

Support Ukraine? - Why and How

Friday 30 December 2022, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 29 December 2022).

The left - in Canada and internationally - has not responded in a coherent way to Russia's assault on Ukraine.

The Social-Democratic left, such as Canada's NDP, is sympathetic to Ukraine's resistance but largely fails to dissociate itself from the government's political support for the neoliberal Zelensky regime or Western imperialist designs.

Further to the left, there is a range of positions. At one extreme (fortunately, of minimal influence), there is a left that overtly supports Russia, echoing the Kremlin narrative on the war. Here is Radhika Desai, the main spokesperson for the International Manifesto Group, in her recent book [Capitalism, Coronavirus and War](#):

“The conflict that the West calls Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Moscow its special military operations for Ukraine's demilitarisation and denazification, is not a conflict between Ukraine and Russia. It is a phase in the hybrid war that the United States, usually but not always followed by other major capitalist countries, has been waging for over a century against any country that chooses an economic path other than subordination to itself or the broader capitalist world. In its current phase, this war takes the form of a US-led NATO war against Russia *over* Ukraine. In this war, Ukraine is the terrain, and a pawn—one that can be and is being sacrificed with the apparent cooperation of its West-oriented leadership.” [p. 183]

Some others, while critical of the Russian invasion if only on tactical grounds, portray the conflict as “a proxy war” between NATO and Russia. Like Desai, they treat Ukraine as a mere pawn of the Western powers and urge it to stop its armed resistance and accept whatever concessions will be forced on its territorial sovereignty. Yves Engler, a typical voice, criticizes the B.C. Federation of Labour for adopting in its recent convention a resolution expressing solidarity with Ukraine. This, [he says](#), “highlights Canadian unions' failure to challenge NATO's proxy war with Russia.”

Still others, such as the Toronto-based Socialist Project, appear to share this approach. A recent [article in its publication *The Bullet*](#) calls on the left to “demand that the Canadian government push for an immediate cease-fire and the return to the negotiating table, something Moscow has continuously requested.” The reality, says the author David Mandel, “is that continued fighting can only add to the suffering of Ukraine's working people, with no hope that it will improve the outcome of the war for them. The opposite is true.”

On the SP's discussion list (in which I participate), a prominent member deplores the lack of “a relevant anti-imperialist socialist base within Ukraine” and tells fellow members like myself, who agitate in defense of Ukraine's resistance, that this “makes it hard... to imagine how we'd work together on fighting the American empire.” A particularly vocal member proclaims that he doesn't “have a stake in which gang of Ukrainian or Russian chauvinists and exploiters control that

miserable strip of contested land bordering the two countries.” It is not, he says, “a genuine war of national resistance led by left-wing Ukrainian forces.”

Notable in all of these positions is a tendency to ignore or oppose the overwhelming opposition of ordinary Ukrainians to Russia’s illegal invasion, occupation and annexations and to deprecate their resistance on the grounds that it is not led by socialist forces.

One SP member (he also posts frequently on the Marxmail weblis) has repeatedly sought support for his opposition to Ukraine’s resistance in an historical antecedent, the inter-imperialist World War I. In that war, the socialist left, he says, opposed all sides in the war and resolutely refused to defend “poor little Belgium,” like Ukraine today occupied by an imperialist power (Germany), its plight cited by the opposing Entente powers to whip up war fever.

Historical analogies can indeed be useful in assessing the issues posed in contemporary events, provided of course that careful attention is paid to the particular circumstances and to what degree the differing situations and protagonists are comparable. As it happens, I have had occasion in the past to explore the left’s approach in WWI to the German occupation of Belgium and in particular what the revolutionary left had to say about it. Note, by the way, that what is said about “imperialist Belgium” applies *a fortiori* to capitalist Ukraine.

The following is what I wrote on the matter more than a dozen years ago in a discussion on a now-extinct *Socialist Voice* discussion list. The comrade I was addressing is identified by his initials; he never replied to me. I follow this with references to what Ukrainian socialists have to say to the Western “anti-imperialist” left about the war and their responses, which address and answer many of the concerns expressed above.

