

Evasions on the Left over Ukraine

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Contents

Evasions on the Left over Ukraine	3
1. Support for the resistance in Ukraine is support for NATO.	4
2. The war in Ukraine is an ‘inter-imperialist war’.	7
Both Anti-Imperialist and Inter-Imperialist?	8
Can we draw any lessons for the international left?	9

Evasions on the Left over Ukraine

Wars are not light topics that can be dispensed of with simple formulas. I, for one, cannot imagine how the success of Russia would further the cause of democracy and socialism around the world. If you do, then say so, openly, so it can be debated in public. But don't falsify tradition and history and hide behind pathetic slogans. To paraphrase Marx, we Marxists disdain to conceal our views and aims.

John Ganz, Ben Burgis's *Bad History: Jacobin's anti-Jacobins*

There is a type of left argument around the war in Ukraine which has arisen in the West. It is one that condemns Putin's invasion, but refuses to offer practical support to the people of Ukraine in resisting that invasion. It is the position one can read in *Jacobin*, or in statements by Chomsky, Corbyn, and the Stop the War Coalition in the UK. In Ireland we have the same type of response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine from People Before Profit and the Socialist Party of Ireland.

I will use the label Evasionist Left for this approach. It's not clear how representative this trend is internationally, as many on the left do pro-actively support the resistance in Ukraine, e.g. parties such as Razem in Poland; those associated with the Fourth International like Left Bloc and the Danish Red Green Alliance; and the main left party in Japan, the Japanese Communist Party.

Of course, there are pro-Russian figures around too, who claim to be on the left: although why anyone would want to be associated with Putin makes no sense. Russia is not in any way a socialist society. In fact, as Russian socialist Ilya Budraitskis puts it, Putin can be understood to be developing a new form of fascism. Explicitly pro-Putin figures are relatively rare on the left, and while they are busy sharing Russian propaganda, are not hugely influential. The left arguments I want to address here are those of the groups and their supporters who express opposition to Putin, but who refuse to take any steps towards bringing about a military defeat for the Russian invasion and in particular, are strongly opposed to the people of Ukraine obtaining arms from the West.

The groups supporting the Evasionist Left position seem to be basing their approach on two ideas: 1) **Support for the resistance in Ukraine is support for NATO** and 2) **The war in Ukraine is an 'inter-imperialist war'**. My goal is to argue that these ideas are wrong and that if you take them seriously, you will find yourself on Putin's side in the war. Often, when I try to discuss these points with their supporters, I hear only silence when I ask them to really think through the consequences of their formulations. But the war itself allows for no evasion.

Typical of the Evasionist Left position are features that speak out against the war in Ukraine and all wars, such as the Irish People Before Profit statement: *No To War. Oppose Putin's Invasion. Stop NATO Expansion*. As with many articles by *Jacobin* and Stop the War (UK), the line taken by this statement is that Putin's invasion should be condemned **but** the US are to be condemned equally.

The article concludes: "The real hope lies in an anti-war movement that crosses the border of East and West and opposes both Putin and NATO. We salute the actions of the Irish Anti-War Movement in calling people out to protest. We urge the international movement that came together to oppose the Gulf War in the past to rise again against the twin aggressors of Putin and NATO."

World peace arising from a mass movement from below East and West would be lovely, but what is evaded here is the question of whether the left should support Ukrainian military resistance to the invasion. “Opposing the war” is a comfortable position to adopt if you are on the other side of Europe to the columns of Russian soldiers. But what does this conclusion mean for the people of Ukraine? Perhaps it means they should not fight back? Or perhaps there is room for supporting armed resistance to the Russian invasion, if it is decoupled from NATO? The point here is that in many cases, *no one knows what it means*. This is not a position that informs the people of Ukraine or those who want to express solidarity with them of what to do.

While we strive for international uprisings against war, should we want the people of Ukraine to defeat the Russian invaders in the meantime? Should we support or sabotage NATO armaments moving to Ukraine? Should we send money and perform solidarity actions that will allow Ukrainian anarchists and socialists to further their military resistance to the invasion? Or should we discourage them from fighting back, because they are unwitting tools of NATO?

