

The War In Ukraine And The Dilemmas Of The Western Left

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This article precisely describes the war seen from Ukraine and the way in which parts of the Ukrainian population joins the resistance, in particular the territorial defence units: a vast popular mobilisation.

I am not a specialist, in the academic sense of the term, neither of Russian-Ukrainian relations nor of geopolitical questions. I am doing a thesis in philosophy. But I was born in Kyiv where I lived for 20 years before arriving in France. My family is currently in Ukraine. My mother left Kyiv on February 28, but many friends and relatives of friends still remain in the capital, either because they are responsible for the elderly and sick, or because they have chosen to defend their city and to help those who remained behind. Other friends have already fled and are preparing to file asylum applications in Poland, Germany or France. Since the first day of the invasion, I have mainly followed local news, via Ukrainian media and various Telegram channels, or directly via the testimonies of my relatives. This is one of the reasons why I decided to write this text, in order to talk about the extent of the destruction, the living conditions of the people currently there, and the networks of solidarity and resistance in which the Ukrainian population is massively involved.

After the failure of the blitzkrieg, the Russian army intensified the bombing of urban centres, notably Kharkiv, Mariupol and Kyiv, without sparing residential areas and civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. What is happening looks more and more like a punitive war. Images of the northwestern suburbs of Kyiv can testify to this: Irpin, Borodyanka, Bucha, Gostomel, as well as several villages along the Kyiv-Zhytomyr road are already half destroyed. In these suburbs where fighting is ongoing, people have been deprived of electricity, heating and mobile networks since the first days of the war. They have to spend several days in a row in cold and damp cellars, unsuitable for protection against “Grad” or “Iskander” type missiles used by the Russian army. The situation is absolutely devastating. Even the Red Cross does not venture into the territories where Russian equipment is stationed and circulates. Last week, the first agreement between the two parties concerning “humanitarian corridors” was concluded. But the ceasefire is barely respected by the Russian army. The soldiers regularly fire on the cars of civilians who try to flee individually from these combat zones. On March 6, a family walking towards one of the evacuation buses was shot dead in Irpin. The safest way to leave the capital remains for the moment the train leaving from the central station. The latter has also already been damaged by an explosion which occurred in front of the station on Wednesday 2 March. Taking the road by car is becoming more and more dangerous, and petrol is scarce: Russian soldiers have already destroyed several oil depots, especially in the Kyiv region, and priority is now given to the needs of the army. For the moment, the evacuation trains run regularly, but they are crowded and people are crammed in, often with 4 people to individual benches, or are even forced to travel standing, or sitting on the floor of the train for more than 10 hours. At Lviv station, where refugees wait for trains to Poland, the situation is becoming increasingly tense. Coming by road, it takes up to 24 hours to cross the Polish border.

But it is in the besieged city of Mariupol – a Russian-speaking city located in the south of the

administrative region of Donetsk – that the hypocrisy of the “special operation” aimed at liberating these territories from the yoke of the “Nazis of Kyiv” reveals in all its extreme brutality. This city, which currently has 360,000 inhabitants, is undergoing massive bombardments which have already claimed at least 1,500 civilian victims, who have to be buried in a mass grave. The inhabitants of the city are completely cut off from all means of communication, water, electricity and heating. Humanitarian aid cannot access them and the humanitarian corridors remain uncertain. A Telegram channel has started listing those still alive.

But if Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol and other cities are resisting the Russian army, even though it has a very clear military advantage, it is because, in the face of this invasion, a vast popular mobilization has risen up. This goes well beyond the state apparatuses, even in the Russian-speaking cities which should, according to the logic of Putin and certain parts of the Western left, welcome the liberating army with open arms. This mobilization takes multiple forms: in Energodar and in other cities, unarmed people go out to form human chains to prevent the advance of Russian tanks; in the already occupied cities, in Kherson and Melitopol, large demonstrations took place to protest against the invader. In other cities, territorial defence groups and self-organized solidarity groups ensure the security and supply of populations. According to the words of a friend who remained in Kyiv, everyone is involved in one way or another in the solidarity groups through thousands of specialized Telegram channels: it is a question of organizing distribution points and the delivery of food, medicine or other basic necessities, in particular to isolated and vulnerable people; find or offer accommodation; request or indicate the availability of places in cars to evacuate people to Western Ukraine. Each city offers a list of places (churches, gymnasiums, restaurants) that can accommodate refugees and people in transit free of charge. The Telegram channel “Help to leave” now has 94,000 members, drivers and passengers alike. All these initiatives are horizontal and do not depend on the state: a symptom both of the bankruptcy of the Ukrainian state, taken aback by a war of such magnitude, but also of the outpouring of solidarity and resistance of the Ukrainian people against the invader.

