

Ukraine: Debates on the Left

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Wars generate debates in society both within the mainstream (i.e., within the ruling class), and on the left. However, compared to many previous wars, the Ukraine War has produced very little debate within either the Irish or the European/American establishments. For example, the Second World War saw a split in the British ruling class between the appeasers and the Churchill wing, and then between Churchill and the Halifax wing, who wanted to sue for peace with Hitler. In the US there were isolationists and interventionists. In the Vietnam War the US ruling class eventually fractured. Over the 2003 war in Iraq there was certainly opposition within the establishment in Britain and in the EU to the Bush-Blair invasion. But where Ukraine has been concerned there has been pretty close to unanimity among the Western powers. The story has not been the same with China and India or with many countries in the Global South. The UN resolution on 3 March condemning the Russian invasion received 141 votes in favour, but 5 countries—Russia, Syria, North Korea, Eritrea and Belarus—voted against, and 35 abstained, including China, India, Pakistan, Cuba and 16 African countries.

In the West, from the moment of Putin's invasion on 24 February, condemnations flew in from all sides, and there was close to unanimity among Western governments on support for Ukraine, strong sanctions on Russia and major military aid to the Zelensky government. There was also, for pretty obvious reasons, a high level of agreement against direct military engagement and against the imposition of a no-fly zone, which would almost certainly lead to such engagement. Moreover, this political consensus and military aid was matched by an extraordinarily extensive and powerful roll-out of hegemony, which has reached almost every nook and cranny of civil

society. In Ireland this has meant everything from blue-and-yellow flags all over Dublin city centre to relentless coverage on Joe Duffy, special editions of *The Late, Late Show* and an almost mandatory standing ovation for President Zelensky in the Dáil (simply not clapping was regarded, and projected in the media, as a serious political offence). Similar operations have been mounted in the UK and elsewhere. We on the left have often called this wall-to-wall propaganda 'warmongering.' But that is not quite accurate; the aim has not so much been to create a fever for war as to try make a certain narrative unchallengeable. This narrative can be summed up as follows:

1. The invasion of Ukraine is an exceptionally heinous crime.
2. The responsibility for this invasion lies solely at the door of Russia and especially of Putin as an individual.
3. We all stand in solidarity with Ukraine, and everything our government/s do, such as imposing draconian sanctions and sending massive arms shipments, is to be supported.
4. The Ukrainians are heroes, their president is a superhero and their refugees, unlike other refugees, are welcome.
5. This war is a war for European/Western values, for freedom and democracy against authoritarianism, and the US has resumed its place as leader of the democratic world
6. Any questioning of this narrative is shameful and tantamount to support for Putin.¹

On the left, however, things have been very different. Here the debates have been many, vigorous and sometimes vitriolic, and this is what I am going to focus on in this article. Fundamentally, there have been three positions: 1) what is known as 'campism,' namely some degree of support for Russia against Ukraine and the West; 2) complete opposition to the Russian invasion and complete support for Ukraine with little or no reservations about NATO or Western imperialism; 3) opposition to both Russian imperialism and to Western imperialism; what is sometimes known as the neither-Washington-nor-Moscow position—the position taken by the Socialist Workers Network, by People Before Profit and by me². I will discuss each of these in turn.

Campism

The term ‘campism’ comes from an outlook that sees the world divided into two basic camps—an imperialist camp headed by the US, and an anti-imperialist camp. There are different versions of the campist position, but the tendency is to see the division between imperialism and anti-imperialism as the primary division in the world and as overriding class divisions within countries. There is in this view only one significant imperialist pole, that headed by US imperialism and including NATO and its other allies. It includes the UK and the EU and other countries such as Australia, Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as countries in the Global South headed by governments which side with the US in matters of foreign policy. The anti-imperialist camp is made up of those countries that have placed themselves or found themselves standing in opposition to the imperialist camp. This ranges from Cuba to Russia, China, Syria, Libya (under Ghaddafi), Venezuela, Bolivia (under Morales and his supporters), Nicaragua and maybe others.

Campism has its historical roots in Stalinism and the particular inflection given to the Leninist theory of imperialism in the Stalin era and in the broad anti-imperialist Third World nationalist tradition that was at its height in the 1960s, a tradition which tended to see the Soviet Union (whatever its faults) as its benefactor and as a bulwark against Western colonialism. But today it tends to be a residual defensive attitude rather than a confident or aggressive ‘revolutionary’ position. Campism has many incarnations, and I cannot deal with them all. I will therefore discuss a few key examples and then turn to what I think are the fundamental issues.

An important example of campism is the influential US-based Marxist journal *Monthly Review* and its online website, mronline.org/. In an editorial written in early March they say:

To understand the origins of the New Cold War and the onset of the current Russian entry into the Ukrainian civil war, it is necessary to go back to decisions associated with the creation of the New World Order made in Washington when the previous Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Within months, Paul Wolfowitz, then under secretary of defence for policy in the George H. W. Bush administration, issued

a *Defense Planning Guidance* stating: ‘Our policy [after the fall of the Soviet Union] must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.’ Wolfowitz emphasized that ‘Russia will remain the strongest military power in Eurasia.’ Extraordinary efforts were therefore necessary to weaken Russia’s geopolitical position permanently and irrevocably, before it would be in a position to recover, bringing into the Western strategic orbit all of those states now surrounding it that had formerly either been parts of the Soviet Union or had fallen within its sphere of influence ([‘Excerpts from Pentagon’s Plan: “Preventing the Re-Emergence of a New Rival.”’](http://monthlyreview.org/2022/04/01/mr-073-11-2022-04_0/) *New York Times*, March 8, 1992). monthlyreview.org/2022/04/01/mr-073-11-2022-04_0/

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, please note, is described as ‘the current Russian entry into the Ukrainian civil war,’ which is clearly intended to frame this action in as favourable a light as possible. This opening paragraph is then followed by a long analysis of US strategy in relation to Russia and the struggle to control Eurasia, with special emphasis on the ideas and plans of Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US national security advisor to President Carter and the man they regard as chief architect of US policy in this regard.³ This analysis, it should be said, contains a number of important insights and makes a number of good points, but it is not complemented by any parallel analysis of Russia’s strategic aims nor is it accompanied by any condemnation of the invasion.

