

USA: Their Anti-Imperialism and Ours

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A review of Medea Benjamin and Nicolas Davies book on Ukraine by Linda Mann of the Ukraine Socialist Solidarity Campaign

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The most important quote in Benjamin's and Davies' book is the following:

"The massive Western [military] support put Russia in a predicament.... In November 2021, Russia still enjoyed 'escalation dominance,' meaning that it could bring greater military force to bear than the US or NATO in any war in Ukraine. But Russia's escalation dominance would keep diminishing as Ukraine's military was gradually armed and trained up to NATO standards, with or without actual NATO membership.

"This meant that from Russia's perspective, if they were going to have to fight to defend the Donbas and Crimea, every year they waited to do so would reduce their escalation dominance, tipping the balance in favor of Ukraine and increasing the risk of a potential nuclear war with the US and NATO.

"The United States military was well-aware of the predicament in which it was deliberately placing Russia's leaders" (pp. 66 - 67).

Medea Benjamin and Nicholas J.S. Davies may think Russia's war with Ukraine is senseless, but in these 2+ paragraphs they explain quite clearly to the rest of us what is at stake in this war. They also present several clues regarding their own interpretation. One, that the Donbas is Russia's to defend. They later claim that Luhansk and Donetsk are part of a civil war within Ukraine and that Kyiv was obligated to recognize them as autonomous under the Minsk Accord. But (true to form), Benjamin and Davies never mention that Russia was also obligated to retreat to its borders and refused.

Two, that an aggressive war was on the table from the beginning, that it wasn't the illegal war Benjamin and Davies admit it is when paying lip service to international law, and that Russia's ability to wage this war was wrongfully undermined by the West. This is truly the heart and soul of the "NATO did it" argument, by improving Ukraine's defense posture and reducing Putin's precious escalation dominance. To wit, "[NATO's] training helped Ukraine defend itself, but it also meant that the fighting was hard fought and deadly on both sides" (p. 82).

To be clear, this is what we're really talking about here:

"'Escalation dominance means you can control the pace of escalation.' That term has always been used in the past to refer to the ability of the United States to threaten

another state with overwhelming retaliation in order to deter it from responding to U.S. force" (Gareth Porter, "[Escalation Dominance](#)," 2007).

Aaron Miles has [a good article](#) on escalation dominance as applied to nuclear conflict, which is the bogeyman invoked by Benjamin and Davies in their final point. The statement on nuclear weapons is the most mind blowing of all and hard to process. It means, in essence, that not only is Russia's war of aggression justified, but that if Russia has to resort to nuclear weapons to win, it's the fault of the NATO countries that help Ukraine defend itself. It's worth mentioning that Benjamin and Davies also try to portray a scenario where the US and NATO threatened Russia with a first strike (pp. 77-78). This is based on the refusal of the US to negotiate issues extraneous to the impending invasion in February 2022.

Only two countries have threatened the use of nuclear war in response to losing a war of aggression to a "weaker" power. The second country is Russia in the current war with Ukraine. But the first to do so was the US during its war with Vietnam. These threats came closer to fruition than Russia's (so far), but no one on the left ever suggested that Vietnam should give up its national liberation struggle as a result. (See Erik Villard, "[Did the US Consider using Nuclear Weapons in Vietnam?](#)")

The history of a bad idea

Much of what I will cover here can be found in Anton Shekhovtsov's *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Routledge, 2018). His book doesn't cover the Western left, or leftist ideas at all; it's a history of Russia primarily set in the Putin era. However, it begins with the development of "Strasserism," an anti-capitalist current within the Nazi Party and contacts between the far right and the Soviet Union that predate the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Another author writing about the "red-brown" alliance is Alexander Reid Ross, with his *Against the Fascist Creep* (AK Press, 2017). It begins in the same interwar period as Shekhovtsov, but it is a history of the US and European left's contagion by fascist co-optation. Neither of these books are about the so-called "horseshoe theory," and until recently the situation they describe would have seemed obscure, an anomaly that was isolated to a few nut groups like the LaRouchies. (Lyndon LaRouche was also in contact with many of the same Russian fascists as Western leftists who are referred to in this review.)