These practical questions are a good way to judge the two key formulations that the Evasionist Left are using. And yet Marx’s claim that socialists don’t hide their views doesn’t seem to apply on the topic of Ukraine, where it’s difficult indeed to ascertain how these questions would be answered. Just to be clear, my own answers and those of Independent Left (and many other socialists and anarchists in Ireland) are *yes*, a victory for Ukraine against Russia would be the best outcome for the left and the world generally and *yes*, we should support the people of Ukraine getting arms from wherever they can, including from NATO. As Taras Bilous, editor of the left-wing Ukrainian magazine *Commons*, puts it, “the Western left, which criticizes military aid to Ukraine are outrageous. Do they want us to fight with bows and arrows when we have shot all our bullets? Do they want the Russians to kill as many Ukrainians as possible? That there were more Bucha’s?”

Based on the limited number of publications and occasional social media post, including exchanges with me, many Evasionist Left supporters do not in fact welcome the Ukrainian resistance, do not support people like Taras Bilous in their efforts to defend their cities. And to justify this they have advanced the two arguments above. These slogans are crucial to the orientation of the Evasionist position, and I believe they are quite wrong.

1. Support for the resistance in Ukraine is support for NATO.

A rather bad-faith version of this argument was visible after a UCU-supported demonstration on 9 April 2022 in the UK, in which a call for victory to the Ukrainian people was described as being “for NATO intervention in Ukraine”.

Such comments echoed the misleading headline by the UK’s *Socialist Worker* reporting on the demonstration, where they interpreted the call for arming the Ukrainian people to be a call for NATO escalation. To say that the people of Ukraine need arms is not at all the same as saying NATO should send troops to fight in the war.

A Russian convoy is approaching your town. The people around you join the Ukraine territorial defence to fight, several of them form their own socialist and anarchist units which you have the option of joining. But those internationally making the same arguments as above say, “No. Don’t escalate. It will lead to more war horror. And potentially nuclear war. Instead, let’s appeal to the Russian anti-war movement to save us.”

The position of these 'left' activists brings peace, but it's the peace of a Putin victory, which not only means your town witnesses hellish scenes of rape and murder, that you could perhaps have prevented, but it also undermines peace for the future. Because understandably, when scenes of slaughtered civilians reach neighbouring countries there is a massive clamour for NATO assistance. Moreover, Putin will have concluded that after Syria and Ukraine, he can push on again, because fear of the horror of war, especially nuclear war, means the western left would prefer his victory to the victory of the resistance. And the Russian anti-war movement, that might have flourished as the Russian army was stalled and thrown back, is crushed by the wave of nationalism around the victorious Putin.

Fortunately, we are not yet in this scenario, above all because of the determination of the people of Ukraine not to surrender to the Russian invaders. Within the resistance to the invasion, the left are able to play an independent role. Here's how Vitaliy Dudin, head of the Ukrainian democratic socialist organisation, Sotsyalnyi Rukh (Social Movement), described the situation from Cherkasy, Ukraine, on 6 April 6 2022:

"Some Social Movement activists, as well as many trade union members, have joined the TD as volunteers. It is worth mentioning that dozens of anarchists and socialists have formed their own unit within the TD, called the Resistance Committee.

"Secondly, a lot of leftists are helping as volunteers to supply the army or satisfy people's humanitarian needs. One of the most effective initiatives in this regard is Operation Solidarity, which has managed to provide supplies to the militant left. We are also working to meet the needs of trade union members serving in the army.

"We have also worked with the nurses' NGO Be Like Nina and helped them obtain medicines for hospitals that are taking care of wounded soldiers.

"Third, we see that a lot of people are protesting the invaders in occupied cities. We aren't involved in such activity, but we support it. Of course, it is very dangerous because peaceful protests can be shot down by armed Russian soldiers. Such resistance proves that people are against the 'liberation' that seeks to turn their cities into grey-zones.

"Fourth, we as Social Movement continue to act as a political organisation. We seek to counter Russian propaganda and call on our people to fight for a free and fair Ukraine."

By contrast, if the politics of the war in the Ukraine are resolved by the Evasionist Left approach, then we will see a Putin victory. You can't negotiate any settlement with Putin, even a bad one for Ukraine that nevertheless de-escalates the threat of nuclear war, unless you stop his army and force him to realise he can't implement his plan to eradicate Ukraine as an independent nation.

There is a better-faith version of the argument against NATO weapons going to Ukraine, which is to say, "I do want Ukrainians to defend themselves, but I don't trust the US. Whenever they arm a side in a war, they have their own imperialist goals." This observation about the US is, of course, correct, but do you really think people in Ukraine, especially the left, are under any illusions about the US interests at play? There's a patronising assumption here that those demanding arms to prevent Russian soldiers from murdering their friends and families are dupes of US intelligence.