In addition the *MR* website has published a series of articles rejecting Western claims of atrocities in the war. These include:

‘Eva Bartlett⁴ reports from Mariupol: “Ukraine forces used scorched earth tactics”’ (mronline.org/2022/04/28/eva-bartlett-reports-from-mariupol/)

and

‘US media are lying about Russian atrocities in Mariupol, says embedded reporter at Ground Zero’ (mronline.org/2022/04/27/u-s-media-are-lying-about-russian-atrocities-in-mariupol-says-embedded-reporter-at-ground-zero/)

and

‘Dutch Journalist: “We are here, in Donbass, to awaken Westerners deluded by propaganda”’ (mronline.org/2022/04/11/dutch-journalist-we-are-here-in-donbass-to-awaken-westerners-deluded-by-propaganda/)

In both of the latter articles the writer, who *MR* describes twice as ‘Independent Dutch journalist, Sonja van den Ende,’ is actually, they also concede, embedded with the Russian army. In short, she is working for Russia. As has often been said, truth is the first casualty of war, and this is going to be the case with both sides, so it is more or less impossible, sitting in Dublin or in Seattle, where *MR* is produced, to know the veracity of these claims and counterclaims. There is certainly a long history of lying ‘black’ propaganda, from alleged German atrocities in ‘poor little Belgium’ through to Iraq’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction, but this is no reason to believe Russian propaganda. The fact that *MR* chooses to publish several such articles is a clear indication where its sympathies lie.

The three most obvious campist organisations in Ireland are the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), the Connolly Youth Movement (CYM) and the Workers’ Party (WP). Each of them is very small, each is from a deeply Stalinist tradition and each has been quite muted in its response to Ukraine. The CPI issued a statement which, while not overtly supporting the Russian invasion, also failed to condemn it. Instead it stated:

The immediate cause of this situation has been the expansion of NATO and its project to constrict its imperial competitor, Russia, by establishing large bases of troops and mass-destructive weapons along its western and southern borders and the massive arming and training of Ukrainian forces and paramilitaries especially by the British.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that overt fascism is well ensconced in the political system of Ukraine and in its military. In the last few weeks US and British arms have been imported on a massive scale to the Baltic countries without regard to the financial or human cost.

It is clear that it will be the working classes of Russia and the Ukraine that will pay the

heaviest price in this on-going military conflict. The CPI expresses its solidarity with the working classes of Russia and Ukraine and with communists in both countries and we share the heartbreak of soldiers and their families, victims of inter-imperialist warfare. (communistparty.ie/en/2022/02/end-the-war-in-ukraine-dismantle-nato-2/)

Only at the very end, in a throwaway comment unbacked by any analysis, is there the recognition that this is ‘inter-imperialist warfare.’ The CYM statement is slightly more critical, but also incoherent.

As Russian forces enter and place military pressure at a number of strategic points in Ukraine outside of the recently recognised Luhansk and Donetsk republics and Crimea, Russia has embarked on a highly dangerous and irresponsible course of action

The mission purpose of NATO is to replace the states of the world one by one with pro-American plutocracies. The goal of CIS, by meagre contrast, is to secure Russia’s niche in the world, despite the much more threatening long-term motivations ascribed to CIS of a ‘Greater Russia.’ NATO’s relationship to capitalism is fundamentally different to other imperialist nations because their role in the development of hyper-capitalism through new markets and the constant regime change and destruction of non-aligned countries are explicitly and inextricably linked. All socialists must struggle to defeat them first and foremost as a pre-condition for any global unity of the working class struggle. (cym.ie/2022/02/25/the-cym-condemns-war-in-ukraine/)

So Russia’s invasion was ‘dangerous and irresponsible,’ essentially a mistake, but whereas NATO is bent on world domination and hyper-capitalism, the goal of the CIS (the Commonwealth of Independent States) is only ‘to secure Russia’s niche in the world.’ No real harm in that, you might think. The Workers’ Party calls on Russia to ‘halt its attack and offer immediate negotiations in order to restore peace.’ Thus it stops short of either

condemnation or demanding Russian troops out. It then segues into a bizarre account of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991 as a kind of generous 'peace initiative.'

The Soviet Union, i.e., the predecessor state to Russia, took the historically unprecedented step of withdrawing its forces from Eastern Europe and permitting a very peaceful breakup into Russia and other states, including Ukraine. Its reward for that was its looting by western capitalists, widespread poverty, and a massive increase in the death rate.... The Soviet peace moves of 1989 and the early 1990s were wrongly taken as a Russian surrender by the Atlantic powers. (workersparty.ie/european-peace-conference-essential-to-ukraine-solution/)

The most prominent representatives of campism in Ireland, because they are elected MEPs, are Clare Daly and Mick Wallace. Their official statement on Ukraine contains a forthright condemnation of the Russian invasion as 'an act of aggression and a serious violation of the United Nations Charter,' and asserts that 'the pretexts President Vladimir Putin is using to justify his decision are contrary to international law and cannot be supported.' They go on to say

The responsibility for opening hostilities is solely with President Putin, but we do not withdraw a single of our longstanding criticisms of NATO brinkmanship and the recklessness of Western policy on Ukraine. Both Russia and the West bear responsibility for creating conditions of instability and confrontation in Ukraine in pursuit of their strategic and economic interests. (claredaly.ie)

A Marxist would question the legalism of this condemnation, with its illusions in the United Nations, but at least the condemnation was clear. Unfortunately, Daly and Wallace are seriously compromised by their long-standing support for Assad in Syria and their defence of other dictatorial regimes on campist grounds, and this has opened them to vitriolic attack in the bourgeois media.

The point of citing these concrete examples of campism is not to polemicise with any of them in particular but to highlight what they all lack, namely

a recognition and analysis of Russia as imperialist. It is clearly the case that Russia is not as powerful an imperialist power as the US, just as Tsarist Russia was not as powerful as Edwardian Britain, but it is an imperialist power none the less, and the historical record leaves no room for doubt on this.