It would have been quite possible, in fact usual, for a left political activist of any persuasion (anarchist, Leninist, pacifist, etc.) before 2013 to be completely unaware of phenomena like red-brown alliances, Eurasianism, multipolarity, etc. If asked, they would have quickly replied that Russia was a capitalist country, not a socialist one. The question would have seemed odd due to the fact that Russia was widely recognized, at least during the 90s and early 00s, as a corrupt oligarchy and mafia-run state. People active for several decades were suddenly confronted in the mid 2010s with pro-Assad "peace movements," Putinist "anti-imperialism." (I will use quotation marks here on out for these formations.) Opponents to Assad were called terrorists and the opposition to Russia, beginning with Maidan in 2014, were "Nazis."

When did the rot set in? We could go back 100 years like the above-mentioned books and trace a lot of it to the degeneration of both the SPD (the German Social Democracy) and the Russian Revolution. The US left has been affected by these developments, but the environment that ultimately produced Benjamin's and Davies's book began with the Iraq War with some foreshadowing in the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. Code Pink is an outgrowth of the Iraq War, as is the ANSWER Coalition which organized the massive anti-war demonstrations in 2003-2004. The main apologists for this "ideology" are people like Chris Hedges, Scott Ritter, Colleen Rowley and others who dealt (honorably, in most cases) with post-9/11 era fabrications of pretexts for the Iraq war. The organization VIPS (Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity) founded by Ray McGovern is not well known but has become quite prominent in this milieu. But the takeover of major portions of the

left beyond the antiwar groups of the Iraq war began when RT (Russia Today) set up shop in the West in 2011. One of the first tests was the gassing of Ghouta, Syria in August of 2013, which was carried out by the Assad government. There was an immediate [attempt](#) by RT and its minions to deflect blame onto Saudi-backed rebels. One of the more noteworthy efforts was an [article](#) in Mint Press (which is widely believed to be funded by Iran, another Assad ally). It was immediately discredited.

Indeed, Syria was one of the first major projects of the developing red-brown “peace movement” after the Iraq War. The goal was to isolate Syrians who were being tortured and killed on a mass scale in Assad’s prisons, by his chemical weapons and the carpet bombing by Russia. Normally, if the US isn’t directly involved, there are still activist groups involved in condemning the atrocities, providing material aid and refugee assistance. What happens if a major disinformation campaign replaces all this with an apologist infrastructure for the war criminals?

Anyone who has suspected that nothing the left does makes any difference has been educated by the catastrophic effect of this betrayal. There are only small, local groups on the left in the US that still defend Syrians’ right to rise up against their government and help refugees, such as CISPOS in Minneapolis (Committee in Solidarity with the People of Syria) and Syria Solidarity NYC.

In Benjamin’s and Davies’s book, a canned history of Ukraine is presented that echoes Putin’s assertion that Ukraine is not a separate country because it has been occupied by other countries or been part of empires (mainly Russia). It has only known independence since 1991 and during a brief period after the Bolshevik Revolution. This is tantamount to saying that other oppressed nationalities like the Palestinians and Kurds have no right to self-determination.

According to Benjamin and Davies, post-independence Ukraine’s original sin occurred in 2014 when it had an uprising to overthrow a Kremlin puppet named Yanukovich and then held elections that elected Poroshenko as president. These events are presented as a coup by the authors and their co-thinkers in the “peace movement” because Victoria Nuland expressed a preference for Arseniy Yatsenyuk to take over as prime minister during Maidan. “Yats” and Poroshenko were both elected in 2014 and continued in that role until 2016 (Yats) and 2019 (Poroshenko). There is no suggestion by Benjamin and Davies that these elections were unfair, and they admit that Right Sector and Svoboda together earned 2% of the vote. These groups, which made up less than 1% of the Euromaidan demonstrators, had gained prominence when the Berkut (Special Operations Police) under Yanukovich began shooting demonstrators. This isn’t explored in any real detail; there is merely the observation that the demonstrations were no longer peaceful. The outsized role of the fascists was due to their ability to fight the Berkut. Otherwise the demonstrators, who were largely liberals and pacifists, would have been massacred. (See Michael Colborne, *From the Fires of War: Ukraine’s Azov Movement and the Global Far Right*, p. 30). In all, approximately [130 demonstrators were killed](#) in January and February of 2014, along with an estimated 700+ injured.