Richard Fidler

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Oppressor and oppressed: The case of ‘poor little Belgium’

In a post to this list January 9, “National oppression and Quebec independence”, JPR states, in reference to comments by Lenin on Norway’s secession from Sweden in 1905:

“It’s worth noting that in 1905, Marxists were still applying the conceptions of national self-determination developed during the epoch of progressive national-bourgeois revolutions in the advanced countries of Europe. The analysis of national struggles in terms of oppressor and oppressed nations was developed somewhat later. Marxists were discussing the new phenomenon of modern imperialism in the first decade of the last century, but they did not immediately apply this analysis to the concept of self-determination. [...]

“When the First World War broke out, the ruling class of each warring country made a semi-plausible case that it was fighting in self-defense and that the nation’s right of self-determination was imperilled. Outside Russia, the main socialist leaderships caved in to this argument and invoked their long-standing position for national self-defense. Given that fact, and the rulers’ control of information, most workers supported or went along with the war effort—at least for a time. As the revolutionary forces rallied in opposition to the war, they refused to defend the ‘self-determination’ of any imperialist

country—not even little Belgium, the salvation of which had been Britain’s alleged reason for going to war.”

JPR cited this example in support of his proposition — a correct one — that “there are cases where demands for national self-determination express chauvinist attitudes current among dominant nationalities, and such demands do not merit support.”

JPR was not disputing Lenin’s view that Norway’s secession was a useful example of how the right of self-determination might apply in practice in the context of developed capitalist countries of Europe — by way of exception, as Lenin noted. JPR’s point, as I understand it [...], is that in the epoch of imperialism the distinction between oppressor and oppressed nations is fundamental, that imperialist countries are oppressor states or nations, and that revolutionary Marxists do not recognize a right of self-determination for an imperialist country. Conversely, we support unconditionally the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, up to and including the right of secession and creation of an independent state.

These propositions are longstanding principled positions of our movement, and are a bedrock of our approach to the national question. However, JPR’s example of Belgium in World War I, as it happens, illustrates the point I want to make below: that the characterization of a country or nation as imperialist or oppressor does not necessarily determine the position we should take toward its actions in certain specific situations. Nor does it absolve us of the constant need to analyze *concretely* every situation of national oppression. In the age of imperialism, an epoch of wars and revolutions, imperialist nations can in fact in some circumstances themselves become the arena for progressive struggles for self-determination that are important components of revolutionary strategy. The Belgian example is a useful reminder of the importance of analyzing each national question in its context and avoiding undue reliance on abstract immutable principles, important as those are.

Belgium in 1914 was an imperialist oppressor power in its own right, a brutal colonizer of a large section of Africa, the Congo. At the outset of the war, in August 1914, Germany invaded and occupied Belgium. It threatened to annex the country, that is, make it part of Germany and thereby gain control of Belgium’s colonies. As JPR mentions, the plight of “poor little Belgium” was cited by Britain and its allies as one of the main reasons for going to war against Germany. Revolutionary Marxists, on the other hand, citing Germany’s seizure of Belgium as an example, correctly characterized the war as an imperialist war fought between the major imperialist powers primarily for the seizure of colonies. And on that ground they opposed it.

JPR says “the revolutionary forces” refused to support self-determination for Belgium or other imperialist nations invaded, occupied or annexed by one or another of the major imperialist belligerents. However, this statement needs to be qualified, as there were important exceptions among these revolutionary forces. In fact, contrary to what JPR says, many of the forces that rallied in opposition to the war and the imperialist defensism of the majority of the Social Democratic leaders not only opposed the occupation of Belgium and its annexation but defended its right to self-determination. And in their lead was Lenin, the most consistent and persistent defender of Belgium’s right to self-determination. In fact, Lenin did not hesitate to refer to Belgium, in the circumstances of the war, as an oppressed nation.

During the war, Lenin was developing both his analysis of imperialism and his understanding of the national question. His most important writings on both questions date from this period, in fact. It is well known that Lenin turned his attention increasingly toward the anti-imperialist liberation movements in the colonies and semicolonies as key components of internationalist revolutionary

strategy. But his conception of the right of self-determination and the role of related democratic demands in the more developed nations of Europe, far from being supplanted by his analysis of imperialism, was incorporated within and enriched by that analysis as part of his strategy for revolutionary struggle in the imperialist countries.