As the Second World War was drawing to a close, Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill met at Yalta (on the Crimean Peninsula!) in October 1944 to discuss the post-war settlement. There they decided to divide up Europe between them, with the East being under Soviet control and the West going to the US and Britain, completely over the heads of all the peoples concerned.⁵ It was a classic imperialist carve-up, directly reminiscent of what was done in the Middle East with the Balfour Declaration and the Sykes-Picot Treaty and what was done later at the Treaty of Versailles. In so far as what actually happened differed from the agreements reached in advance, this was due to the disposition of Russian and Allied forces on the ground at the end of the war.

The Soviet Union then used the combination of the Red Army and the respective Eastern European communist parties to: a) insist that the whole of Eastern Europe from Poland to Bulgaria came into its sphere of influence and under its control; b) adopt the Soviet economic and political model; and c) use that control and that model to subordinate the economies of the Eastern bloc to the needs of the Russian economy. This was done by means of extreme war reparations, mixed companies and unequal trade. Chris Harman describes this process in detail in his *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe 1945–83*,⁶ and on the final element comments: 'The method of exploitation was quite simple: Eastern European goods were bought at below world market prices, at times even below cost price, while Russian goods were sold in Eastern Europe at above world prices'⁷

This economic exploitation and subordination was widely understood and resented by 'ordinary' people across the Eastern bloc, and is one of the main reasons, along with the police-state methods of the regimes, why Eastern Europe was characterised by a succession of 'anti-Soviet' rebellions throughout the post-war period. The first of these rebellions was in Yugoslavia in 1948. It was led by Marshall Tito and the Yugoslav Communist Party, and centred precisely on the Yugoslavs' unwillingness to be economically subservient to Stalin and the Soviet Union. The next was the workers' uprising in East Berlin in 1953, followed by revolts in Poland and Hungary in 1956.

The Hungarian revolt turned into a full-scale revolution. Then came the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the Solidarnosc uprising in Poland in September 1980. The Soviet response to all these revolts was invariably repressive and imperialist: on two occasions—in Hungary in '56 and Czechoslovakia in '68—they mounted full-scale military invasions.

Soviet imperialism, however, was by no means confined to Eastern Europe. It operated also within the boundaries of the USSR and in Asia.

The old Tsarist Empire was infamous as 'the prison house of the peoples' and was regularly denounced as such by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Their position was to defend unequivocally the right to self-determination, including the right to secede, of all the various and numerous oppressed nationalities of the Russian Empire—of Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Uzbeks, Kazaks and so on. Under the Stalin regime, all the old oppression of these nations was restored. Although granted formal 'autonomy,' all their economic, political and cultural life was strictly controlled from Moscow through European Russian party secretaries, and there was a general process of cultural Russification. In extreme cases, whole—supposedly autonomous—national republics were dissolved and entire national populations were deported: this was the fate of the Volga German Republic in 1941, the Kalmuk SSR in 1943, the Checheno-Ingush SSR and the Crimean Tartars in 1946. Communist leaders from these oppressed nations were also systematically persecuted. Tony Cliff writes: 'Altogether in the big purge of 1937-8 the whole or majority of thirty national governments were liquidated. The main accusation against them was their desire for secession from the USSR.'⁸ And the outcome of this imperialist oppression was that the moment the centralised Communist regime fell apart almost all these nationalities decided to secede in much the same way as the moment the British Empire was weakened, the British colonies in India and Africa all established their independence.

Just as the US and the Soviet Union partitioned Germany at the end of the war, so they partitioned Korea. The country was split into a Soviet puppet regime in the North and a US puppet regime in the South, a division from which the Korean people are still suffering. Then, in 1950, North Korean forces, prompted and backed by the Soviet Union, invaded the South. What followed was a three-year proxy war between the great powers (also with the involvement

of China) which utterly devastated Korea and claimed something like three million (overwhelmingly Korean) lives without achieving any significant outcome. It was classic imperialist butchery in which ordinary people were sacrificed on an industrial scale by both sides.

The Chinese Revolution of 1949, when Mao's Red Army captured Beijing, was hailed as the greatest victory for 'communism' since 1917, but within seven years the Soviet and Maoist Regimes were at each other's throats in a split which divided the international Communist movement, came close to war and affected geopolitics for decades. Ostensibly the split was about doctrine, with the Maoists condemning 'Soviet revisionism' and preaching a more 'revolutionary' anti-imperialist line, but China's deeds and actual development give the lie to this 'ideological' (i.e., idealist) explanation. In reality the basis of the split was that the Soviet Union was attempting, as it did elsewhere, to impose its will and its economic priorities on China, but Mao, the Chinese nationalist, was having none of it. In other words, the root of the problem was Russian imperialism.

Yet another example was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which led to ten years of war costing over two million lives and creating five million refugees, at the end of which Russia was forced to admit defeat and withdraw.

Nor did Russian imperialism come to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. If, as was often argued by right-wing anti-communists, Soviet imperialism was driven by ideology, by a political aspiration to force communism on the whole world, then these imperialist wars should have ceased after 1991. If, on the other hand, Soviet expansionism, like Western imperialism, was fundamentally driven by competitive capital accumulation, then one would expect it to continue despite the abandonment of 'Marxist' or 'communist' language and symbolism and despite the shift sideways from bureaucratic state capitalism to a mixed semi-state capitalism. Continue it did.

First under Yeltsin and then under Putin, Russia waged two brutal wars, in 1994–96 and 1999–2000, in and against Chechnya. Amnesty International reported”

There were frequent reports that Russian forces indiscriminately bombed and shelled civilian areas. Chechen civilians, including

medical personnel, continued to be the target of military attacks by Russian forces. Hundreds of Chechen civilians and prisoners of war were extrajudicially executed.⁹

The Chechen capital, Grozny, was flattened and occupied, but guerrilla resistance continued in the mountains for another nine years.

In August 2008, in a short and totally unequal war, Russia invaded Georgia in a dispute about the region of South Ossetia. In 2014 they intervened in the conflict in the Ukraine to annex the Crimean Peninsula.