But the authors’ problem with Ukraine really dates back to the Orange Revolution of 2004. The same Kremlin puppet was involved that time as well. A common accusation lodged by these “leftists” is that uprisings in countries ruled by autocrats that the US does not favor, are “color revolutions.” The Orange Revolution was one of the earliest of these revolutions, but not the first. The very first in the 21st century was the “Bulldozer Revolution” in Serbia which deposed the genocidal dictator Slobodan Milosevic. This goes a long way to explaining the hostility of the US “peace movement” to color revolutions. This hostility would seem odd because the color revolutions are mass movements that depose dictators in a mostly peaceful manner through electoral politics. It’s unusual for pacifist methods to effect real change in the absence of a mass armed struggle (see Ward Churchill, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America*, 1998), but you’ll never see color revolutions showcased along with Gandhi or the Civil Rights movement and the reason for

this is political. Serbia has entered their pantheon of victims because they were bombed by NATO, putting an end to their genocide in the former Yugoslavia just as they were about to reduce Kosovo to rubble. NATO didn't do this because they are a humanitarian organization and the bombing did kill civilians and damaged infrastructure. Serbia was allowed to conduct its ethnic cleansing and rape camps for several years before Western Europe and the US decided that allowing them to turn Eastern Europe into a mass grave was too disruptive.

Autocratic governments like Russia and China don't like revolutions in general, which might come as a surprise to the red-brown crowd, but these revolutions in particular are seen as a sneaky plot by Western neoliberals for overthrowing governments without having to go through the hassle of fomenting a Civil War or installing a puppet government. The "peace" and "anti-imperialist" activists solemnly repeat this special pleading by these dictators. Apparently, Otpor, the massive youth group that helped to overthrow Milosevic and have him sent to The Hague, did get money from the National Endowment for Democracy and USAID. PORA, the mass youth and civic group in Ukraine, consulted with Otpor, but claimed not to have accepted any support, although their successors in Maidan did (according to Benjamin and Davies) receive funding from NED. This brings us to another obsession of the authors and their "anti-imperialist" co thinkers: the purity of the victim and an insistence that poorly armed or unarmed people face the armed state and/or its military without any aid. Anyone who has defended the right of Vietnamese, Nicaraguan, and other Third World victims of US aggression to defend themselves using weapons from sources like the Soviet Union or China will recognize the debate tactics being used here.

Prior to the Orange Revolution, Georgia held the Rose Revolution which led to a peaceful change in leadership in 2003. There were many others, most occurring in the so-called Coalition of Independent States, or countries that became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It's obvious why Putin wouldn't like these revolutions and one reason he doesn't is that they involved independent political action through mass mobilizations and civic engagement. The receipt of aid doesn't change this and these groups have the right to accept assistance. In the midst of all this, the Putin regime began to turn to "managed nationalism" through fascist groups, in particular Russkii Obraz. Robert Horvath discusses this in his 2021 book *Putin's Fascists: Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia*:

"Russkii Obraz was simultaneously collaborating with the state and with some of the most violent and politically extreme elements in Russian society... these divergent engagements were made possible by the Kremlins's 'preventive counter- revolution,' a programme of measures designed to protect Russia from an anti-authoritarian 'colour revolution'" (p.63).

In December of 2014, members of the Eurasian Youth Union, affiliated with fascist Alexander Dugin's Eurasia Party, attended a [conference in Moscow](#) put on by the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia. Other attendees included representatives of the International Action Center and United National Antiwar Coalition, both associated with the Workers World Party, and the League of the South, a neo-Confederate group in the US. The subject of the meeting was the "Right of Peoples to Self-Determination and Building a Multi-Polar World." One of the agenda items, UNAC reported, was the "US-backed war against the people of Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine."

The ideological foundations of the red-brown left

To what end does the "red-brown" left labor? We see the means they employ to get there; their shifting rationales, their opportunism, and the utter lack of any empathy for victims of imperialism who are being attacked by powers other than the US. But their ends seem particularly murky and in constant flux. Indeed, they purport to have no goal other than stopping US imperialism. This is a

worthy objective but they don't seem to mind giving other imperialists a boost or at least left cover for their crimes. And caping for Putin, China, Iran, et al. doesn't even affect US policy other than to make outfits like NATO stronger, as more countries clamor to join and military spending goes through the roof. This latter result of the war is one which Benjamin and Davies spend significant time bemoaning.

