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Ukraine debate

# Self-Determination and the War in Ukraine

- Debate - Ukraine -

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**Two months ago, when I wrote "[A Letter to the Western Left from Kyiv](#),"** I hoped that the shock of the Russian invasion and the voices of the Ukrainian left would push Western leftists to reconsider their approach. Unfortunately, too many of them have failed to do so. In their analyses of the war, Ukrainians are just victims in need of humanitarian aid, not subjects with desires that should be respected.

Of course, this doesn't apply to everyone on the left not by a long shot. Scandinavian left-wing parties as well as Eastern European ones have listened to Ukrainians and supported arms supplies to Ukraine. Some progress is taking place among U.S. socialists. But unfortunately, even a [joint statement by Ukrainian and Russian socialists](#) hasn't convinced enough people to support military aid. Let me try to address the left once more.

## A Just War?

Let's start by addressing a common question: "why is Ukraine paid so much attention and provided so much help while other armed conflicts in the world are not?" First of all, aren't the potential consequences of the war reason enough to pay more attention to it? When was the last time the world was so close to the threat of nuclear war? Second, I agree that other conflicts are paid insufficient attention. As I've [written before](#), the fact that Europe has treated Ukrainian refugees so much better than their Syrian and Afghan counterparts is due to racism. This is a good time to criticize migration politics and point out that the help extended to Ukrainian refugees should be provided to all refugees.

I recall another armed conflict where parts of the left had their "good guys" (and gals) and paid them outsized attention compared to other armed conflicts: Rojava. Ukraine is not Rojava, and we can list many complaints about Zelensky's domestic and foreign policies. Ukraine isn't even a classic liberal democracy here, every new president tries to amass as much power as possible via informal mechanisms, the parliament passes unconstitutional laws, and rights and freedoms of citizens are often violated. Even during the war, the Ukrainian government has passed a law curtailing labor rights. In this respect, it is not very different from the rest of Eastern Europe.

Does this mean that Ukrainians should give up the struggle? For me, the answer is obvious: I decided to join the Territorial Defense Forces at the start of the war. But I'm far from the only one. Anarchists from Ukraine, Belarus, and even a few from Russia are [currently fighting](#) in the Territorial Defense or are helping. They dislike Zelensky and the state itself, they've been repeatedly detained during protests by police (as I have been), and some foreign anarchists have faced deportation attempts by special services. But still we went to war. You may think that these are not "real" anarchists or you may consider the notion that we know something about Eastern Europe that you do not understand.

I am a socialist, and I do not think that you should have to defend your country in any defensive war. Such a decision should depend on analysis of the participants, the social nature of the war, the sentiments of the people, the broader context, and the potential consequences of different outcomes. If Ukraine was run by a fascist junta and the situation was the one presented by Russian propaganda, I would still condemn the invasion, but I wouldn't join the army. Leading an independent partisan struggle would be more appropriate. There are other invasions, such as the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan or Iraq, that should be condemned, but would it have been right to fight for the regimes of the Taliban or Saddam Hussein? I doubt it. Is Ukraine's far-from-perfect democracy worth protecting from Putin's [para-fascist regime](#)? Yes.

I know that many dislike such terms. After 2014, when it became popular in Ukraine to label Putin a fascist, I criticized this view. But in recent years, Putin's regime has become more and more authoritarian, conservative, and nationalistic, and after the defeat of the antiwar movement, its transformation has reached a new level. Russian left intellectuals such as [Greg Yudin](#) and [Ilya Budraitskis](#) argue that the country is moving toward fascism.

In many armed conflicts, it is right to call for diplomacy and compromise. Often in the case of ethnic conflicts, internationalists should not take a side. But this war is not such a case. Unlike the 2014 war in Donbas, which [was complicated](#), the nature of the current war is actually simple. Russia is waging an aggressive imperialist war; Ukraine is waging a people's war of liberation. We cannot know how Ukraine will develop after the war it depends on a plethora of factors. But we can say for sure that only if Ukraine wins will there be a chance for progressive change. If Russia wins there will be horrible consequences. This is the main reason to support the Ukrainian resistance, including with military aid.

## The Ukrainian Far Right

Here, some readers might want to ask another question: "what about the Ukrainian far right?" In the more reasonable debates on this topic, one side always stresses the far right's low electoral support and lack of representation in parliament, while the other side emphasizes that, due to infiltration of law enforcement agencies and active participation in street protests, the far right has had disproportionate influence over Ukrainian politics. Both are true, but there is one important fact that both sides usually ignore: the disproportionate influence of the far right was based largely on the weakness of civil society and the state, not their power.

The far right's presence can be felt across Eastern Europe, but the dynamics are different in each country. In the late 2000s, the Russian far right unleashed terror in the streets, including bombings, pogroms, and other lethal attacks. After the Manezhnaya Square riot in 2010, the Russian state began to crack down, and members of the Russian far right fled the country or were jailed. Some have found a place in Ukraine, which was a safe place not least because the repressive apparatus of the Ukrainian state is so much weaker. (The relative weakness of the state was also the main reason for the success of mass protests in Ukraine compared to Belarus, where demonstrators faced arbitrary detention and torture, or Kazakhstan, where Russian-backed security forces led a deadly crackdown.)

In recent years, the far right's power in Ukraine has been subject to new challenges. Since Maidan, the development of liberal civil society has changed the balance of power in street politics. Until recently, there wasn't always a clear line between the far right and other political forces. But this is also gradually changing due to the rise of feminist and LGBT movements, which oppose right-wing radicals. Finally, thanks to the campaign against the deportation of Belarusian anarchist Aleksey Bolenkov and the protection of the Podil district from the far right in Kyiv last year, [there has been a resurgence of the antifa movement](#) on the streets.

