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# How Ukraine won its independence, in Soviet times, and the lessons for today

Tuesday 8 March 2022, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2022).

## Introduction

**Two weeks after Vladimir Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine, events are not turning out as he planned. He had not anticipated the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people, the already high number of Russian casualties, or the massive support the Ukrainians have won from public opinion throughout Europe, and elsewhere. The UN General Assembly voted by a huge majority to demand that Russia stop its offensive and immediately withdraw all troops, only five states voting against.**

Meanwhile, in Russia itself, [thousands of citizens have rallied to protest the war](#), braving mass arrests and repression. Independent and critical media have been shut down. It is illegal now even to use words such as “war” or “invasion” to describe Russia’s intervention in Ukraine.

Contrary to his expectations, Putin’s war has been met in Europe and abroad with heavy sanctions against Russian banks and businesses. Most surprisingly, perhaps, Germany, although very dependent on imports of gas, oil and coal from Russia, has veered sharply in its foreign policy, suspending possibly forever Russia’s Nord Stream II gas pipeline, agreeing to open two terminals for U.S. LNG imports, sending lethal weapons to Ukraine and boosting its own military budget by an unprecedented amount.

Finland and Sweden are now indicating they may join NATO, adding to the encirclement of Russia on its western flank that this military alliance has been building since the demise of the Soviet Union. Neutral Switzerland has joined the European Union in imposing sanctions.

In Canada, the corporate media and politicians were quick to take advantage of public outrage at the war, responding cynically with calls to renew previously cancelled plans for new LNG terminals and pipelines, to boost the military budget, and to increase the shipments of weapons and other military assistance it was already supplying to Ukraine to prepare it for future NATO membership.

The [Washington Post exults](#), perhaps prematurely: “In one week of war, life within the boundaries of Ukraine has been upended, but the brutal assault Russian President Vladimir Putin launched last Thursday has also reverberated around the globe, steering history in a new direction and switching up 75 years of relations among some of the world’s most powerful and wealthy countries.”

Putin has been explicit: his goal is to conquer Ukraine and change its regime. But he has also indicated that his ultimate goal may be [to deprive Ukraine of its statehood](#), to incorporate Ukraine into greater Russia.

On the eve of his invasion of Ukraine he argued that its creation was illegitimate [as a product of the Bolshevik Revolution](#) of 1917. “As a result of Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose, which even

today can with good reason be called 'Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine'. He is its author and architect."

"I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia - by separating, severing what is historically Russian land. Nobody asked the millions of people living there what they thought. [...]

"Lenin's ideas of what amounted in essence to a confederative state arrangement and a slogan about the right of nations to self-determination, up to secession, were laid in the foundation of Soviet statehood. Initially they were confirmed in the Declaration on the Formation of the USSR in 1922, and later on, after Lenin's death, were enshrined in the 1924 Soviet Constitution.

"This immediately raises many questions. The first is really the main one: why was it necessary to appease the nationalists, to satisfy the ceaselessly growing nationalist ambitions on the outskirts of the former empire? What was the point of transferring to the newly, often arbitrarily formed administrative units - the union republics - vast territories that had nothing to do with them? Let me repeat that these territories were transferred along with the population of what was historically Russia.

"Moreover, these administrative units were de facto given the status and form of national state entities. That raises another question: why was it necessary to make such generous gifts, beyond the wildest dreams of the most zealous nationalists and, on top of all that, give the republics the right to secede from the unified state without any conditions?"

Putin's account, while coloured with Great Russian chauvinism, is partly true. But the real story of how Ukraine won its independence is much richer, more instructive than the Russian autocrat would have us believe. And it contains many lessons for today's socialists attempting to integrate national independence movements within their strategy for state power.

This history is best described in the following article by a leading Marxist authority on the Ukrainian national question. Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski is a former leader of Solidarnosc in Lodz, and an editor of *Inprekor*, a Fourth International magazine published clandestinely in Poland from 1981 to 1990. Among his published works is the book *Give Us Back Our Factories*.

"For the Independence of Soviet Ukraine" was originally published in the *International Marxist Review*, in 1989, while Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union. It seemed appropriate, amidst Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika, to revive Trotsky's call in 1939 for the independence of soviet Ukraine, oppressed by the Stalinist counter-revolution. The text explains the reasoning behind the demand as it was developed in the complex experience of the early Soviet government grappling with the Great Russian prejudices and practices inherited from the Tsarist regime - a regime now often cited by Putin as his own inspiration.

The text was later scanned by Andrew Pollack and published by the late Louis Proyect on [his website](#), but without the footnotes. I have added these and revised the text to correspond with the version published by Marilyn Vogt-Downey in her book *The USSR 1987-1991: Marxist Perspectives* (Humanities Press, 1993).

In a message to me this week, Zbigniew said "The resistance [in Ukraine] is extraordinary," and he

praised “the solidarity in Poland with the Ukrainian people, the complete opening of the Polish frontier for all Ukrainian refugees, including foreign (Afghan, etc.) refugees living in Ukraine.”

[For the Independence of Soviet Ukraine](#)

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**Richard Fidler**

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**P.S.**

Life on the Left

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2022/03/how-ukraine-won-its-independence-in.html>