The apologists for Putin may spurn theory but this doesn't mean they have abandoned arguments when advancing their position. Indeed there has been a surfeit of arguments that tend to shift in response to certain events, though often the events driving the shifts aren't readily apparent. Is the Russo Ukraine war a proxy war or is it an inter-imperialist war? Both of these positions and other shifting arguments are only tangentially related to the events of the war. Instead, they are concocted to add in the US/NATO as combatants and to remove the Ukrainians as autonomous actors. In the early days of this war, some put forward the writings of Karl Liebknecht, a German socialist in the SPD before World War I who, unlike the majority of his party's deputies, refused to vote for war credits. He [declared](#) it was the duty of every Socialist to deny support for their imperialist government. However, he said nothing about supporting the imperialist war aims of a competing government. As the war has dragged on, "proxy war" appears to be the winning argument, albeit a proxy war with only two (or at most three) parties fighting for their own interests. Others have stuck to the "inter-imperialist war" position, meaning that all sides were waging an unjust war, including the side that was attempting to defend itself.

These arguments never recognize material facts such as Russia's support for fascism and Christian fundamentalism around the globe, though the relatively small number of Ukrainian fascists are given a level of attention that renders invisible the vast numbers who oppose fascism. This is of a piece with their approach to fascism in general. It doesn't exist (except for Ukraine) because if it did exist globally, as we know it does, they would have to acknowledge all the fascists who admire "anti-imperialist" Assad and Putin. Instead, we are now seeing the beginnings of a red-brown alliance as Code Pink [finds common cause](#) with anti-Ukrainian politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Other than occasional lip service to "Russia's brutal aggression," acts of oppression, including war crimes, never play a part in red-brown argumentation. What does matter are the geopolitics of imperialist competition and the shifting reality of a war that constantly wreaks havoc on their worldview and leads to a lot of impressionist ideation. Before the war, their political line didn't seem to ever change. The anti-imperialist landscape involved the victims of US imperialism and the non-existence of victims found in the multipolar world outside of US hegemony. Now, because of this catastrophic act, every day is a new day for these folks. The nostrums of yesterday are quickly discarded as they become disproved on the battlefield or, of all places, the Kremlin. In this way they are a lot like the fascist GOP. Both depend on people not remembering the inconsistencies of the past as they put forward a new operating theory. But they also resemble the communist parties of western capitalist countries during the interwar period when Stalin kept changing the political line and the sheep had to follow.

They never had to face this situation before, because other victims such as anti-Assad Syrians, Uighurs, Chechens, and various dissidents who could be dismissed as "color revolutionists" never had a fighting chance. Nothing upsets the pacifist applecart like an "unworthy victim" (see below) running afoul of a desired outcome. Ward Churchill diagnosed this problem as follows:

"It is immediately perplexing ...that many of North America's most outspoken advocates of absolute domestic non violence when challenging state power have consistently aligned themselves with the most powerful expressions of armed resistance to the exercise of US power abroad" (*Pacifism as Pathology*, p. 70).

National liberation struggles have long been the means through which revolutionary desires are expressed in First World countries. This is a legacy of the Stalinist doctrine of “socialism in one country” which dictated that the CPs in first world countries forego revolutionary struggles against their own ruling classes. The same applied to colonial people when their struggle was supported by the Soviet Union. They were to subordinate the class struggle to the national liberation struggle being waged by their own capitalist class. Now the armed struggle they look to for inspiration is Russia’s attack on Ukraine, refashioned as a war against NATO.

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Shifting rationales, hidden agendas, these are the universally recognized calling cards of sophistry. Any reviewer, faced with constant omissions, distortions and outright lies, has to dig below the written word and apply the conundrums created by these authors to living situations.

For example, a distinction is often made between wars between sovereign countries and so-called civil wars. Atrocities committed in the first instance are clearly governed by international law and rules of war. The “international community” has found it more difficult to deal with human rights violations by governments against their own people (unless genocide is involved). The UN charter specifically prohibits wars of aggression by its member states, which may be one reason Putin decided to call his war against Ukraine a “special military operation” and criminalized the use of the term “war.” The international left, in contrast, has never had a problem with equating crimes against humanity whether committed by a foreign aggression or a government domestically. Until now. A common justification by the “left” of Russia’s intervention in Syria is that the Assad government requested its assistance in putting down a popular uprising against the repressive government. This can justly be compared to the requests of various client states of the US for “assistance” against their own people. Or the requests for assistance by Belarus and Kazakhstan for Russian assistance in suppressing uprisings in those countries.