Reviewing this brief survey of Russian imperialism since 1945, it could be objected that it is one sided in that, in each instance, I have failed to consider the possible justification for Russia's actions, as in 'The invasion of Hungary in 1956 was necessary to prevent "fascist counter revolution" or 'The invasion of Czechoslovakia was necessary to prevent it being taken over by the West and the invasion of Afghanistan was necessary to prevent it being taken over by Islamist jihadis' and so on. Any power always has its justifications; in the modern world, where 'public opinion' (i.e., the consciousness of the working class) has to be considered even by dictators, no government ever simply says 'We are imperialist predators.' It is worth noting the pattern. In each case the 'excuse' put forward is the need to combat a demonised enemy: fascists, Western imperialists, jihadis, Islamic terrorists, etc. The problem is that, with the substitution of evil communists for Western imperialists, this turns out to be more or less the same list of enemies used by the US and the UK to justify their numerous imperialist interventions.

A final point on this is that no serious person will believe that in 1914, Britain, which held in subjection India, Ireland and half of Africa, went to war for the sake of 'poor little Belgium' or that the US fought for three years in Korea out of concern for the rights of the Korean people. By the same token, are we really being asked to believe that the Russian state, which had deported the Chechens and the Crimean Tartars wholesale in the thirties and forties, was motivated by international solidarity, rather than, for example, by its desire to protect oil supply lines or to have a foothold on the Black Sea, when it came to 1999 or 2014?

No; the pattern of imperialist behaviour is long standing and consistent, and therefore, when it comes

to assessing Russia's current interventions in the war in Ukraine, there is absolutely no reason to imagine that it is motivated by anything other than imperialist calculation and self-interest.

The campist blindness to Russian imperialism extends also to China, in some cases because of a reluctance to accept that China is fully capitalist. This matters because, from a Marxist point of view, if China is capitalist (which it clearly is) and on track to being the largest capitalist economy in the world, then it is bound to be or become imperialist, as imperialism is a necessary outgrowth and consequence of capitalist competition. To this can be added that China has a clearly imperialist record in relation to Tibet, to Xinjiang (the homeland of Uyghurs) and to the invasion of Vietnam in 1979.¹⁰ Also, China now has massive investments in Africa and Latin America. These are claimed, for the moment, to be benevolent, not imperialist, but then they would be. Then there are China's aspirations to be hegemonic in its region and in the South China Sea. At the moment, none of this is a burning immediate issue because China's strategy is to avoid overt conflict while it is winning the economic competition with the US and at the same time building its military strength. This will become more evident in the future, and I will return to it later in the article.

Another major weakness in the campist outlook is that when popular revolt breaks out in states considered to be in the anti-imperialist camp, the first instinct of campists is to view these revolts as being engineered by Washington and the CIA. Now, the CIA would not be doing its job if it did not have agents at work in such revolts, just as 'communists' and 'Trotskyists' would not be doing their job if they didn't take part in anti-capitalist rebellions, but this does not mean that such revolts are not genuine mass movements articulating the interests and anger of ordinary people. The most egregious instance of this campist instinct came in relation to the Syrian Revolution of 2011, when those with a campist outlook rallied to the defence of the murderous Assad regime against his own people. The same response was evident in relation to the initial revolt against Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, later to the revolt in Hong Kong, and more recently to protests in Cuba.

The effect of this more widely is to deny the right to resist of people in designated 'progressive' or 'anti-imperialist' states (even when they are brutal dictatorships) and to deny them any agency. They are

seen as not capable of acting on their own behalf except at the instigation of the West. This mirrors the right-wing view that all mass protests are orchestrated and induced by ‘outside agitators’ and ‘professional revolutionaries.’ Moreover, there is an intrinsic link between this attitude and the campist and Stalinist worldviews in that the latter are based on the idea that the main actors in history are states, not ordinary people, not class struggle.

Don’t mention NATO!

If campism retains a good deal of influence on the international left, this has not been the case in Ireland (or the UK). Far more influential has been the tendency to view the war in Ukraine as simply a conflict between Russia/Putin and the Ukrainian people without reference to the wider international situation. In this view, the actions of the US and NATO played no significant role in generating the conflict, nor is discussion of their role in the present situation warranted beyond supporting the aid—economic and military—they give to the Ukrainian government. It is therefore absolutely wrong and morally repugnant to make any equivalence between Russia/Putin and Western imperialism or NATO. Indeed, doing so is tantamount to backing Putin.

Predictably, this is the position of Ivana Bacik and the Labour Party and of most of social democracy in Europe. I say predictably because ‘mainstream’ social democracy has a record of supporting imperialism and its wars that goes back to World War I and before. When in 1914 Karl Liebknecht voted against war in the Reichstag, he was one against 111 SDP deputies. This is the tradition that always stood with America during the Cold War and that gave us Lord Attlee—the British prime minister who manufactured the British atom bomb (without informing parliament or the country)—and Tony Blair and which has never wavered in its support for apartheid Israel. So when Bacik responded to President Zelensky in the Dáil with fawning obsequiousness and said not one word of criticism of NATO, closing her speech with the Ukrainian nationalist slogan, ‘Slava Ukraini!’¹¹ she was merely acting true to form, as she is when she repeatedly demands more sanctions on Russia.

It is the same with Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the British Labour Party, who has offered uncritical support to NATO and Boris Johnson over the Ukraine issue and denounced the Stop the War Coalition in Britain for opposing NATO escalation. When eleven Labour MPs, headed by Diane Abbott, signed a Stop

the War Coalition statement, Starmer threatened them with expulsion from the Parliamentary Labour Party unless they removed their signatures, and sadly they all capitulated.

