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Stragic thinking

# Revolutionary defeatism, yesterday and today

- Features -

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[“The masses take a practical and not a theoretical view of things.”](#)

—V. I. Lenin

The debate on the Left over the war in Ukraine has exposed serious disagreements on international questions, ones that have been brewing and deepening for over a decade. From 2001 to 2011, there was general unity on the socialist Left about the question of imperialism and the response to it. This was a period of explicit and obvious attacks on sovereign countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States, United Kingdom, and other imperialist forces. This naked imperialist aggression triggered global mass movements against the so-called “War on Terror.”

For socialists, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan was as straightforward as the U.S. invasion of Vietnam: oppose the war and also support the right of the people of that country to resist being colonized. You didn’t defend a country (or not) based on the nature of its government or the leadership of its national resistance movement, any more than you rejected the national aspirations of the Palestinians because of the reactionary politics of Hamas. It is a basic point, not even a socialist one but a bourgeois democratic one, that a nation has a right to self-determination and another nation should not carry out regime change using missiles and tanks. These are all pretty clear and obvious examples, so obvious that most of the socialist Left was united on them at the time.

But there was the beginning of a divergence, and a fracturing of the general perspective, in Libya in 2011. During the Arab spring there was an armed uprising in Libya against Muammar Gaddafi by various ethnic groupings that was initially disorganized and chaotic. This was the first war in the twenty-first century in which the question of imperialist division and re-division became more complicated. This was initially because of the role played by democratic movements against ‘anti-imperialist’ dictatorships. Then, increasingly, some on the Left began minimizing the role of other imperialist powers that were not in Western Europe or North America, namely Russia and China.

Sensing an opportunity to overthrow a regime that had often been a thorn in the side of the West, NATO intervened in support of the uprising, providing air support to prevent their total annihilation by Gaddafi’s forces. This wasn’t a celebration of popular revolt by Western imperialism, but a pragmatic calculation that overthrowing Gaddafi was in the interests of the Western imperialists. It was also in the interests of Libyans as well, of course.

Then Syria followed. The initial movement for democratic rights was brutally suppressed by Bashar al-Assad’s regime, which plunged the country into a decade-long civil war. The Western imperialists were far less reluctant to intervene in this case, though Russian imperialism gladly assisted its ally Assad, sending materials, mercenaries, and military advisors, and financially propping up the government. Iran and Hezbollah also intervened to crush the popular uprising. The United States intervened into the north of Syria to assist the Kurdish YPG (People’s Defense Units) in targeting ISIS, though they drew the line at helping to destroy the Syrian government’s military. This conflict caused a huge split in the international Left, with people either siding with the uprising and the Kurds or with the Assad regime because it was “anti-imperialist”, though in reality dependent on Russian imperialism. Some on the Left were ambivalent about the Arab uprising against Assad, but were very sympathetic to the Kurds because they saw them as a genuine national liberation struggle with Left politics. In the end, the popular revolution was crushed and some of the Left cheered the fall of Aleppo—the same type of “leftist” who supported Russian tanks invading Hungary in 1956 to put down a workers uprising there.

Now the war in Ukraine has caused a raging argument over tactics and strategy—and a complete disagreement over the role of imperialism in the conflict. The essential disagreement is over the degree to which Ukraine has a right to

defend itself from an invasion by an imperialist power. Some on the “Left” are cheerleading Russia and believe this is a war waged by Russia to denazify Ukraine. I won’t deal with that argument because it is so obviously ridiculous. But others conclude that because Ukraine is in the orbit of the West—for example, it has asked to join NATO—Volodymyr Zelensky and his government are proxy agents of Washington/London/Paris/Berlin. Therefore this is seen as an example of an inter-imperialist war between Russia and the West fighting through its surrogate in Kiev.