In this situation, I was truly struck by the persistent inability of a good part of our comrades in France and elsewhere to go beyond a vision of the world where responsible power, in the last instance, of all wars, it is the United States and NATO. This is the reason why many analyses of the situation in Ukraine focus, surprisingly, on something else: it is a question of going back to the “root causes” that are quite remote, historically and geographically. Such a geopolitical approach masks in part the ignorance of the political and social processes of the post-Soviet space, fueling, in particular, the idea that all the oligarchic governments of this part of the world are equal, whatever the degree of repression that they inflict on their own population and the populations of neighbouring states. It is in the name of this reductionist vision of complex realities that the Ukrainians are practically invited to capitulate, either directly, or – more indirectly and under the cover of revolutionary anti-militarism – by opposing any military aid to Ukraine provided by NATO member countries. While addressing the Ukrainians with an internationalist greeting, it suggests that they should accept the military occupation and a government-imposed by Putin.

Certainly, since the invasion, few comrades allow themselves to deny that we are dealing with military aggression nourished by the imperialist pretensions of Russia. But the campist positions nevertheless remain legible in different positions through the order in which the arguments are presented (yes, there is unacceptable aggression on Ukraine by Russia, but we still have the encirclement of Russia by NATO), and which continue to uphold the image of Russia as a subaltern and essentially reactive imperialist power. Last Saturday, in the Facebook announcement of the demonstration “for peace” organized by the young people of the NPA, away from the great demonstration in support of the Ukrainian people which was taking place in Republic Square, we could read that the invasion of Ukraine militarily by Russia was a Russian reaction to NATO’s

aggressive policy. We could read that the organisers support those who “in Ukraine as in Russia”, “fight against the war”. However, the Ukrainians are not fighting against the war: they are, despite themselves, at war against Russia. Is this anything other than an invitation to capitulation?

When the war broke out, given the overwhelming pre-eminence of the Russian forces, I myself hoped that Kyiv would be occupied within 48 hours, so that at least the price to be paid for certain defeat would be as low as possible. But I was, and I think we all were, stunned by the resistance of the Ukrainian army and people. It is important to make the comrades understand that this is not currently the affair of the neo-Nazis alone, nor even of the Ukrainian capitalist state, nor of the Western imperialist states. My anarchist, socialist, feminist friends join solidarity groups, organize collections for the Ukrainian army, mobilise in territorial defence groups.

One should certainly not close one’s eyes to the gloomy prospects of all the possible outcomes of this war. As a Russian-speaking Ukrainian and a Marxist, I have watched with concern the political developments in my country since 2014, from the unbolting of the statues of Lenin and the decommunisation laws to the proliferation of far-right paramilitary groups and the war in the Donbass. Putin’s war in Ukraine risks strongly accentuating these tendencies and anti-Russian feelings in all spheres of life. All wars, all movements of the so-called “national liberation” involve such dangers. Preventing the advance of a foolish nationalism that seeks to erase multilingualism and the Soviet heritage in Ukraine, making it difficult for the development of anti-capitalist, feminist and environmentalist movements in this country will be the future task of the Ukrainian and international left. But at this moment we have to show total solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance against the invader. Solidarity with Ukraine is at the same time solidarity with the voices which, in Russia, are rising ever louder against the war and against the government.

Along with the repression, political and social divisions in Russia will intensify. The Russian state wants to conceal from its population the images of the bombardments of the civilian districts of Kyiv, Kharkiv and Mariupol, but for how long will it be able to do this? Whatever the outcome of this war, I am increasingly convinced that Ukraine will be the end of Putin. Support for woman’s rights and fighting climate change will be the future task of the Ukrainian and international left.