I am not going to go through all the various articles, resolutions and polemics by Lenin and others in the revolutionary Marxist current that address the Belgian question and self-determination in this period. Most of these are available in the book JPR cites: *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International* (ed. John Riddell), an excellent source. An easy way to locate the main documents is by consulting the index under "Belgium" and "Self-determination". However, here are a few highlights, to indicate the general flavour of the debates and how they evolved (page references to the book):

The Manifesto issued by the Zimmerwald conference, the first major gathering of antiwar Marxists, stated that "entire nations and countries like Belgium, Poland, the Balkan states, and Armenia are threatened with the fate of being torn asunder, annexed in whole or in part as booty in the game of compensation." Listing the tasks before the international working class movement, the Manifesto said "The right of self-determination of nations must be the indestructible principle in the system of national relationships of peoples." (pp. 318-20) In a joint statement to the conference, the German and French delegations denounced "the violation of Belgian neutrality" and demanded "restoration of Belgium to its complete integrity and independence." (p. 307) In a message to the conference from prison, the German antiwar deputy Karl Liebknecht called for "a peace that could restore unfortunate Belgium... to freedom and independence, and give France back to the French." (p. 289) (Part of France was occupied by Germany.)

Lenin and some others (while voting for the Manifesto) were critical of it, but not for these positions. However, there were some sharp divisions within the Zimmerwald Left over the question of self-determination. For example, the Poles, including Rosa Luxemburg, argued that the right of self-determination could only be realized in a socialist society. As the editor's notes explain (p. 353):

"Lenin thought that the Polish Social Democrats were correct in not raising the demand for Polish independence, [[1]]and in stressing instead the need for unity in action with the workers of Germany and Russia. But they went wrong in generalizing this attitude, and applying it to the workers of other nations — especially the dominant nations. 'It is not indifferent to the Russian and German workers whether Poland is independent, or they take part in annexing her,' he wrote.

"The situation is, indeed, bewildering, but there is a way out in which all participants would remain internationalists: the Russian and German Social-Democrats by demanding for Poland unconditional 'freedom to secede'; the Polish Social-Democrats by working for the unity of the proletarian struggle in both small and big countries without putting forward the slogan of Polish independence for the given epoch or the given period."

This is similar to the general approach Lenin had taken with regard to the issue of self-determination for Norway [...].

In these Lenin drafted at this time, entitled "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination", he argued that "Increased national oppression under imperialism does not mean that Social-Democracy should reject what the bourgeoisie call the 'utopian' struggle for the freedom of nations to secede but, on the contrary, it should make greater use of the conflicts that arise in this sphere, too, as grounds for mass action and for revolutionary attacks on the

bourgeoisie.”

Lenin also polemicized with fellow Bolsheviks over the issue of self-determination. As the editor's notes explain (p. 362):

“The question of self-determination divided the exiled Bolsheviks as well. ... Yevgeniya Bosh and Yuri Pyatakov, the publishers of the Bolshevik journal, were won over in 1915 to Nikolai Bukharin's position of opposition to the self-determination demand.... Bukharin based his criticisms of the demand for self-determination on the nature of the imperialist epoch as shown by the war.”

Lenin's debates with Luxemburg, Bukharin and others were over the general validity of the slogan of self-determination and did not directly address the issue of whether occupied imperialist countries like Belgium could be said to have that right. In fact, in his theses on the socialist revolution, referred to above, Lenin had divided countries into three “main types”. The first was “the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe and the United States.” In these countries, Lenin said, “progressive bourgeois national movements came to an end long ago. Every one of these ‘great’ nations oppresses other nations both in the colonies and at home. The tasks of the proletariat of these ruling nations are the same as those of the proletariat in England in the nineteenth century in relation to Ireland.”

The other “types” of nations were the Eastern European countries where bourgeois-democratic reforms were incomplete and national movements were progressive, and “the semi-colonial countries, such as China, Persia and Turkey, and all the colonies....” There, of course, socialists were unconditional supporters of national liberation.

But what if an imperialist country of the first type was invaded, occupied and possibly annexed? Did it then have a right of self-determination? Lenin met this question head-on in his final document, “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up”. Only a small part of this document is excerpted in *Lenin's Struggle*, and it does not include the part that interests us here. However, the entire document is available on-line at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jul/x01.htm>.

