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War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine and the dilemmas of the Western left

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This article describes very precisely the war seen from Ukraine and how part of the Ukrainian population has joined the resistance, especially the territorial defense units: a vast popular mobilization. From there on, Daria Saburova addresses a number of questions to the anti-imperialist left, in particular on military aid for the popular resistance. Without this, in her opinion, the internationalist greetings and the solidarity shown to the Ukrainian people risk remaining abstract.

I am not a specialist, in the academic sense of the word, either on Russian-Ukrainian relations or on geopolitical issues. I am doing a thesis in philosophy. But I was born in Kiev, where I lived for 20 years before arriving in France. My family is at present in Ukraine. My mother left Kiev on February 28, but many friends and relatives of friends still remain in the capital, either because they are responsible for the elderly and sick, or because they have made the choice to defend their city and help those who have remained there. Other friends have already fled and are preparing to apply for asylum in Poland, Germany or France. Since the first day of the invasion, I have mainly followed local news, via the Ukrainian media and various Telegram channels, or directly via the testimonies of my relatives. This is one of the reasons why I decided to write this text, in order to talk about the extent of the destruction, the living and survival conditions of the people on the ground today, and the networks of solidarity and resistance in which the Ukrainian population is massively involved.

After the failure of the blitzkrieg, the Russian military intensified the bombing of urban centres, including Kharkiv, Mariupol and Kiev, without sparing residential neighbourhoods and civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. What is happening looks more and more like a punitive war. Images of the northwestern suburbs of Kiev can attest to this: Irpin, Borodyanka, Bucha, Gostomel, as well as several villages along the Kiev-Zhytomyr road are already half destroyed. In these suburbs, where fighting is ongoing, people have been without electricity, heating and the grid since the early days of the war. They have to spend several days in a row in cold and damp cellars, unsuitable for protection against the “Grad” or “Iskander” missiles used by the Russian army. The situation is absolutely dramatic. Even the Red Cross does not venture into the territories where Russian military vehicles are stationed and circulate. Last week, a first agreement on “humanitarian corridors” was reached between the two sides. But the ceasefire is barely respected by the Russian army. The military regularly shoots at the cars of civilians who are trying to flee these combat zones individually. On 6 March, a family walking to one of the evacuation buses was shot dead in Irpin. The safest way to leave the capital remains for the moment the train leaving from the central station. However, the station has also already been damaged by an explosion just in front of it on Wednesday 2 March. Driving is becoming more and more dangerous, and petrol is becoming scarce: Russian soldiers have already destroyed several oil depots, especially in the Kiev region, and priority is now given to the needs of the army. At the moment, evacuation trains run regularly, but they are crowded and people pile up, four people on seats meant for two, or are even forced to travel standing or sitting on the ground for more than ten hours. At Lviv station, where refugees are waiting for trains to Poland, the situation is becoming increasingly tense. Coming by road, you have to wait up to 24 hours to cross the Polish border.

But it is in the besieged city of Mariupol — a Russian-speaking city in the south of the Donetsk administrative region — that the hypocrisy of the “special operation” to liberate these territories from the yoke of the “Kiev Nazis” is revealed in all its extreme brutality. This city, which currently has 360,000 inhabitants, is suffering massive bombings that have already killed at least 1500 civilians. They are starting to be buried in a mass grave. The city’s inhabitants are completely cut off from all means of communication, water, electricity and heating. Humanitarian aid cannot get access to it and humanitarian corridors remain uncertain. A Telegram channel has begun tracking people who are alive, so that families and friends can have information about their loved ones, whom they have not been able to reach for nine days.

But if Kiev, Kharkiv, Mariupol and other cities are resisting the Russian army although it has a very clear military advantage, it is because, in the face of this invasion, a vast popular mobilization has risen that goes far beyond the state apparatuses, even in the Russian-speaking cities that should, according to the logic of both Putin and a certain Western left, welcome the liberation army with open arms. This mobilization takes many forms: in Energodar and other cities, unarmed people go out to form human chains to prevent the advance of Russian tanks; in the already occupied cities, in Kherson and Melitopol, there have been large demonstrations protesting against the invader. In other cities, territorial defence groups and self-organized solidarity groups ensure the security of and supplies to the population. In the words of a friend who stayed in Kiev, everyone is in one way or another involved in solidarity groups via thousands of specialized Telegram channels: it is a question of organizing distribution points and the delivery of food, medicine or other basic necessities, especially to isolated and the most fragile people; of finding or offering accommodation; of requesting or indicating the availability of places in cars to evacuate people to Western Ukraine. Each city offers a list of places (churches, gyms, restaurants) that can accommodate refugees and people in transit free of charge. The Telegram channel “Help to Leave” now has 94,000 members, drivers and passengers combined. All these initiatives are horizontal and do not depend on the state: a symptom both of the bankruptcy of the Ukrainian state, caught off guard by a war of such magnitude, but also of the surge of solidarity and resistance of the Ukrainian people in the face of the invader.