Solidarity for refugees (or at least neutrality) has also been a given in left circles. In the midst of a chapter on how “privileged” the Ukrainian refugees were, here’s a particularly noxious statement by Benjamin and Davies regarding refugees in general:

Ukraine proved that, if you have the right (white) skin color, you’ll get sympathetic coverage from the Western media. But it also helps if you’re resisting the right invader” (p. 125).

Syrians didn’t have the right skin color but they did, arguably, have the right aggressor as of 2015, when the Russian bombing campaign began. But this did not avail them in the eyes of the Western “peace movement” because Russia wasn’t an invader. They had become “unworthy victims,” as defined in 1988 by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* (“A Propaganda Model”). As for Ukrainian refugees, who are “worthy victims” with regard to skin color and having Russia as a foreign aggressor, justice would demand that they at least receive sympathy and at least neutrality. But it was more convenient for the “peace movement” that they be silenced as the Syrians were. In one of the most nauseating instances of “whataboutery,” the authors compare the (to them) more limited bombing by Russia in Ukraine to the US bombing of Iraq. They end by stating that the impunity of US imperialism is to blame for Putin believing he could get away with the same behavior in Ukraine and that any attempt to hold him accountable would be dismissed by the world as part of a double standard. “*And that they would be right*” (p. 127). The US does enjoy relative impunity (though not complete impunity), but the “peace movement” seems to be isolated in its view that this double standard excuses Russia.

However, there is a large grain of truth to this statement about impunity, though not in the way

Benjamin and Davies would have us believe. The reason Putin believed he would escape condemnation for the destruction of Ukraine isn't that the US did the same thing. It was that he had already destroyed, or damaged, at least three countries prior to the invasion without much notice by much of the world, including the "peace movement." These were Chechnya (part of Russia), Georgia, and Syria. Additionally, Russia has sent its mercenary army, the Wagner Group, to various countries in the global South where they have committed war crimes against civilians. This was done at the request of the governments, of course, which means they don't "count."

Putin went to a lot of trouble to convince the world that Ukraine is really part of Russia, which is similar to the magic wand he used successfully in Chechnya, Syria, and South Ossetia in Georgia. It worked with a large part of the Russian population, far right sympathizers in the West (including members of the GOP and alt right groups in the US). It also worked with Benjamin and Davies and their fellow "peace activists." The latter make a distinction between an "illegal war" (which they admit this was) and a "provoked war" (p. 80). These provocations mainly involved Ukraine acting like an independent country and NATO responding to requests for memberships by countries that have a long history of victimization by Russia. Of course NATO did this after various US politicians had "promised" that NATO wouldn't. But unlike the Budapest Memorandum (fn. 4), none of the parties to these "promises" thought to sign an agreement.

To sum up, the real questions are not about methods and arguments of Benjamin and Davies and their followers. It's their goals we need to examine. This involves some guesswork because, unlike most left organizations, their goals are opaque. The best analyses are by [Michael Karadjis](#) and [Kavita Krishnan](#). According to them, the "anti-war" crowd is more concerned with geopolitics than they are about class struggle and international solidarity. This can be seen in one of their primary demands: That the US go around the Ukrainians and negotiate a peace deal with Russia. This really touches all of their main objectives:

- That Russia be treated as an equal vis a vis other imperialists like the US or China. This includes the right to carve up the world into "spheres of influence" with the big boys.
- That Ukraine be reduced to a colonized country with no voice regarding its future and no right to autonomy or self defense.
- And that Russia be allowed to keep what it has stolen.

As Ukraine seizes back more land and the Russian military degrades, the push for these negotiations becomes louder and more desperate. And here we see the final goal: that Russia wins. Because, if Russia loses, this will discredit the "peace" and "anti-imperialist" movements just as surely as if the Syrian uprising had been allowed a chance to defeat Assad and Putin.

Linda Mann

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P.S.

Three Way Fight

<http://threewayfight.blogspot.com/2023/01/their-anti-imperialism-and-ours-guest.html>