In this document, Lenin describes “the forcible retention of one nation within the state frontiers of another” as “*one of the forms of political oppression*”. In the chapter entitled “What is Annexation?”, he states (all emphasis in the original):

“The concept of annexation usually includes: (1) the concept of force (joining by means of force); (2) the concept of oppression by another nation (the joining of ‘alien’ regions, etc.), and, sometimes (3) the concept of violation of the status quo. ... However you may twist and turn, annexation is *violation of the self-determination* of a nation, it is the establishment of state *frontiers contrary to the will of the population*.”

“To be against annexations *means* to be in favour of the right to self-determination. To be ‘against the forcible retention of any nation within the frontiers of a given state’ ... is *the same* as being in favour of the self-determination of nations.”

At the same time, said Lenin, “It would be absurd to insist on the *word* ‘self-determination’.... The question is only one of political clarity and of the theoretically sound basis of our slogans.” A few paragraphs later, in the chapter “For or Against Annexation”, he returns to the question:

“In any case, hardly anybody would risk denying that annexed Belgium, Serbia, Galicia and Armenia would call their ‘revolt’ against those who annexed them ‘defence of the fatherland’ *and would do so in all justice*. It looks as if the Polish comrades are *against* this type of revolt on the grounds that there is *also* a bourgeoisie in these annexed countries which *also* oppresses foreign peoples or, more exactly, could oppress them, since the question is one of the ‘right to oppress’. Consequently, the given war or revolt is not assessed on the strength of its *real* social content (the struggle of an oppressed nation for its liberation from the oppressor nation) but the possible exercise of the ‘right to oppress’ by a bourgeoisie which is at present itself oppressed. If Belgium, let us say, is annexed by Germany in 1917, and in 1918 revolts to secure her liberation, the Polish comrades will be against her revolt on the grounds that the Belgian bourgeoisie possess ‘the right to oppress foreign peoples’!

“There is nothing Marxist or even revolutionary in this argument. If we do not want to betray socialism we *must* support every revolt against our chief enemy, the bourgeoisie of the big states, provided it is not the revolt of a reactionary class. By refusing to support the revolt of annexed regions we become, objectively, annexationists. It is precisely in the ‘era of imperialism’, which is the era of nascent social revolution, that the proletariat will today give especially vigorous support to any revolt of the annexed regions so that tomorrow, or simultaneously, it may attack the bourgeoisie of the ‘great’ power that is weakened by the revolt.”

Finally, in the penultimate chapter of this document, the famous polemic against Radek and others over the significance of the Irish rebellion of 1916, and following his eloquent statement that “The socialist revolution in Europe *cannot* be anything other than an outburst of mass struggle on the part of all and sundry oppressed and discontented elements,” Lenin asks:

“Is it not clear that it is least of all permissible to contrast Europe to the colonies in *this* respect? The struggle of the oppressed nations in *Europe*, a struggle capable of going all the way to insurrection and street fighting, capable of breaking down the iron discipline of the army and martial law, will ‘sharpen the revolutionary crisis in Europe’ to an infinitely greater degree than a much more developed rebellion in a remote colony. A blow delivered against the power of the English imperialist bourgeoisie by a rebellion in Ireland is a hundred times more significant politically than a blow of equal force delivered in Asia or in Africa.”

And he continues:

‘The French chauvinist press recently reported the publication in Belgium of the eightieth issue of an illegal journal, *Free Belgium*. Of course, the chauvinist press of France very often lies, but this piece of news seems to be true. Whereas chauvinist and Kautskyite German Social-Democracy has failed to establish a free press for itself during the two years of war, and has meekly borne the yoke of military censorship (only the Left Radical elements, to their credit be it said, have published pamphlets and manifestos, in spite of the censorship) — an oppressed civilised nation has reacted to a military oppression unparalleled in ferocity by establishing an organ of revolutionary protest! The dialectics of history are such that small nations, powerless as an *independent* factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli,

which help the *real* anti-imperialist force, the socialist proletariat, to make its appearance on the scene.”