In this situation, I have been really struck by the persistent inability of a good part of our comrades in France and elsewhere to overcome a vision of the world where the power ultimately responsible for all wars is the United States and NATO. This is why many analyses of the situation in Ukraine are surprisingly about something else: it is a question of going back to the “root causes” that are quite distant, historically and geographically. Such a geopolitical approach partly masks the lack of knowledge of the political and social processes of the post-Soviet space, fuelling in particular the idea that, basically, all oligarchic governments in this part of the world are equal, regardless of the degree of repression they inflict on their own population and the populations of neighbouring states. It is in the name of this simplistic view of complex realities that Ukrainians are practically invited to capitulate, either directly or — more indirectly and under the guise of revolutionary antimilitarism — by opposing any military aid to Ukraine provided by NATO member countries. While addressing the Ukrainians with an internationalist salute, it is thus suggested that they should accept the military occupation and a government imposed by Putin.

Certainly, since the invasion, few comrades allow themselves to deny that we are dealing with a military aggression fuelled by Russia’s imperialist pretensions. But the campist positions nevertheless remain evident in different positions through the order in which the arguments are presented (yes, the unacceptable aggression of Ukraine by Russia, but nevertheless, the encirclement of Russia by NATO), and which continue to support the image of Russia as a subordinate and essentially reactive imperialist power. Last Saturday, in the Facebook announcement of the “peace” demonstration organized by the NPA youth sector, separate from the large demonstration of support for the Ukrainian people that was taking place in Place de la République, we could read that Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine was Russia’s reaction to NATO’s aggressive policy. We could read that the organizers support those who “in Ukraine and in Russia”, “fight against the war”. However, the Ukrainians are not fighting against the war: they are, in spite of themselves, at war with Russia. Is this anything other than an invitation to capitulation?

When the war broke out, given the overwhelming pre-eminence of the Russian forces, I myself hoped that Kiev would be occupied within 48 hours, so that at least the price to pay for a certain defeat would be as low as possible. But I was, and, I think, we were all, stunned by the resistance of the Ukrainian army and people. It is important to make the comrades understand that what is happening today does not concern only neo-Nazis, nor even the Ukrainian capitalist state, nor the Western imperialist states. My anarchist, socialist and feminist friends join solidarity groups, organize collections for the Ukrainian army, mobilize in territorial defense groups. The population as a whole seems very determined to defend the simple right to live in peace in their country, a country where protesting and publicly expressing divergent positions has become perhaps more complicated in recent years, but not impossible, as is the case in Russia.

We must certainly not turn a blind eye to the bleak prospects for all possible outcomes of this war. As a Russian-speaking Ukrainian and Marxist, I have watched with concern the political developments in my country since 2014, from the removal of Lenin's statues and decommunization laws to the proliferation of far-right paramilitary groups and the war in Donbass. Putin's war in Ukraine is likely to sharply accentuate these tendencies and anti-Russian sentiments in all spheres of life. All wars, all movements of what has been called "national liberation" carry such dangers. Preventing the advance of a foolish nationalism that seeks to erase multilingualism and the Soviet legacy in Ukraine, making difficult the development in that country of anti-capitalist, feminist and ecological movements, will be the future task of the Ukrainian and international left. But at this moment, we have to show total solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance against the invader. Solidarity with Ukraine is at the same time solidarity with the voices in Russia that are rising louder and louder against the war and against the government. Along with the repression, political and social fractures in Russia will intensify. The Russian government wants to hide from its population the images of the bombings of the civilian districts of Kiev, Kharkiv and Mariupol, but how long will it be able to do so? Whatever the outcome of this war, I am increasingly convinced that Ukraine will be thr downfall of Putin.

