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Ukraine-Mexico

No concessions to any imperialism! The Zapatistas' Clear Stand on Ukraine

- Features -

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When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, leftist movements across Latin America faced a dilemma that exposed fundamental contradictions in their politics. How could they maintain anti-imperialist principles in the face of Russian, non-western imperialism? Most chose the path of least resistance: supporting Russia, adopting "both sides" neutrality, or retreating into silence.

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation chose differently. From the mountains of Chiapas, Mexico's Indigenous revolutionaries issued an uncompromising condemnation of the invasion that prioritised solidarity with grassroots resistance over geopolitical convenience. Their position—supporting Ukrainian resistance and Russian anti-war movements whilst rejecting both Putin and NATO—offered a radical alternative to the campist logic that dominated leftist discourse across Latin America and in Spain. When Israel launched its assault on Gaza in October 2023, the Zapatistas applied the same ethical framework, condemning those who "justified Putin's invasion of Ukraine citing 'self-defense' but now invalidate that argument against Israel, and vice versa." This consistency across conflicts demonstrates how feminist anti-imperialist politics can transcend the false choices imposed by great power rivalry, offering not just solidarity but a fundamental challenge to rethink anti-imperialism itself.

In March 2022, as much of the Latin American left scrambled to find positions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine that would preserve their anti-imperialist credentials whilst avoiding direct condemnation of Putin's war, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) issued a statement that cut through the ideological fog with characteristic clarity.

"After the battle, no landscape will remain," declared the communiqué from the Sixth Zapatista Commission, establishing a position that would distinguish the Indigenous revolutionaries of Chiapas from virtually every other significant leftist current across Mexico, Latin America, and Spain. Where others saw geopolitical chess moves and imperial rivalries, the Zapatistas saw something simpler and more fundamental: an aggressive war against ordinary people that demanded unequivocal opposition.

The Zapatista Position: Solidarity from Below

The EZLN's stance rested on principles that have guided their movement for three decades: "As Zapatistas, we do not support either state but rather those who are struggling for life against the system." This wasn't mere rhetoric. The Zapatistas actively sought contact with anarchist and libertarian groups in both Russia and Ukraine, sending financial aid to those resisting their respective governments.

Their analysis acknowledged complexity whilst maintaining moral clarity. Yes, they recognised, "big capital's interests are at play on both sides." Yes, Western governments had cynically calculated what they might extract from Ukraine's resistance. But these realities didn't diminish the fundamental fact: "There is an aggressor: the Russian army."

The Zapatistas' rejection of Putin's "de-nazification" narrative was particularly pointed. They understood this rhetoric as classic imperial justification—the same logic that would later be used to invade "other geographies to save them from 'neo-Nazi tyranny' or to eliminate neighbouring 'narco-states.'" As their comrades in Russia told them: "Russian bombs, rockets, bullets fly towards Ukrainians and do not ask them about their political opinions and the language they speak."

A Lonely Voice: Latin America's Left Chooses Sides

The Zapatista position stood in stark contrast to the responses across Latin America's leftist spectrum. From Mexico's MORENA party to Brazil's PT, from Argentina's Kirchnerism to Spain's Podemos, the dominant tendency was either explicit support for Russia or a disingenuous "both sides" neutrality that effectively served Russian interests.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's response exemplified this approach. Whilst claiming neutrality, AMLO consistently echoed Russian talking points, calling for Ukraine to negotiate surrender terms and criticising Western arms supplies. His government's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia was dressed up as principled non-intervention, but functioned as de facto support for the aggressor.

This pattern repeated across the region. Venezuela's Maduro offered full-throated support for Putin's "special military operation." Nicaragua's Ortega praised Russia's "legitimate right" to defend itself. Even more progressive figures like Colombia's Gustavo Petro called for negotiations that would reward Russian aggression with territorial concessions.

In Spain, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias initially blamed NATO expansion for provoking the war, whilst the party's official position called for dialogue without clearly identifying Russia as the aggressor. This "plague on both houses" approach became the comfortable middle ground for much of the European left as well.

The Weight of History and Ideology

Understanding these positions requires grappling with the historical and ideological frameworks that shape Latin American leftist thought. For many, support for Russia represented a nostalgic connection to the Soviet Union that once provided material and ideological support to liberation movements across the Global South. Putin's Russia was imagined as a continuation of this anti-imperialist legacy, despite its transformation into an oligarchic capitalist state.

The "campist" logic—automatically supporting whatever opposes US imperialism—proved particularly powerful. If the United States opposed Russia, then Russia must represent the progressive side of history. This mechanistic anti-imperialism blinded many to the reality of Russian imperialism and the genuine popular resistance it faced in Ukraine.

Economic interests also played a role. Many Latin American countries had developed significant trade relationships with Russia, particularly in energy and agricultural exports. For governments dependent on these economic ties, moral condemnation of Russia carried material costs.

Perhaps most importantly, many leftist intellectuals and politicians had absorbed Russian propaganda narratives about Ukrainian "Nazis" and Western "puppet regimes." These talking points found fertile ground among those predisposed to see US manipulation behind any popular uprising.

The Feminist Dimension: Seeing Women's Resistance

For a movement with deep feminist principles, the Zapatista response offers particular insights. Where other leftist currents focused on great power rivalries and geopolitical abstractions, the Zapatistas centred the lived experiences of ordinary people—including the Ukrainian women who formed the backbone of civilian resistance.