So, following Lenin’s reasoning — and notwithstanding the fundamental distinction between oppressor and oppressed nations — in the particular conditions of foreign occupation of an imperialist country a national struggle within the occupied country for liberation from that oppression could be considered progressive and an application of the Marxist theory of the right of national self-determination. This did not mean that the imperialist country had been turned into a colony or semicolony; it was still imperialist. But it could, for the duration of the occupation only, also be described as “oppressed” by the occupying power, and its struggle against the occupation could be characterized as a form of national self-determination. Lenin made no exceptions.

I think this is the correct approach. Needless to say, of course, that struggle against the foreign oppressor will be strengthened if conducted under independent proletarian leadership (that is, independent of “the reactionary class”, as Lenin puts it) and around a class-struggle program that includes the call for independence of the colonies. [...]

Lenin’s 1916 writings on self-determination were not widely published at the time owing to censorship and, within months, the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. Some of the key documents were not made available until 1929, when they were published by Stalin, seeking Lenin’s authority in his campaign to discredit Bukharin and Trotsky (who had also differed with Lenin on the importance of the right of self-determination). In any event, their lessons do not appear to have been deeply absorbed by the revolutionary vanguard. The outbreak of the Second World War, in 1939, found the revolutionary Marxists in some disarray on how to relate to the mass resistance movements that soon broke out in the countries occupied by the Axis armies of Germany and Italy. The story is taken up in an interesting talk given by the late Ernest Mandel, “Trotskyists and Resistance in World War 2”, available on-line at <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article800>.

Mandel outlines the Leninist position I have just described and notes that the Second World War was “in reality a combination of five different wars” — a position he sets out at length in his excellent book, *The Meaning of the Second World War* (Verso, 1986). It was (1) an inter-imperialist war, (2) a just war of self-defence by the USSR, (3) a just war by the Chinese people against imperialism, (4) a just war of Asian colonial peoples for national liberation and sovereignty, and (5) *a just war of national liberation*, fought by the oppressed workers, peasants, and urban petty bourgeoisie against the German Nazi imperialists and their stooges, “more especially in two countries, Yugoslavia and Greece, to a great extent in Poland, and incipiently, in France and Italy.”

The French Trotskyists divided over their stance toward this “fifth war”. As Mandel describes it, the majority leadership, citing a statement by Trotsky in one of his last articles (“France is being transformed into an oppressed nation” under the German occupation), advocated a bloc with the “national bourgeoisie” against German imperialism — although, Mandel notes, “There was never any agreement with the bourgeoisie, never any support for them when it came to the point.” And in fact this opportunist error was reversed by 1942. Another wing of the French Trotskyists, however, took an ultraleft position, Mandel says; it “denied any progressive ingredient in the resistance movement and refused to make any distinction between the mass resistance, the armed mass struggle, and the manoeuvres and plans of the bourgeois nationalist, social democratic or Stalinist misleaders of the masses. That mistake was much worse because it led to abstention on what were important living struggles of the masses.” Mandel adds:

“Trotsky warned the Trotskyist movement against precisely such mistakes in his last basic document, the Manifesto of the 1940 emergency conference. He pointed out that they should be careful not to judge workers in the same way as the bourgeoisie even when they talked about national defence. It was necessary to distinguish between what they said and what they meant — to judge the objective historical nature of their intervention rather than the words they used.”

This ultraleft Trotskyist fraction, which included the group now called Lutte Ouvrière, “persists even today in identifying the mass movements in the occupied countries with imperialism — saying the war in Yugoslavia [by Tito’s Partisans] was an imperialist war because it was conducted by nationalists....” And Lutte Ouvrière continues to this day to invoke this division in World War II as a justification for its separate existence as a revolutionary Marxist current in France! [...]

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Further reading, all pieces appearing first on the website of the Ukrainian publication *Commons*.

[US-plaining is not enough. To the Western left, on your and our mistakes](#), by Volodymyr Artiukh

[A letter to the Western Left from Kyiv](#), by Taras Bilous

[10 Terrible Leftist Arguments against Ukrainian Resistance](#), by Oksana Dutchak

[Ukraine’s Socialist Heritage](#), by John-Paul Himka

[1] Poland was divided among three empires: the German, Russian and Austro-Hungarian. — RF

P.S.

• Life on the Left. Thursday, December 29, 2022:
<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2022/12/support-ukraine-why-and-how.html>