Socialists who deny Ukraine’s right to defend itself from an invasion by an imperialist power because of the policies of the Ukrainian government are junking any understanding of the national question and the way that the people of Ukraine are actually responding to Russia’s invasion. They are in practice denying the right to self-determination because they don’t like the government of Ukraine, which is irrelevant to the principle being discussed. By extension, no one would support the Tamil Tigers, Hamas fighters, or even Irish Republicans, all of which had (or still have) reactionary positions on a range of issues and were pro-capitalist. Or they use the excuse of Ukraine wanting to join NATO to suggest it was essentially an imperialist power itself.

Because Ukraine is seen as a proxy for the West and it is receiving anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, some are drawing an equal sign between Russia and Ukraine, concluding that both sides should lose. How can both sides lose? In reality, that would be a long drawn out stalemate that lasts years, with countless dead.

Others try to be more nuanced, and say that the people of Ukraine should resist but they should overthrow their government first because their government backs Western imperialism. So, they argue, in the face of an actual invasion, with Russian tanks and armored vehicles making their way into major cities, the Ukrainian working class needs to magically form a class-conscious mass movement. Presumably, this would be revolutionary in nature, completely understand the reactionary role of NATO and Western imperialism, and successfully overthrow the government before declaring a Paris Commune-type government. Only then is it legitimate to wage a “socialist defense” of the country. How useful for the Ukrainian people for socialists in the West to wish that their political situation was totally different and much more favorable.

In response to the invasion of an army that is under the command of the people who oversaw the slaughter of the Syrian revolution and the flattening of Grozny, it is understandable that the Ukrainian people—even those that do not like and have actively opposed Zelensky and his policies—will defend their country and their communities from Russian occupation. As [V. I. Lenin put it](#), “When the worker says he wants to defend his country, it is the instinct of an oppressed man that speaks in him.”

Now it is clear that the Zelensky government needs to be overthrown, just as Vladimir Putin’s does, just as Joe Biden’s, Boris Johnson’s, Viktor Orbán’s, and any other bourgeois government does. And the war in Ukraine [offers a chance for a revolutionary explosion](#) against the existing order. But in order to get from “the Russians have invaded, we need to defend our homes” to “all power to the Ukrainian Soviet” requires serious united front work alongside the great mass of the Ukrainian people mobilized into the popular defense units by the government. It means being one step ahead of the masses, not ten miles ahead.

The creation of the popular defense units means that there is now a militia in Ukraine that is armed and has incredibly rudimentary training in weapons. Socialists that are advocating boycotting these units are effectively pacifists, even if they quote Lenin to justify their position. In fact, [Lenin argued](#) that the “militarization” of society during a war was one of the few positive aspects of it:

“Today the imperialist bourgeoisie militarizes the youth as well as the adults; tomorrow, it may begin militarizing the women. Our attitude should be: All the better! Full speed ahead! For the faster we move, the nearer shall we be to the armed uprising against capitalism. How can Social-Democrats give way to fear of the militarization of the youth, etc., if they have not forgotten the example of the Paris Commune?”

Here Lenin is writing about an imperialist nation, not even a semi-colony or a colony, arming itself.

Some socialists have defended the Ukrainians right to resist occupation but argued that the Western imperialist nations should not provide any material or weaponry for the fight. Their view is that consignments of anti-tank weapons from London change the class character of the national resistance fundamentally, and therefore it is not permissible to send weapons to the Ukrainians. Others state that weapons should only be sent to working-class organizations in Ukraine, but unless people identify such organizations and make that a practical reality, it is only an excuse not to support the wider arming of the country. When faced with the Russian army, the call to disarm the Ukrainian resistance is essentially a call for Russia to win with ease.

Again, who provides weapons to a national liberation movement or a country resisting imperialist invasion is a secondary question to the fact of the legitimate struggle itself. It was right for the Kosovars to get weapons from the West in the 1990s. It was right for the Syrian resistance and the Kurds to get weapons during the Syrian revolution. Do these weapons come with strings attached? Sometimes, but we cannot ignore the autonomy of people fighting a legitimate struggle for freedom because of imperialist machinations.