More surprising has been the position taken by the Trotskyist Fourth International. The Fourth International is a fairly loose association of revolutionary groups and parties in a number of countries, including the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in France and Anti-Capitalist Resistance in Britain. It does not have any great political influence, and in Ireland it has virtually none, but it does have the allegiance of a number of quite well-known intellectuals, such as Gilbert Achcar, Daniel Tanuro, Andreas Malm and Michael Lowy, who have a voice on the international left. Moreover, unlike mainstream social democrats, it does attempt to produce Marxist justifications for its positions. Shortly after the Russian invasion, the executive bureau of the Fourth International issued a statement. It differed markedly from earlier statements it made on Ukraine which had highlighted its opposition to NATO escalation in that it now focused overwhelmingly on the Russia/Ukraine conflict. On NATO the statement offers the following slippery paragraphs:

NATO (which we opposed from its foundation) is a tool for US imperialism and its allies, initially built against the Soviet Union and Communist China. Logically it should have been dissolved with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991, but successive US governments have not only kept it going, but they have also continued to expand it. We reject the competitive logic of capitalist power-states leading to the accumulation of ever more powerful weapons. This is what motivates the opposition to NATO of large parts of the population in the world—and this is not Putin’s preoccupation! However, in some countries, which had been colonized by tsarism or subjugated by the USSR, joining NATO was supported by their populations in the hope that it would protect their independence. We stand instead for the eradication of inequalities, and the necessary social, environmental and democratic development as the means to defend peace.

The fight against the extension of NATO to the East passes today through the uncom-

promising defence of the national and democratic rights of the peoples threatened by Russian imperialism.

We demand the dissolution of NATO, however this is not the question posed by the attempted annexation of Ukraine by Russian imperialism, which denies the very existence of this nation

So *in general* and *in the past* we have opposed NATO, but this is ‘not the question posed’ in this situation. It goes on: ‘Ukraine is an independent country which has preserved a regime of formal democracy. Russia has an authoritarian, repressive parliamentary system.’ This is a comment which echoes the dominant bourgeois narrative of the whole conflict as one between democracy and authoritarianism. Then the slide continues:

Solidarity and support for the armed and unarmed resistance of the Ukrainian people. Delivery of weapons on the request of the Ukrainian people to fight the Russian invasion of their territory...

- Support for sanctions against Russia, as called for by the Ukrainian resistance, that limit Putin’s ability to continue the ongoing invasion and his warmongering policy in general. Rejection of any sanctions that hit the Russian people more than the government and its oligarchs.¹²

A few days previously, Gilbert Achcar, a leading Fourth International spokesperson, had issued a memorandum in which he expounded on the question of NATO escalation, arms deliveries and sanctions.

We are against calls for direct military intervention of one imperial force against another, be it with boots on the ground or the imposition of a No-Fly Zone from a distance. As a matter of general principle, we are against direct military intervention by any imperialist force anywhere. Asking for one of them to clash with another is tantamount to wishing a world war between nuclear powers. Moreover, there is no way that such an intervention could be effectuated within the boundaries of international law since most major imperialist powers have a veto right at the

UN Security Council. Even if one can easily understand that Ukrainian victims of the aggression may make such calls out of despair, they are nevertheless irresponsible demands.

We are in favour of the delivery of defensive weapons to the victims of aggression with no strings attached—in this case to the Ukrainian state fighting the Russian invasion of its territory.... Blank opposition to such deliveries is contradictory with basic solidarity with the victims.

We have no general attitude on sanctions in principle. We were in favour of sanctions targeting the South-African Apartheid state and we are in favour of sanctions targeting the Israeli settler-colonial occupation. We were against the sanctions imposed on the Iraqi state after it had been destroyed by war in 1991, for they were murderous sanctions serving no just cause but only the subjugation of a state to US imperialism at a quasi-genocidal cost for its population. Western powers have decided a whole set of new sanctions against the Russian state for its invasion of Ukraine. Some of these may indeed curtail the ability of Putin’s autocratic regime to fund its war machine, others may be harmful to the Russian population without much affecting the regime or its oligarchic cronies. Our opposition to the Russian aggression combined with our mistrust of Western imperialist governments means that we should neither support the latter’s sanctions, nor demand that they be lifted.¹³

Thus Achcar begins, rightly, by rejecting calls for direct Western imperialist intervention, even when made in desperation by Ukrainians (and they are being made, constantly). But he then goes on to support indirect imperialist intervention by arms deliveries, while being ambiguous on sanctions.

Here I am treating the Fourth International as representatives of a more widely held position on the left, and in offering a critique of this position I will deal in turn with the issues of arms deliveries, sanctions and the overall effect of the position.

There is, of course, something bizarre about a small group of Trotskyists debating the pros and cons of different kinds of arms deliveries—when they are not in a position to deliver a single consignment of rifles—at precisely the time when the US (and the UK and EU) is channelling sophisticated weaponry of all kinds by the plane, boat and train load to the Zelensky government and the Ukrainian army. However, with this proviso, it has to be said that the distinction between offensive and defensive weapons is there simply to save the blushes of Gilbert and the Fourth International. It holds no meaning in practice. If you deliver a gun, that gun can be used equally for defence or offence. Likewise with anti-tank weapons—they can be used to destroy Russian tanks invading Ukraine or to destroy Russian tanks in an offensive against Russia. It is the character of the war that determines the character of the weapons, not the other way round. And remember, every imperialist war and intervention has been and is always presented as ‘defensive.’ Britain conquered a third of the world ‘defending’ itself against Spain, France, Germany, etc. But the effect of supporting arms deliveries by ‘our’ governments—whether they be large or small, for the defence of democracy or whatever—is to *disarm* us, the left, in our opposition to our own rulers.

It is much the same with the matter of sanctions. Given the fact that in this situation (differing from that of South Africa and of Israel) the only sanctions that matter are those imposed by Western imperialist powers, the distinction between sanctions that hit the oligarchs and the elites and those that hit ordinary people breaks down. If the sanctions have the effect—very much desired by the Western powers—of crashing the Russian economy, this will hit both the oligarchs and ordinary people simultaneously—it is just that ordinary people will suffer much more. Achcar’s strange position that ‘we should neither support...sanctions, nor demand that they be lifted’ means that we, the left in Western imperialist countries, are unable to oppose our own governments on this issue.