Certainly, the Western left confronted with this invasion has a number of dilemmas. I will only touch on two of them here: how to support the Ukrainian resistance — and this inevitably involves, in my view, supporting the delivery of arms and other equipment to the Ukrainian army, given the incomparable superiority of the Russian army — while generally denouncing the arms industry, the announced increase in military budgets, etc. ? How to support Ukrainian refugees and rejoice in the momentum of civil society towards them, while recalling the treatment inflicted for decades on non-white refugees fleeing conflicts that do not directly affect the European continent, without sinking into a posture which consists, from the position of a Western militant,

Among the arguments evoked on the left to oppose the delivery of arms, we find three main categories. The first is, it seems, a concern to limit the conflict to Ukraine only. The left, like the right, is afraid of provoking Russia into extending the conflict, half-heartedly admitting that the West could legitimately sacrifice Ukraine to preserve peace in the “civilized world”. Despite the great declarations of support, the United States itself remains very cautious on this issue, not only refusing the granting of the *No-fly zone*, which would require planes of the Western NATO coalition to shoot down Russian planes, but also the delivery of fighter planes requested by the Ukrainian government. Indeed, it seems more than prudent to make a clear distinction between the direct involvement of NATO countries in the war against Russia and the delivery of defensive weapons to the Ukrainian army. On the side of the invader, Belarus is already explicitly participating in the war in Ukraine, without this causing the West to cross any red line. But it must also be taken into account that any intervention by the West, including in the form of economic sanctions, already

described by Putin as a “declaration of war”, could serve as a pretext for a widening of the conflict if that were its intention...

The second argument consists of opposing the diplomatic solution to the military solution, a speech for peace to the warmongering speech. We then seem to forget that the process of negotiations with the occupying forces currently depends, to a very large extent, on the balance of power in the military field. Moreover, the ignorance of the stakes around Crimea and Donbass, and of the real historical circumstances in which the local populations had to express their right to self-determination - involving active interference by Russia through the occupation in Crimea or the disinformation campaign concerning the alleged intentions of the “Nazi government” in Kyiv to exterminate the Russian-speaking populations in the Donbass, not to mention the non-transparent nature of the referenda — makes it acceptable in the eyes of some comrades, to the conditions under which Russia says it is ready to seriously sit down at the negotiating table. As long as the latter refuses to withdraw its troops, the protection of civilian populations also depends, above all, on the defensive capacities of the Ukrainian army.

Finally, fear is expressed as to the recipients of Western military aid, given the existence of an extreme right-wing “Azov” brigade within the Ukrainian army. Their armament rightly raises serious concerns. But it is still reducing the resistance of an entire people to a fringe group, numbering a few thousand fighters, and refusing to see that Ukrainian society is a society just as complex as any other, woven from social identities, cultural and politically heterogeneous. When we talk about the arming of the Ukrainian resistance, we must think first of all of the needs of the territorial defence groups resulting from the general mobilisation, as well as the need for protection of civilian populations by means of weapons capable of knocking down warplanes and missiles aimed at them. In short, an abstract anti-militarist position must give way to a concrete movement for peace in Ukraine, which takes into account both the military and non-military needs of the Ukrainian resistance. The longer it lasts, and the stronger it gets, the more the peace movement in Russia and abroad has a chance of succeeding.

On the issue of refugees, the comrades rightly point to Europe’s hypocrisy and racist double standards, including at the Polish border, where thousands of people suffered inhuman treatment only a few months ago, the comparison between the warm welcome given to Ukrainian refugees has been stark. Contrary to our adversaries who seek to discriminate between good and bad refugees, it is for us to reaffirm our support for all resistance and all victims of imperialist powers, relying on the Ukrainian precedent to demand that open borders and ‘temporary protection’ become the norm for all people seeking asylum in European countries, regardless of their nationality, skin colour or proximity of the conflict to European borders.

Darya Saburova - philosopher member of the editorial board of *Contretemps* - addresses a number of questions to the anti-imperialist left, in particular on military aid for popular resistance. Otherwise, according to her, the internationalist salute and the solidarity shown to the Ukrainian people risk remaining abstract.

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