Some on the Left have apparently concluded that, in the modern world system of imperialism, every poorer semi-colony is in some other imperialist country's orbit, so the national question is redundant. This is not a new idea. In the [Junius pamphlet](#), Rosa Luxemburg argued that the world had already been divided up by imperialism, so all conflicts are to some degree or other imperialist conflicts. Therefore the national question is relegated to the past, and now only socialism is the order of the day. The problem with this is that it completely ignores any genuine national questions that might exist—for instance when your country is invaded by a much more powerful nation right next door whose leader has been [publishing essays](#) saying your country was a mistake and shouldn't exist any more.

Writing in 1916, partly in response to these types of arguments, [Lenin argued](#):

“The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another ‘Great’ Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous case of the bourgeoisie utilising republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example, in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.”

These matters are crucial because we are entering a multi-polar world in which an analysis based on the Cold War won't do. As Russia and China flex their growing imperialist might, there will be more conflicts in which a poorer country or ethnic group might look to the West for assistance, and if socialists use an overly simplistic view of international relations to guide their thinking, then the socialist Left will be wrong-footed. We cannot put a minus simply where the Western bourgeois class puts a plus. We must use theory to illuminate and explain, not set up barriers to reality.

The conflict in Ukraine has also seen some socialists call for the defeat of both sides in the conflict, basing their position on a policy Lenin advocated in 1914 to 1916. The rest of this article will examine what this policy meant—and did not mean—in practice and its usefulness to developing a coherent socialist policy around Ukraine today.

# What does ‘revolutionary defeatism’ mean

Lenin’s [view on inter-imperialist war](#) appears simple:

“The bourgeoisie of all the imperialist Great Powers—England, France, Germany, Austria, Russia, Japan, the United States—has become so reactionary and so intent on world domination, that any war waged by the bourgeoisie of those countries is bound to be reactionary. The proletariat must not only oppose all such wars, but must also wish for the defeat of its ‘own’ government in such wars and utilise its defeat for revolutionary insurrection, if an insurrection to prevent the war proves unsuccessful.”

Any class-conscious worker will be suspicious of the actions of their government and their capitalist class in a war, regardless of whether the nation is imperialist or not. In an imperialist war, a class-conscious worker will be scornful of the war mongering politicians and the calls by the bosses for “unity in the war effort,” to work longer hours, speed up production, work for free at the weekend, forbid strikes and public meetings, and so on. You don’t want your government to be victorious because you know that the result will be unbridled nationalism, patriotism, and jingoism—the enemies of socialism. It will bind the masses to their bourgeoisie through the glorification of the successes of the nation, something that undermines and mitigates against class consciousness.

There is truth in the notion that an imperialist war going badly contributes to a growing mood of radicalization against the government. The Russian revolution in 1917 was possible largely because the war was going so disastrously for Russia that it was causing untold misery back home and the peasants sent to fight and die in the war were fed-up and wanted peace. If the war was going well and Russia was advancing into other countries to seize new territories, all under the brilliant leadership of the tsar, then it would have only caused a much greater feeling of nationalism among the people. The February and October revolutions likely would not have happened.

Likewise when the Vietnam war was going badly for the U.S., the sense of growing national crisis exacerbated and deepened other social contradictions in the United States, connecting with and radicalizing other issues, especially the fight against racism. The feeling that the government is in crisis and that its imperial power is failing helps give a sense of strength and purpose to the working class and oppressed to organize and fight back on other fronts—though it also makes the ruling class even more vicious and violent on the home front in order to maintain order.

Photo of V.I. Lenin, Red Square, Moscow, March 3, 1919.

The problem with taking every slogan issued at every point of the war as a practical and immediate call for action is that this collapses different levels of analysis and activity. Lenin’s position on defeatism was largely a propagandistic reaction to the betrayal of socialism that was defensism, namely when Social Democrats across Europe suddenly started supporting their own government war aims because they accepted that they were all “defensive” conflicts. The slogan “defense of the fatherland” was objectionable because it was clearly a lie to promote an aggressive war of expansion. A big part of the imperialist propaganda around World War I was that the war was always started by someone else, and every belligerent country was only reacting defensively to the actions of their belligerent neighbors. It was the capitulation of the socialists to the imperialist war aims of their ruling class that Lenin countered with his policy of defeatism.