Similarly, I've heard socialists in Ireland say, "we have to weigh up different dynamics here, on the one hand, Russian imperialism, for sure; but on the other, US interests."

If Ukraine is to defeat Russia the people there obviously need modern weapons. Anarchists have described how they are currently having to use machine guns from 1944.

If you are someone who wants Russia to be defeated, but doesn't want NATO armaments to arrive in Ukraine, you really need to think this through. Are you asking communities to defeat the Russian soldiers using only home-made Molotov cocktails and Second World War weapons? This seems to be the position of the Socialist Party of Ireland, who at least do support workers in Ukraine arming themselves. At the same time, however, their supporters are told: "In the Western capitalist countries opposition to NATO militarism and expansionism must always be a central feature of our propaganda, even where this is not currently the mood among the mass of workers. We stand against all military intervention on the part of U.S. and Western imperialism — this includes opposition to the provision of weaponry by NATO powers to the Ukrainian military. This in and of itself increases the threat of the conflict escalating more widely."

Similarly, in a feature on 25 April 2022, *Ukraine: The United States are now fighting a proxy war with Russia* Kieran Allen (Socialist Workers Network, Ireland) argues that the Ukrainian people, "have every right to resist", yet is opposed to them using NATO weapons.

It's not at all unreasonable to keep an eye on what the US is up to. No doubt there are US hawks who are thinking now would be a perfect time to take Russia on and smash Putin's army while he's weak. We should oppose US intervention of troops, ships, and aircraft, mainly because of the risk of nuclear war but also because of their own imperialist record. But that's not happening right now: yes, NATO countries are supplying weapons to Ukraine but at the time of writing they have not entered the war with Russia with their own armed forces. Sitting on the fence now in fear of what the US might do in future, again means not supporting those currently fighting the Russian soldiers. The same question faces the good faith left person as the bad: when the Russian convoy is approaching your town, do you fight back militarily? You can't say, "well, there's a balance of imperial interests to consider and I'm going to be neutral until I get non-NATO weapons." That neutrality will be finished by a Russian bullet to the head to you and anyone else you have persuaded of your position.

Moreover, those trying to dress up this recognition of the interplay of rival imperialisms as if it's something new are missing the obvious point that throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, US and Russian imperialism always backed any movement that was fighting their rival. So when Solidarnosc rose up against the Communist Polish government in 1980-1, the CIA rushed to fund and influence the union. That didn't stop it being a genuine mass movement which socialists of the type now adopting the Evasionist position recognised and supported.

Finally, on the legitimacy of the people of Ukraine taking advantage of inter-imperialist rivalry to obtain arms from NATO, there are very clear left precedents. For those of the Evasionist Left viewpoint who are champions of Lenin, it is worth noting Lenin's response when France and Britain offered to give military aid to Russia to fight Germany, when he wrote: "Please add my vote in favour of taking potatoes and weapons from the Anglo-French imperialist robbers."

He later explained:

The North Americans in their war of liberation against England at the end of the eighteenth century got help from Spain and France, who were her competitors and just as much colonial robbers as England. It is said that there were 'Left Bolsheviks' to be found who contemplated writing a 'learned work' on the 'dirty deal' of these Americans.

2. The war in Ukraine is an ‘inter-imperialist war’.

A second justification for not supporting the people of Ukraine fighting back against Russia is based on the idea of ‘revolutionary defeatism’. The tone here for *Rebel* in Ireland was set by an article by Kieran Allen, entitled, James Connolly and War.

The parallels with World War One in 1914 are striking. Then and now it was the weaker imperial power than began a new era of global conflict. In 1914, it was Austria who made the first moves. Today it is Russia, a country with a commodity driven economy and a GDP that is one tenth that of the USA.

Just as James Connolly concentrated on challenging the propaganda of the Irish National Party and Britain, argues Allen, so socialists today should be revolutionary defeatists and recognise the main enemy is at home. Which means Irish socialists should concentrate on furthering the class war in Ireland.