The political effect of the individual stances on arms and sanctions is the same as the overall effect of regarding the matter of NATO and its role as ‘not the question’ posed by the situation today: it leaves socialists and the left simply going along, albeit with the addition of various Marxist phrases and expressions, with the official narrative being blasted across the airwaves 24/7. ‘Down with Putin! Down

with the Russian invasion!’ Solidarity with Ukraine! Send arms, impose sanctions!’¹⁴

But if this position is very weak as a basis for opposing our rulers, it can nevertheless be weaponised against those on the left who advance the ‘difficult’ argument¹⁵ of opposing *both* Russia and Western imperialism. And the level of vitriol and moralism with which this has been done is striking. It has been common to be on the receiving end of comments accusing us of denying arms to Ukrainians and thus aiding Putin’s victory. Thus, in response to the statement (in defence of Irish neutrality) that ‘Ireland can stop the transportation of weapons on US planes coming through Shannon—for a start! Neutrality begins at home!’ Penelope Duggan, a leading Fourth Internationalist, retorted, ‘And who does that help? Russia, because Ukraine won’t have weapons. So you are for Putin’s victory?’

Those taking this view have even developed a new pejorative term for those opposing both imperialisms, namely ‘the evasionist left.’ A good example is the article ‘Evasions on the Left over Ukraine’ by Conor Kostick, which was published on the website of the British affiliate of the Fourth International.¹⁶

Kostick is liberal in his denunciation of many forces on the left. He offers a sweeping condemnation of *Jacobin*, Chomsky, Corbyn and the Stop the War Coalition in the UK, but his principal target—remember, the main enemy is at home—is clearly People Before Profit.¹⁷ Kostick repeatedly makes the familiar accusation that those who oppose arms deliveries or sanctions are really supporting Putin, and even suggests, without quotation or evidence, that PBP has equivocated in its condemnation of Putin. His main argument, however, is that we are failing to listen to the oppressed people of Ukraine.

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 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.

And he repeatedly asks us to imagine we are in a Ukrainian village being approached by a column of

Russian tanks. Listening to the working class in Ireland, in Ukraine and internationally is certainly essential, but it does not follow that revolutionary socialists simply go along with whatever the masses believe or demand. Indeed, such an approach would be fatal for socialists because the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class and therefore the mass of the working class are, unfortunately, perfectly capable at certain times of being nationalistic, sexist, racist, reformist, passive and in the grip of various illusions.

Let me give a very concrete example of this. After taking part in the International Women's Day rally on 5 March, I went to the Ukraine solidarity rally at the GPO, precisely in order to 'listen' to what Ukrainians and their supporters were saying. I do not know if Conor Kostick was there, the crowd was about 4000–5000 strong, but if he had been he would have heard repeated calls and chants for a no-fly zone to 'shelter our skies.' Now, neither PBP nor the entire left can deliver and enforce a no-fly zone, only the US and NATO can do that, and it was they who were being addressed by the rally. Should we, as socialists, have taken up and 'amplified' these heartfelt calls (and I am sure they were heartfelt)? Of course not, because as Kostick knows and Gilbert Achcar concedes, that would be to invite all-out war with the most terrible consequences, including for the people of Ukraine.

This is not an isolated example. During the horrible crushing of the Syrian Revolution by the vile Assad regime, there were repeated appeals from Syrians and Syrian solidarity activists for the West to 'do something' and specifically to impose a no-fly zone. We had to resist such appeals because we knew from both past experience and, yes, Marxist theory that such Western intervention would make the situation even worse. Then there was the case of Libya. When the Libyan uprising against Gaddafi was in the process of being crushed, Gaddafi announced his intention to slaughter the rebels who were holed up in Benghazi. Libyans in Dublin who were gathering regularly at the Spire were desperately calling for NATO intervention. Of course we heard them and understood them, but we still could not support their calls. In fact NATO did intervene, bombed the hell out of Libya and did make the situation worse.

I wonder if Conor Kostick wrote any articles attacking us for 'evasion' over Syria and Libya. Perhaps I missed them. But then Syria and Libya were not popular causes 'amplified' by virtually every TV channel, radio station and newspaper in the Western world.

To the specific question of what attitude socialists should take to the Ukrainian resistance my answer is that we should support it politically¹⁸ and hope for its victory, and it is perfectly understandable that it will try to get weapons from wherever it can, but we in the West have a duty to oppose our own rulers' and especially the US's attempt to use Ukraine to further their own imperial interests and agenda, and the arms deliveries they are making and the sanctions they are imposing are a part of that.

Finally, in deploying the contemptuous term 'evazionist left' to describe those who disagree with him, Kostick fails to realise the extent to which it applies to himself and his co-thinkers in the Fourth International in that it is precisely they who 'evade' and turn a blind eye to the imperialist offensive being waged by the US and its allies.

Inter-imperialist rivalry—neither Washington nor Moscow.

From the start of this war we at the *Irish Marxist Review* and in People Before Profit have consistently argued that it has a dual character. It is *both* an imperialist invasion by Russia, which we condemn unequivocally, *and* an inter-imperialist conflict with the US and its allies (principally the UK and the EU) in which we are equally opposed to both sides but have a particular duty to oppose our own government, who are in the US camp. In defending this position, which by implication I have been doing throughout this article, I have already said more than enough to make clear our total opposition to the invasion and to the Putin regime.¹⁹ Now I want to elaborate briefly on the element of inter-imperialist rivalry.

We did not suck this analysis of imperialist rivalry leading to imperialist war out of our thumbs the day after the Russian invasion. It goes back more than a hundred years to the Marxist analysis of imperialism developed before and during the First World War by Luxemburg, Bukharin, Lenin and others.²⁰ The reality of war between rival colonial powers goes back to the dawn of the capitalist era: England versus Spain in the sixteenth century; England versus the Dutch in the seventeenth; England versus France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; then Britain versus Germany in the twentieth, followed by US versus Russia in the Cold War. The more recent changes and developments in imperialism on into the twenty-first century have been debated and analysed by many Marxist hands.²¹

Fundamental principles of the Marxist approach have been that: a) imperialist rivalry is rooted in the logic of competitive capital accumulation which is at the very heart of capitalism; b) this economic competition operates at the level of states as well as corporations; c) ultimately, whatever the locality of specific conflicts, the inter-imperialist struggle is one for 'the division and re-division of the whole world' (Lenin); d) this struggle develops a semi-independent geopolitical logic, i.e., although resources are often important they are often subordinated to broader strategic considerations, though these strategic considerations are ultimately rooted in economic competition. Thus the US did not go to war in Vietnam over the natural resources in Vietnamese soil but as part of its defence of its global economic empire against spreading anti-imperialist revolts. Britain did not attempt to retain its control over the Suez Canal in 1956 primarily for the revenues from the canal itself but because of its strategic importance as a route to the Indian Ocean and the Far East and as a marker of its ongoing status as a world power.