Since 2014, the far right has compensated for electoral failures by strengthening its presence on the streets and reinforcing its alliance with the liberals, which formed during the years of struggle against the Yanukovich regime. But this union began to gradually collapse after Zelensky came to power in 2019. The far right, in particular the [Azov movement](#), was in crisis. And after the resignation of Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, who was considered Azov's patron, the state apparatus began to treat them more coolly.

Of course, the war has changed everything, and what happens next depends on many factors. The participation of the Ukrainian far right in the current war is less noticeable than in 2014, with one obvious exception the Azov Regiment. But not all Azov fighters today are far right, and as part of the National Guard and the Armed Forces, they carry out orders from the high command. And even Azov is only a small part of the Ukrainian resistance. Therefore,

there's no reason to assume the current war will push the rise of the far right as much as the war in Donbas.

Today, the main threat to the citizens of Ukraine is not the Ukrainian far right, but the Russian occupiers. This includes groups that have often been attacked by the far right in recent years, such as Roma or LGBT people, who are also active in the Ukrainian resistance. This applies to residents of Donbas, too. Russian propaganda has hypocritically used Donbas residents to justify the invasion, accusing Ukraine of "genocide" while the Russian military razes the region's cities to the ground. While people join huge lines to enlist in the Territorial Defense in Ukraine, in the Russian-controlled part of Donbas, men are caught on the streets, forcibly conscripted, and [thrown into battle, without training, like cannon fodder](#).

## Inter-Imperialist Conflict

Another common argument against the Ukrainian resistance is that this is a proxy war between the West and Russia. Any military conflict is multilayered, and one of the components of the current confrontation is an inter-imperialist conflict. But if that is enough to call this a proxy war, almost all armed conflicts in the world are proxy wars. Instead of arguing about the term, it is more important to analyze the degree of Ukraine's dependence on the West, and to understand the goals of both imperialist camps.

Ukraine is much less of a Western proxy than the [Syrian Kurds were U.S. proxies](#) during their heroic fight against ISIS. But proxies are not puppets. They are local actors who receive military support from other states. Both the former and the latter have their own interests, which may only partially coincide. And just as leftists supported the fighters in Rojava despite the Syrian Kurds receiving American military aid, leftists should support the Ukrainian people. Socialist policy on armed conflicts should be based on analyzing the situation on the ground rather than on whether an imperial power supports one side or the other.

In recent months, some leftists have used the history of the First World War to argue that socialists should not support either side in inter-imperialist conflicts. But the Second World War was also an inter-imperialist conflict. Does this mean that neither side should have been supported in that war? No, because the inter-imperialist conflict was only one dimension of that war.

In a [previous article](#), I recalled that many representatives of anticolonial movements did not want to fight for their colonizers during the Second World War, and one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, Chandra Boss, even collaborated with Nazi Germany. But it is also worth mentioning Jawaharlal Nehru's words: in the conflict between fascism and democracy, we must unequivocally be on the latter's side. It is also worth mentioning that the most consistent of the INC's leaders to support the Allies' war was M.N. Roy, its most left-wing member. Of course, this didn't mean that Roy suddenly began supporting British imperialism. Similarly, supporting the struggle against Russian imperialism does not imply support for American imperialism.

Of course, the situation is different now. Direct participation of other states in the war will only make the situation worse. But socialists should support economic pressure on Russia and demand tougher sanctions and embargoes on Russian oil and gas. Many of the sanctions currently in place are designed to weaken [Russia's military industry](#) and thus hinder Russia's ability to continue fighting. Leftists should also support sanctions on oil and gas imports from Russia, which will further increase economic pressure on Putin to end the war.

The United States may have learned its lesson by disgracing itself in Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia must now learn its lesson too, and the tougher, the better. Defeat in war has repeatedly provoked revolutions, including in Russia. After Russia lost the Crimean War in 1856, serfdom was finally abolished in the Russian Empire. The First Russian

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Revolution of 1905 took place shortly after Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Losing against Ukraine could spark a new revolution. With Putin still in power, progressive change in Russia and most post-Soviet states will be almost impossible.

Western states share responsibility for this war. The problem is that many radical leftists criticize these states for the wrong reasons. Instead of criticizing the supply of weapons to Ukraine, they should criticize the fact that even after the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas, EU countries [continued to sell weapons to Russia](#). This is just one example. The responsibility for that decision lies with Western governments, not the left. But rather than try to change the situation for the better, much of the left is foolishly trying to make things even worse.

Ukrainians are well aware that war is terrible. This is not our first war. We have been living with the conditions of a smoldering conflict in Donbas for years. We are suffering major losses in this war, and we will continue to suffer if the war drags on. It is up to us to decide what sacrifices we are willing to make in order to win, and what compromises we must make to stop death and destruction. I do not understand why the U.S. government agrees with this, while much of the left prefers to take a more imperial approach, demanding that the West decide for us.

So far, the Kremlin has been unwilling to make serious concessions. They are waiting for us to surrender. But Ukrainians will not agree to the recognition of their territorial conquests. Some argue that supplying weapons to Ukraine will prolong the war and increase the number of victims. In fact, it is the lack of supplies that will do that. Ukraine can win, and Ukraine's victory is what the international left should stand for. If Russia wins, it will establish a precedent for the forced redrawing of state borders and push the world into a Third World War.

I became a socialist largely under the influence of the war in Donbas and my realization that only overcoming capitalism will give us a chance for a world without war. But we will never achieve this future if we expect nonresistance to imperialist intervention. If the left does not take the correct stance on this war, it will discredit and marginalize itself. And we will have to work for a long time to overcome the consequences of this nonsense.

*4 May 2022*

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