Allen doesn’t spell out what revolutionary defeatism actually means in the context of the war in Ukraine: and the reason is surely that to publicly embrace the implications of his approach would be to declare that a Putin victory is the better outcome for those in the West. Again, let’s go back to the situation where a Russian column is approaching your town. A revolutionary defeatist position means that you should never give support to ‘our side’ in the war, even if that results in the other side obtaining military victories. That was the position of Karl Leibknecht in Germany and the Bolsheviks in Russia. They really did mean that they preferred to see their own countries defeated than support their own national elites in their war aims. And they were right. But transpose this policy to the soil of Ukraine and revolutionary defeatism can only mean a refusal to join the resistance and a refusal to support Zelensky, *even if that means Russian victories.*

The Evasionist Left position of condemning the Russian invasion, declaring support for the right of the people of Ukraine to fight back, yet taking a ‘defeatist’ approach toward Ukraine means giving no practical support for the resistance to the invasion. It is quite consistent with not wanting arms to get to Ukraine. Our main enemy (they say) is at home. It is our job to stop NATO. That might feel very principled from afar but it abandons the left in Ukraine and the population more generally to military defeat, with all that means for the massacres of civilians and the strengthening of Putin.

This is the contradictory but inevitable outcome of a flawed analysis. And the analysis is flawed for the simple reason that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is nothing like the outbreak of the First World War. Within a week of Austria’s declaration of war against Serbia in 1914, all the European imperial powers were in a full-blooded war against one another. From the Russian invasion until now, we have not witnessed the equivalent to French and British armies crashing up against the German army.

The more obvious parallel to make with James Connolly’s world is that of British rule in Ireland. For centuries Britain tried to rule Ireland directly, eradicating the Irish language and crushing Irish culture. This is a clear parallel with Russia’s history in regard to Ukraine. Just as Connolly was right to take German weapons to support an armed rising against the British empire, so the Ukrainian people are right to take weapons from wherever they can to rise against the Russian empire.

In a related feature based on the same defeatist idea, John Molyneux argues the left should not support sanctions against Russia. Sanctions, he says, are a feature of NATO’s war against

Russian. They are, “an integral part of a political offensive waged by one of the imperialist blocs in this conflict – the bloc which, as internationalist socialists and opponents of all imperialism East and West, we have a particular duty to oppose because they are the bloc to which our ruling class is affiliated.”

Again, the analysis is that this war is not one of Russian imperialism attempting to crush a smaller neighbouring nation but an inter-imperialist war in which the main enemy is at home. In which case, one should not call for sanctions against Russia, because Russia is not the main enemy for the Western left: NATO is. Yet let’s go back to our approaching Russian convoy once more. Are there sanctions which will help stop that convoy reaching its target town in Ukraine? Yes, plenty of them. A good example is the closure of the tank factory at Uralvogonstavod.

And another, potentially even more decisive closure arose on the basis of a fire at the Dmitrievsky Chemical Plant, Russia’s only internal source for vital chemicals.

The fire at the Dmitrievsky Chemical Plant threatens to leave Russia without additives needed for advanced rocket and jet fuels; treatments and solvents for servicing metal parts; core input chemicals for explosive and solvents, traces and washes needed to manufacture electronics and circuits. So long as sanctions prevent these from being delivered at scale, Russian military efforts will be seriously hampered.

Not all sanctions are appropriate, some are less concerned with assisting Ukraine than developing Western business advantages. But when the people of Ukraine call for Western sanctions focused on stopping the Russian war machine, they are right to do so, and the left should listen to them and support them. Ironically, the Evasionist Left position in fact supports sanctions against Ukraine, applauding actions such as those of workers at Pisa Airport, Italy, who refused to load weapons and explosives destined for Ukrainian forces. By hindering the military resistance in Ukraine and refusing all sanctions against Russia, the practical effect of the Evasionist Left is to align their political energies with a victory for Putin.

Both Anti-Imperialist and Inter-Imperialist?

In an article of 19 September 2022, Paul Murphy, an Irish TD and member of RISE, offered an analysis that attempted to bridge the position between those supporting Ukraine’s right to resist the invasion and those in the west who see NATO, not Putin, as the main enemy here. His conclusion was:

It means socialists must attempt to disentangle, to the degree possible, the legitimate resistance to Russian imperialist invasion, and the inter-imperialist conflict which we oppose.

It means supporting the right of Ukrainian people to resist. We don’t blame people in Ukraine for getting weaponry from wherever they can source it, but we do encourage them to operate on the basis of complete independence from NATO. If such genuinely independent forces existed, socialists could even fundraise to send them weapons. However, those of us living in the western camp, the dominant imperialist bloc in the world, cannot support NATO forces pouring weapons into Ukraine in the

pursuit of an inter-imperialist conflict, risking an escalatory spiral that could lead to armageddon. We should support the Russian anti-war movement and demand the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine.