In the rivalry between Britain and Germany that culminated in the First World War, the main driver was the rise of Germany at the turn of the century as an economic power more or less the equal of Britain in a situation where Britain had already carved out the lion's share of the world's available colonies (India, a third of Africa, etc.), with very little left for Germany. From the point of view of German imperialism this was 'unfair'; Germany wanted its fair share of the bounty. From the point of view of British imperialism this constituted a threat to the empire which could not be tolerated. The result was the construction of opposing alliances (Germany with Austria, Britain with its previous enemies France and Russia), a major arms race and near war crises at Algeciras and Agadir, as well as substantial Balkan wars, all of which culminated in the horror of world war in 1914.

At the end of the Cold War, the US dreamed of a 'new world order' in which it would be the sole world hegemon. This dream fell apart with the disaster in Iraq and, most importantly, with the spectacular economic rise of China. China has gone through decade after decade of exceptional economic growth, going from being an underdeveloped, poor Third World country to being, in absolute terms, the second-largest economy in the world, within striking distance of the US. The military implications of this have been somewhat masked by the fact that the strategy of China's rulers has been to avoid foreign conflicts while steadily winning the economic war.

But the avoidance of open war does not mean they are not expanding and preparing militarily. On the contrary, their military spending has been growing relentlessly, and in 2022 they have announced a massive 7.1 percent increase in their military budget, bringing it to \$229.5 billion for the year, still way below the US (which stands at \$801 billion) but on a sharply rising trajectory and combined with by far the largest armed forces in terms of personnel.

None of this is news to the strategists in the Pentagon or elsewhere in NATO. In 2012, under Obama, the US executed its 'Asian pivot,' in which it switched its strategic focus from the Middle to the Far East. But between Europe and China stands Russia, and it has become increasingly clear that when push comes to shove Russia will stand with China, not the US.²² Consequently the US's longstanding strategy has been to hem in both China and Russia through a series of alliances with bordering states, hence the ongoing expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe (with Sweden and Finland looking like the latest candidates) and the recent AUKUS deal with Australia.²³ Into this mounting tension, which had been developing over many years, came the shock of the US's defeat by the Taliban in Afghanistan. This was undoubtedly a serious blow to the strategy and underlined the weakness of the US, evident since Vietnam, when it came to actually fighting a ground war. But then, perhaps emboldened as a result of Afghanistan, Putin took the decision to invade Ukraine with the aim of recouping some of the ground Russia had been losing since 1991.

From the point of view of US strategy, this was a golden opportunity to inflict a major defeat on Russia without putting any American boots on the ground and incurring any American casualties by arming Ukraine to the teeth and waging a proxy war to the death of the last Ukrainian.²⁴ Moreover, it could do this while apparently holding the moral high ground by virtue of Putin's obviously heinous invasion

There are major material resources at stake in Ukraine. There are huge reserves of uranium ores, manganese, iron, mercury and coal, plus Ukraine is the breadbasket of both Russia and Europe, being the world's second-largest producer of barley and third-largest producer of corn. And crucially, it has the second-largest gas pipeline network in Europe. All this makes Ukraine a very tempting prize to control for both the US and Russia. Even so, this is probably secondary to the massive geopolitical gain for Russia of regaining effective possession of Ukraine, and for

the US of definitively separating Ukraine from Russia and integrating it into the Western camp.

These are the considerations that lie behind the massive quantity of arms delivered to the Ukrainian government by the US. As Kieran Allen has noted:

Since February 2022, it has sent \$3.4 billion of weaponry. On March 16th, the White House produced a fact sheet on what it had supplied by that date. It included the following: 800 Stinger anti-aircraft systems; 2,000 Javelin, 1,000 light anti-armour weapons, and 6,000 AT-4 anti-armour systems; 100 Tactical Unmanned Aerial Systems; 100 grenade launchers, 5,000 rifles, 1,000 pistols, 400 machine guns, and 400 shotguns; over 20 million rounds of small arms ammunition and grenade launcher and mortar rounds.

But that list was only the latest tranche it sent. In addition to the above, it had also previously sent over 600 Stinger anti-aircraft systems; 2,600 Javelin anti-armour systems; five Mi-17 helicopters; three patrol boats, four counter-artillery and counter-unmanned aerial system tracking radars; four counter-mortar radar systems; 200 grenade launchers and ammunition.²⁵

And since then, Biden has announced an even more immense package of aid, estimated by Adam Tooze to be as high \$47 billion. It is literally inconceivable that this is being done out of humanitarian concern or democratic solidarity. The US state does not and never has operated like that. This is an imperialist power play.

And it is the same with the cultural response. Let's take simple facts we all see on our TV screens. The Irish state and other EU states have fallen over themselves to welcome Ukrainian refugees. No other group of refugees has been treated that way. Why the difference? Ryan Tubridy stands with Ukraine. Why? It is just not credible that it is out of the goodness of their hearts. It is because these are both elements in the strategic power play.²⁶

The great strength of the PBP position and analysis is that it has recognised this reality from the outset—a reality that has become more evident by the day.

Looking to the Future

In all these debates on the left, a large amount of energy has gone into trying to find appropriate analogies and precedents from the past: The First World War, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, Vietnam, Iraq and so on. This is often accompanied by a search for what Lenin or Trotsky may have said in certain, apparently similar situations. I understand why people do this as they search for firm and familiar ground on which to stand in a difficult and challenging situation, and I would readily accept that knowledge of history is a good thing. But I would also argue that this war is in important respects unprecedented—the product of a new balance of imperialist forces which has to be analysed and assessed in its own right in order to arrive at a correct strategic orientation for socialists.