There is a hard and a soft reading of what the logical practical conclusions of revolutionary defeatism might mean. The softer meaning is that in an imperialist war you don’t cheer on your own government’s war aims and you raise principled slogans like “not a penny nor a person for the war machine.” Any military defeats you use in your agitation

to point out that the war is futile, is causing unnecessary bloodshed, and that the government should be overthrown for getting us all into this mess on behalf of the big industrialists. You continue the class struggle—and even intensify it where you can—regardless of pleas for national unity from trade union leaders and bourgeois politicians.

There is a harder reading, which Lenin sometimes pointed to and which has become a kind of orthodoxy for some socialists, largely as a result of a faction fight in the Russian Communist Party in the 1920s. In this interpretation, you not only desire the defeat of your own government, you should actively work for the military defeat of the war effort through sabotage, “shoot your officers,” and so on. Indeed, Lenin argued that the defeat of Russia by the German army was a “lesser evil” than the victory of tsarism, which Lenin argued was the most barbaric and reactionary government in Europe.

The problem with this view—as [the socialist Hal Draper has pointed out](#)—is it doesn't really match what the Bolsheviks were saying in Russia or the practical consequences of the defeatism slogan. First, there was no real unity among the Bolsheviks on the question of defeatism because it meant different things at different times in Lenin's writings. Most went with the softer reading, over which there was little disagreement from other anti-war socialists. But the defeatism slogan in its hardest form was not an operative policy for agitation among the masses of soldiers but a polemical reaction to the collapse of so many socialists into “defense of the fatherland” politics. (Imagine handing out leaflets to nineteen-year-old conscripted soldiers saying that your policy was for them to “come home in a body bag.”)

Look at the practical positions that the Bolsheviks argued for at international antiwar conferences, particularly the crucial one at Zimmerwald, where there was not a mention of “revolutionary defeatism” but instead a [focus on prosecuting the class war at home and politicizing any industrial struggles](#) into more general fights against capitalism and imperialism.

“The prelude to this struggle [for socialism] is the struggle against the world war and for a quick end to the slaughter of the peoples. This struggle demands rejection of war credits, an exit from government ministries, and denunciation of the war's capitalist and anti-socialist character—in the parliamentary arena, in the pages of legal and, when necessary, illegal publications, along with a forthright struggle against social-patriotism. Every popular movement arising from the consequences of war (impoverishment, heavy casualties, and so on) must be utilized to organize street demonstrations against the governments, propaganda for international solidarity in the trenches, demands for economic strikes, and the effort to transform such strikes, where conditions are favorable, into political struggles. The slogan is ‘civil war, not civil peace.’”

If Lenin's position on revolutionary defeatism carries a certain clarity, what did it mean on the ground? [Lenin cautioned](#) “this does not mean ‘blowing up bridges,’ organizing unsuccessful strikes in the war industries, and in general helping the government defeat the revolutionaries.” But what about agitation in the army? It is a popular view from some socialists that Bolshevik agitation in the army focused on radical actions, including calls for soldiers to shoot their officers and for whole regiments to rise up and fight the government loyalist troops and not the foreign power.

The slogan “Turn the imperialist war into a civil war” is understood to be an immediate demand for soldiers and workers to open up a second front at home, fighting to overthrow the government while your country is being invaded. It is a call that modern day socialists rarely think about tactically, however. They throw the slogan around as a principle as if, from day one, the immediate demand was for soldiers to turn their guns on their own government. But to transform this general revolutionary slogan into a tactical demand in the immediate outbreak of war is just ultra-left posturing. The actual consequences of attempting to launch a civil war when working-class consciousness is



overwhelmingly focused on the desire to defend their national rights means isolation and death for the Left.

Instead the practical policy of the Bolsheviks in the army was to focus on general agitation against the class character of the war, educating workers and soldiers in what imperialism meant and denouncing the war aims of the government. After late 1916 through to summer 1917, the Bolshevik's demands increasingly centered on the rights of soldiers.