If a pure, revolutionary workers movement existed in Ukraine that was genuinely independent of NATO then RISE would not only support them, but would even fundraise for their weapons. It's good to have such revolutionary credentials. Unfortunately for the actually existing socialists in Ukraine, such as Taras Bilous and those linked below, they aren't sufficiently anti-NATO or in some other unstated way fail to pass the RISE test. Still, at least they aren't to blame for their decision to fire guns and other weaponry supplied by the West and that will no doubt be comfort to their troubled consciences.

This 'test-the-left' position is evasionist in regard to the question of whether a victory for Ukraine under the neo-liberal Zelensky is preferable to a victory for Russia (or a peace with Russia having made territorial gains). The answer that Murphy skirts around seems to be 'no', because of the inter-imperialist aspect of the conflict. To achieve a Ukrainian victory risks armageddon.

The mistake here is to see the activity of the US and its goals in regard to Ukraine as being on a par to the those of Putin. There is a vast difference between the two. This is not a symmetrical inter-imperialist war where victory for either side would make no difference to the lives of Ukrainians and the fate of the world more generally. This is an imperialist invasion by Russia, where the defeat of Russia is by far the best outcome for everyone who dreams of a "just and humane world" as Boris Kagarlitsky puts it.

Victory for Russia or a settlement that gives it control of Ukrainian territory leads to ruthless military rule over the conquered people; it plays into the hands of the far right world wide; it increases the possibility of other land grabs by militarily strong powers; and, in particular, it keeps Putin in power. Defeat for Russia retains the space in Ukraine for trade unionists, social rights activists, and civil society generally to organise. It also has the potential to unleash revolution in Russia. Kagarlitsky believes, plausibly, that the defeat of Russia will bring about the end of Putin and deep changes in Russia.

Yes, defeat for Russia means temporary gains for the US but a free Ukraine would not be a satellite of the US, its people would not be under military rule and it might not even become a member of NATO. Moreover, as Kagarlitsky warns, there are those in the West who are deeply uneasy about the prospect of revolution in Russia. They would prefer Putinism without this particular Putin to a popular revolt.

The RISE position of seeing the war as both inter-imperialist and anti-imperialist separates that organisation from the Ukrainian left and any anti-imperialist revolts that develop as a result of Ukrainian military victory.

Can we draw any lessons for the international left?

The contradiction in the Evasionist Left position – 'we condemn Russia but we don't support arming the resistance in Ukraine' – is an unstable one. Some members put more weight on the condemnation of Russia than others. Some even state online that they would welcome a victory for Ukraine. On the whole, though, the leadership of these parties place their emphasis on why we should not support Ukraine. Hopefully, the members who want to see Ukraine survive and

throw out the Russian invaders will push back their leadership on the two formulations above (that support for Ukraine is support for NATO, and that it is an inter-imperialist war), that directly oppose support for the resistance.

There's a lesson here for the left in how the wrong positions have been arrived at, which is that we are witnessing the consequence of a top-down approach to socialist politics rather than a bottom up. The reason I have repeatedly asked the reader to imagine the approach of a Russian column of tanks and to think through your response is that this is exactly how billions of people have thought about these issues. The majority of the world's working class empathise with the people of Ukraine, who before Putin's invasion were bringing their kids to school, going to work, planning their weekly shop, collecting the kids, going to the playground, chatting with friends. They were exactly like us and then the hell of war descended on them from Russia.

The left can influence this public feeling of solidarity for Ukraine by making points about Western hypocrisy on refusing to cancel Ukraine's debt; on refugees, on Palestine, and yes, on the imperialist role of NATO. But the best way to do that is to amplify the voices of Ukrainian socialists and anarchists who are putting their lives in the front lines against Putin's army. This 'bottom up' approach listens to the people of Ukraine and if you are on the left, to the voices of anarchists and socialists, such as: diary of an anarchist in Ukraine; also <https://commons.com.ua/en/left-west-must-rethink/>; or <https://freedomnews.org.uk/.../interview-operation.../>; or <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article62209> or <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article61988>.

The Evasionist Left model is a top down one, where the leadership derive their positions based on past experience and their reading of canonical Marxists texts, then the party apparatus delivers the position to the members. This means blunders are inevitable.

The Evasionist Left are in the process of making a serious mistake now and one where the equivocation of condemning Putin while not supporting the military resistance of the Ukrainian people cannot be sustained. There can be no hiding from the question of what to do when the Russian soldiers are coming. And if you are a member of one of these parties or organisations who thinks the Ukrainian people are right to fight back, then you have your own battle to avoid your party coming out of this war with a lasting reputation for having adopted a position whose practical consequence was to disarm those facing the Russian invasion.

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