Certainly, the Western left is faced with serious dilemmas with this invasion. I will address only two of them here: how to support the Ukrainian resistance — and this implies, in my opinion inevitably, support for the delivery of weapons and other equipment to the Ukrainian army, given the incomparable superiority of the Russian army — while generally denouncing the arms industry, the announced increase in military budgets etc.? How can we support Ukrainian refugees and rejoice in the momentum of civil society towards them, while recalling the treatment inflicted for decades on non-white refugees fleeing conflicts that do not directly affect the European continent, without sinking into a posture that consists, from the position of a Western activist, in pointing the finger at the "privileged refugee"?

Among the arguments used on the left to oppose the delivery of weapons are three main categories. The first, it seems, is the concern to limit the conflict to Ukraine. The left, like the right, is afraid to provoke Russia into extending the conflict, admitting half-heartedly that the West could legitimately sacrifice Ukraine to preserve peace in the "civilized world". Despite great statements of support, the United States itself remains very cautious on this issue, refusing not only the granting of the No-fly zone, which would accept that Western coalition planes shooting down Russian planes, but also the delivery of fighter jets requested by the Ukrainian government. Indeed, it seems more than prudent to make a clear distinction between the direct involvement of NATO countries in the war against Russia and the delivery of defensive weapons to the Ukrainian army. On the side of the invader, Belarus is already explicitly participating in the war in Ukraine, without this provoking the West into crossing the red line. But it must also be taken into account that any intervention by the West, including in the form of economic sanctions, already described by Putin as a "declaration of war", could serve as a pretext for an expansion of the conflict, if that were the intention.

The second argument is to counterpose the diplomatic solution to the military solution, a discourse for peace to the warmongering discourse. It seems to be forgotten that the process of negotiations with the occupying forces currently depends, to a very large extent, on the balance of power in the military field. Moreover, the lack of knowledge of the issues surrounding Crimea and Donbass, and of the real historical circumstances in which local populations had to express their right to self-determination — with active Russian interference through the occupation of Crimea and the disinformation campaign regarding the alleged intentions of the "Nazi government" in Kiev to exterminate the Russian-speaking populations in Donbass, not to mention the non-transparent nature of the referendums — makes acceptable to some comrades the conditions under which Russia says it is ready to come seriously to the negotiating table. As long as Russia refuses to withdraw its troops, the protection of the civilian population also depends, above all, on the defensive capabilities of the Ukrainian army.

Finally, there is a fear about the recipients of Western military aid, given the existence of a far-right "Azov" brigade within the Ukrainian army. Their armament rightly raises serious concerns. But this is still to reduce the resistance of an entire people to its very minority fringe, with a few thousand fighters, and to refuse to see that Ukrainian society is a society just as complex as any other, with interwoven heterogeneous social, cultural and political identities. When

we talk about arming the Ukrainian resistance, we must think above all of the needs of the territorial defense groups resulting from the general mobilization, as well as the need to protect the civilian population with weapons to shoot down rockets and air raids that target them. In short, an abstract antimilitarist position must give way to a concrete movement for peace in Ukraine, which takes into account both the military and non-military needs of the Ukrainian resistance. The longer it lasts, and the stronger it becomes, the more likely the peace movement in Russia and abroad is to succeed.

On the question of refugees, the comrades rightly point to the hypocrisy and racist double standards of Europe;. The Polish border, where thousands of people suffered inhuman treatment only a few months ago, is now becoming one of its most blatant symbols. Unlike our adversaries who seek to discriminate between good and bad refugees, it is for us a question of reaffirming our support for all the resistances and victims of the imperialist powers, building on the Ukrainian precedent to demand that the opening of borders and “temporary protection” become the norm for all people seeking asylum in European countries, regardless of their nationality, skin colour or proximity of the conflict to European borders. And we will still have to ensure that, vis-à-vis the Ukrainians themselves, the grand declarations do not become, after a few weeks, mere empty formulas, and that the promised aid allows sustainable installation in dignified conditions.

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This text was written from Daria Saburova's contribution in the discussion "War in Ukraine: what stakes, what internationalism?" (in French "[Guerre en Ukraine : quels enjeux, quel internationalisme ?](#)") on 6 March 2022.

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