However, it is also clear that this conflict is itself a precedent and harbinger of conflicts to come as the rivalry between the US and its allies and China and its allies intensifies, as it will. In the years to come there will be 'Ukraines' and the like in the South China Sea or the Western Pacific. And in this regard, the analysis of inter-imperialist rivalry deployed by People Before Profit and others will prove immensely more useful than either of the alternatives on offer.

- ¹ When Paul Murphy TD and People Before Profit put a motion in the Dáil demanding a referendum before the abandonment of Irish neutrality, Paschal Donohoe, for the government, began his response with, ‘Deputy, whose side are you on?’
- ² This, broadly speaking, has also been the position of the Stop the War Coalition in the UK and of the International Socialist Tendency (See the IST Statement on Ukraine: <https://internationalsocialists.org/announcements/ist-statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine>)
- ³ See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). The title of this book is very revealing of the author’s view of the world.
- ⁴ Eva Bartlett is a journalist who became infamous for her support for Assad in Syria and her discredited attacks on the White Helicopters.
- ⁵ See the vivid description of this actually happening in Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War* (New York, 1970), pp. 114–5.
- ⁶ See Chris Harman *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe 1945–83* (London, 1988) pp.41–9.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ⁸ Tony Cliff, *Russia – A Marxist Analysis* (London, 1955), p. 190.
- ⁹ ‘[Russian Federation 2001 Report](#)’, *Amnesty International* (archived 14 November, 2007).
- ¹⁰ This war is largely forgotten now, but it claimed tens of thousands of lives. ‘Socialist’ China invaded ‘socialist’ Vietnam in response to Vietnam’s intervention in Cambodia against the Chinese-backed genocidal Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot.
- ¹¹ ‘Glory to Ukraine!’ This slogan dates back to the time of the Ukrainian War of Independence, 1917–21 and the Independent Ukrainian Republic 1921–24 of Symon Petliura, under whose rule between 50,000 and 200,000 Jews died in pogroms. It was also used in the 1930s by the fascist-sympathising Stepan Bandera and his Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists. In 2018 it was adopted as the slogan of the Armed Forces of the Ukraine.
- ¹² <https://fourth.international/en/566/europe/426>
- ¹³ <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7540>
- ¹⁴ It should be noted that the positions of the Fourth International leadership have been extensively critiqued by other members of the Fourth International. See for example ‘Tendency for a Revolutionary International statement,’ ‘Let us build an international movement against the imperialist war! No to the intervention of NATO, the USA and the EU Russian troops out of Ukraine!’ available to read online at:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7641>
- ¹⁵ What it makes it ‘difficult’ is precisely that it challenges the dominant bourgeois narrative.
- ¹⁶ <https://anticapitalistresistance.org/evasions-on-the-left-over-ukraine/>
- ¹⁷ It is worth noting that neither Martin nor Varadkar nor even Joe Biden is mentioned by name in the article, whereas Kieran Allen and myself are both named and quoted.
- ¹⁸ Self evidently neither People Before Profit nor Independent Left are in a position to offer military support.
- ¹⁹ Obviously, there are people who, no matter how trenchant and consistent our statements, will continue to believe that we are secretly pro-Putin. My experience is that whenever you oppose your own ruling class in war you are accused of supporting the enemy. Thus, at various times in my life, I have been charged with being a ‘pro-Russian commie,’ a supporter of Argentinian fascism (the Falklands/Malvinas War), a supporter of Saddam Hussein, a Fenian (I liked that one except that it was accompanied by a death threat), ‘objectively’ an agent of US imperialism (over Syria), a supporter of ISIS (at various times) and, of course, an anti-Semite over Palestine.
- ²⁰ The key texts are Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) and *The Junius Brochure* (1915), Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and the World Economy* (1916) and Lenin, *Socialism and War* (1915) and *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916). All are readily available online on the *Marxist Internet Archive*. www.marxist.org.net
- ²¹ Two very useful guides to these debates and analyses are Chris Harman ‘Analysing Imperialism’ (2003), available to read online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/2003/xx/imperialism.htm> and Alex Callinicos, *Imperialism and Global Political Economy* (London, 2009).
- ²² This is not a matter of ideology but of geopolitical self-interest. In the 1960s, when both Russia and China were ostensibly Marxist states, they were also on the verge of war with each other.
- ²³ See Marnie Holborow, ‘AUKUS: The Route to a More Dangerous World,’ *REBEL*, 22 September 2021, available online at: <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2021/09/22/aukus/>
- ²⁴ It is arguable that this proxy war was already taking place and had been since 2014 in terms of the war in Donbas, which had claimed 14,000 lives. ‘Between 2018 and 2021, the United States delivered 77 Javelin missile launchers. This number increased significantly in 2022 as 300 missile launchers were delivered in January alone. In 2021, the United States provided more than \$450 million in aid to the Ukrainian army.’ ‘Let us build an international movement against the imperialist war! No to the intervention of NATO, the USA and the EU! Russian troops out of Ukraine!’ *Tendency for a Revolutionary International*, 5 May, 2022. <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7641>

²⁵ Kieran Allen, 'Ukraine: The United States is now Fighting a Proxy War with Russia,' *REBEL*, 25 April, 2022, available to read online at: <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2022/04/25/ukraine-the-united-states-are-now-fighting-a-proxy-war-with-russia/>

²⁶ The double standard in relation to refugees is often ascribed to the fact that Ukrainians are white and 'look like us.' This is a good anti-racist gut reaction, but remember that imperialist states have had not the slightest difficulty whipping up racism against people of the same skin colour. Think of England and the Irish, or Israel and Palestinians or Greeks and Turkish. The real reason for the discrepancy is strategic self-interest. Ryan Tubridy may have been told what to say or he may not. It doesn't matter. The likes of Tubridy build their careers on sensing which way the wind is blowing up on high.