The key turning point for the Bolsheviks in Russia was after February 1917 when tsarism was overthrown by a popular revolution and a liberal democratic regime headed by Alexander Kerensky replaced it, and said it would continue the war. Some people on the Left fell into line after February, arguing that the task was to defend a more liberal and democratic Russia against the German Kaiser now that the character of the government had changed. Lenin and his comrades doubled down on opposition, however, and when the war continued to go badly under Kerensky, it was this principled course that allowed them to eventually wrestle power from the capitalists in October 1917.

What was [the material that the Bolsheviks were handing out](#) on the eve the All-Russia Congress of the Soviets in April 1917?

"All power to the soviet of workers' and soldiers deputies! This does not mean that we must immediately overthrow the present government or disobey it. So long as the majority of the people support it... we cannot afford to fritter away our forces on desultory uprisings. Never! Husband your strength! Get together at meetings! Pass motions!"

It is clear that the revolutionary strategy did not come from an immediate mutiny, refusing to fight, opening up a revolutionary fight against the bourgeois government, but from slow patient work in building up support for antiwar and revolutionary ideas.

Ultimately, the working class led by revolutionary forces came to power in October not on a policy of "shoot your officers" or actively agitating for the military defeat of the army, but on a policy of "bread, peace, and land." These demands were only achievable by taking power from the Russian capitalists and their liberal politicians to secure peace for a country exhausted and destroyed by war. The Bolsheviks immediately sued for peace with Germany, signing the very unfavorable Brest-Litovsk treaty to take Russia out of the war, conceding a great deal of territory as the price for peace. It was during the debates on ratifying the Brest-Litovsk treaty that [Lenin remarked](#),

"Boris [Kamkov, of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries] heard that we were defeatists, and he reminded himself of this when we have ceased to be defeatists.... We were defeatists under the tsar, but under Tseretelli and Chernov [ministers in the the Kerensky government] we were not defeatists."

So after the February revolution, Lenin argues that the Bolsheviks dropped the defeatism slogan, though in practice it existed mainly at the level of propaganda between 1914 and 1916 and was shelved by 1917. It was replaced by a more concrete and specific call for democratic rights for soldiers and a push for dual power in the military as the revolutionary upsurge radicalized more and more regiments.



By September 1917, even Lenin was making statements that were no longer based on revolutionary defeatism but essentially advocated a revolutionary war of defense, couching it in the language of how to successfully defend the country from invasion:

“It is impossible to render the country capable of defending itself without the greatest heroism on the part of the people in courageously and decisively carrying out great economic transformations. And it is impossible to appeal to the heroism of the masses without breaking with imperialism, without offering to all the peoples a democratic peace, without thus transforming the war from a war of conquest, a predatory, criminal war, into a just, defensive, revolutionary war.”

This further demonstrates that Lenin was primarily using the revolutionary defeatism slogan in relation to tsarism and the idea that a defeat of the tsar's army would create the conditions for a more radical democratic regime to replace it. And on this point, he was right.

Things move fast in war. When Lenin returns from exile and begins to actually talk to Russian workers and soldiers, he detected another mood, that it is entirely reasonable not to want your country to be invaded and occupied, and it is this sentiment that he now expressed, even using the language of a revolutionary defensist war that he had rejected in April 1917. The key point was to oppose the expansionist, imperialist war aims of the bourgeois class.

## Practical conclusions

When an imperialist country is invading a poorer nation to try to carve up the world, advocating the latter's right to resist and defending its right to self-determination is a basic democratic demand. Even saying you are in favor of the smaller nation winning is a principled and correct position.

Even if you are in an imperialist nation and you are being invaded by another imperialist nation, then it is inevitable that people will not want to be invaded and occupied by a foreign power.

In either situation, socialists should put forward general anti-war agitation and propaganda, draw out the class contradictions between what the imperialists want and working people being sent to slaughter each other for it. We should make links with socialists in the invading country, organize rank-and-file committees in the military and in trade unions, and make links between workers and soldiers, clearly saying that the government doesn't speak for the people, that this barbarous war needs to stop, and only a socialist government can bring it to an end.

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Source [Tempest](#).

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