The EZLN's approach rejected the masculinist logic that dominates much international relations discourse, where wars are analysed as games between powerful men rather than attacks on communities and families. Their direct contact with grassroots resistance groups in both countries reflected a politics that prioritised horizontal solidarity over vertical geopolitical loyalties.

This gendered analysis becomes even sharper when considering the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war by Russian forces—a reality largely ignored by Putin's leftist apologists across Latin America. The Zapatistas' unconditional support for Ukrainian resistance implicitly recognised that women's bodies had become a battlefield in Russia's imperial project.

The Price of Principle

The Zapatista position came with costs. It put them at odds with much of the international left, including many previous allies in anti-globalisation struggles. Their fundraising for Ukrainian resistance was criticised by those who argued it would inevitably support Nazi militias or corrupt officials.

The EZLN anticipated these criticisms: "It will be said that those who resist in Ukraine and Russia are a minority and that they play into the hands of the right wing." Their response was characteristically direct: "Dignity and ethics are not measured in numbers."

This ethical stance reflected hard-won lessons from the Zapatistas' own struggle. They understood that liberation movements cannot be pure, that popular resistance inevitably includes contradictory elements, and that solidarity means supporting people's right to defend themselves rather than imposing ideological tests from afar.

Consistency: Palestine as Mirror

The true test of the Zapatistas' ethical framework came in October 2023, when Israel launched its devastating assault on Gaza. In a statement titled "Of Sowing and Reaping," Subcomandante Moisés demonstrated the consistency of Zapatista principles across different conflicts.

The statement included a sharp observation about the hypocrisy of much international commentary: "Those who just a few months ago justified and defended the invasion of Putin's Russia into Ukraine, citing their 'right to defend themselves against a potential threat', must now be juggling (or hoping for oblivion) to invalidate that argument against Israel. And vice versa."

This comparison revealed the Zapatistas' understanding that ethical consistency requires rejecting imperial logic regardless of which state employs it. Those who condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine whilst supporting Israeli aggression in Palestine (or vice versa) were applying different moral standards based on political convenience rather than principled opposition to attacks on civilian populations.

The Zapatista position remained characteristically clear: "Neither Hamas nor Netanyahu. The people of Israel will survive." Just as they had declared "Neither Zelensky nor Putin" in 2022, they refused to choose between competing authorities whilst expressing solidarity with ordinary people caught in the violence.

This 2023 statement demonstrated that the Zapatistas' Ukraine position wasn't an isolated stance but part of a coherent worldview that prioritises the lives and dignity of ordinary people over the strategic calculations of states and their apologists.

Lessons for International Solidarity

The Zapatista response to Ukraine offers crucial lessons for feminist and leftist movements grappling with international solidarity in an era of resurgent authoritarianism.

First, it demonstrates the possibility of maintaining anti-imperialist principles whilst rejecting the campist logic that turns solidarity into a zero-sum game between rival powers. Opposition to US imperialism need not translate into support for Russian imperialism.

Second, it shows how centering the voices and experiences of ordinary people—particularly women and marginalised communities—can cut through the fog of geopolitical abstractions. The Zapatistas didn't need complex theories about NATO expansion to recognise that Russian bombs were killing Ukrainian civilians.

Third, it illustrates the importance of horizontal networks and direct relationships in building authentic international solidarity. Rather than relying on state-to-state diplomacy or party-to-party connections, the Zapatistas sought out grassroots movements that shared their values.

Finally, it demonstrates that ethical consistency sometimes requires lonely positions. The EZLN's willingness to break with much of the international left reflected their understanding that principles matter more than political convenience.

Beyond Solidarity: Building Feminist Anti-Imperialism

As the war in Ukraine continues and other conflicts emerge, the Zapatista example points toward new possibilities for feminist anti-imperialist politics. Rather than choosing between competing imperial powers, we can build solidarity with grassroots resistance movements wherever they emerge.

This means supporting Ukrainian women defending their communities whilst also supporting Russian feminists imprisoned for anti-war activism. It means opposing NATO's militarism whilst also opposing Russian expansionism. It means recognising that ordinary people's right to self-determination matters more than the geopolitical preferences of distant leftist intellectuals.

The Zapatistas understood something that much of the Latin American left missed: **solidarity is not a geopolitical calculation but an ethical commitment**. In choosing to stand with Ukrainian resistance and Russian anti-war movements, they demonstrated that another kind of internationalism is possible—one rooted in feminist principles of

care, mutual aid, and collective liberation.

As Subcomandante Marcos once wrote, "We are sorry for the inconvenience, but this is a revolution." The inconvenience of supporting Ukrainian resistance may have isolated the Zapatistas from their traditional allies, but it also pointed toward a revolution in how we think about international solidarity itself.

In the rubble of Ukraine's cities and the cells of Russia's prisons, that revolution continues. The question for the rest of us is whether we will join it.

*The author acknowledges the ongoing work of Ukrainian feminist organisations, Russian anti-war activists, and the Zapatista communities of Chiapas in their struggles for liberation and dignity.

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These represent the most recent available Zapatista statements specifically addressing the Russia-Ukraine war. While the EZLN has issued numerous communiqués on other topics since March 2022, their 2023 statement on Palestine-Israel provides important insights into the consistency of their anti-imperial framework across different conflicts.*

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