

Ukraine and the Crisis of the Italian Left

Wednesday 25 January 2023, by [BURATTINI Fabrizio](#) (Date first published: 22 December 2022).

The invasion and destruction of Ukraine by the armies of the Russian Federation has been going on for almost a year.

Of course, as is well known, the entire history of capitalism is punctuated with wars, devastation, massacres. The “world peace” pledged immediately after the defeat of Nazi-fascism has certainly not turned into the peace preached in the “United Nations Charter”: this committed to “maintain international peace and security by taking effective collective measures to prevent and remove threats to the peace and to suppress acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to achieve by peaceful means the settlement or resolution of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace”. (from Article 1 of the 1945 UN Charter)

Moreover, as we know, in the present phase-right now-the world is being hit by a flurry of crises, from the economic to the environmental, from the food crisis to the migration crisis... Hence, wherever we turn, the reasons for mobilisation by anti-capitalists are multiplying, while the forces for involving in those mobilisations are becoming increasingly scarce.

A missed opportunity

But these observations, which I would say are obvious, in no way take away from the appalling nature of the Russian war on Ukraine. And yet a large part of the Italian left has substantially trivialised this war, as if to say that since it is one of many there's no point tackling it head-on, and has focused not so much on the suffering of the peoples directly affected, but rather on the consequences the war would have for the Italian working classes.

On the contrary, the Italian left (albeit with different nuances, but essentially with a largely convergent approach) chose to ignore the crucial opportunity for anti-war intervention and initiative that the Ukrainian crisis offered, chose not to tune in to the wave of emotion that Putin's criminal initiative triggered in the public opinions of western European countries, and in particular in Italian public opinion, which is usually culpably deaf even to the most unspeakable human suffering when it occurs outside its comfort zone.

It chose rather to set itself against that wave of sentiment, treating it as a secondary by-product of Western imperialism's propaganda. And it chose to favour the search for a hypothetical alignment with “shopkeeper pacifism”, the pacifism of those who view the Ukrainian resistance with hostility, oppose the sanctions, and silently (and sometimes even explicitly) barrack for the “victory of the strongest”, because everything that resistance and sanctions entail calls into question their miserable business affairs.

In courting this supposed “Italian pacifist majority”, it is no coincidence that the left has found itself in direct competition-dishonourable and profitless-with Berlusconi and Salvini.

A radically different approach could have become an instrument to make people reflect on their own selfishness, to stir a movement of indignation towards Putin and of solidarity with the Ukrainians,

and at the same time to point to their sufferings as an example of the torment of all other peoples afflicted by war or oppression by foreign powers.

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was taken by a large part of what continues to be considered as—who knows why?—the Italian “radical left”, as an opportunity to talk about something else, carefully avoiding any meaningful mention of what was and is happening in Ukraine.

I consider this undeniable reality one of the main indicators of the terminal crisis of what used to be the “Italian left”, a sign of the loss of any true internationalist outlook and, in the end, of a very serious obscuring of its ability to understand the world.

Being ‘left-wing’

The first quality that should differentiate a left-wing woman or man from right-wing women and men is the ability to empathise with the rest of the working classes, whatever the colour of their skin, their religion, their place in life. Empathy, a term that became widespread in culture towards the end of the 20th century, is defined by the dictionary as follows: “the ability to understand the mood and emotional situation of another person in an immediate way, mainly without recourse to verbal communication. More specifically, the term denotes phenomena of intimate sharing and identification”. Put simply, the ability to “put oneself in the other person's shoes”. Without bothering about vocabulary and with the communicative force of his personality, Che Guevara wrote in a well-known letter to his children: “Above all, always be able to feel deeply any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world. This is the most beautiful quality of a revolutionary.”

It must be recognised that the injustices committed against the Ukrainian people in this year of war have not been “deeply felt” by the Italian left, indeed they have not been felt even superficially. This is a left more inclined to favour and “feel” the “suffering” of the Russian oligarchy, described more or less correctly as seriously threatened by US imperialism (and its European allies), justifying this reaction to some extent at the cost of the Ukrainian people.

The Italian left adopts the arguments of one imperialism as its own

On the, alas, very few occasions for protest around the war where the “left” has dared to parade, it has focussed its slogans on disarming the Ukrainian resistance and ending sanctions on Russia. Hence, an Italian “left” that has been rightly perceived by the Ukrainian people as a supporter of Russian aggression, of its bombings, its massacres, its blackmail now by freezing cold (through the systematic bombing of power plants), etc.

A “left” that has distinguished itself by endorsing, accepting and adopting as its own the justifications broadcast in its own interest by the leadership of the Russian Federation (changing, moreover, according to military and political expediency):

- *“Nationalist and anti-Russian Ukraine”*: precisely when, just two years before the aggression, a president (Zelensky) had been democratically elected with over 73% of the vote (including in the Donbass) who had proposed a program of seeking an understanding with neighbouring Russia. It should be recalled that in the Ukrainian parliamentary elections, held three months after Zelensky's election in 2019, more than twenty parties took part, including some pro-Russian ones that together garnered just over 16% of the vote and elected around fifty deputies (out of 450);
- *“Ukraine as den of Nazism”*: when the admittedly far-right forces present were reduced to a few percentage points—in the July 2019 elections, the *Svoboda* (Freedom) coalition in which all

the ultranationalist anti-Russian groups were represented garnered 2.25% and elected only one deputy. What are we to say about Italy, where the post-fascist party leads the government?—and when the Russian Federation was and is a point of reference for a large part of international far-right forces;

- *“Ukraine as undemocratic because it has outlawed opposition parties”*: when the outlawed parties are those who have openly supported the Russian invasion. Ilya Kiva, leader and deputy of the main pro-Russian opposition party, after the entry of Russian troops declared from Spain where he had already taken refuge—evidently knowing in advance what was brewing—said that “Russia’s actions bring peace and hope for the rebirth of the Ukrainian people, enslaved and brought to its knees by the West, permeated by Nazism and without future. Ukraine needs help and liberation. We count on Russia, because I know that Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians are one nation, one family. And the time will come when we come together and stand together.” It is really difficult for parties with such positions to continue operating in a war situation. Let us emphasise that such outlawing was in any case condemned by the left-wing Sotsialnyi Rukh party. As for the “democracy” comparison, let us recall that in Russia, anyone who even carelessly utters the word “war” gets thrown into jail;
- *“Ukraine is non-existent as a people other than Russia”*: I will return to this question (national consciousness, ethnicity, self-determination...) later on.

Many on the “left” have welcomed the stream of Russian lies, including the most cynically perverse ones, such as the insinuation that the Bucha dead were extras paid by Ukrainian propaganda.

In their absurdity and their grossly self-serving character Putin’s “arguments” wouldn’t require exposure before a left-wing public that, claiming to be “anti-imperialist”, should on principle mistrust anything that comes from the government of an imperialist power, just as we mistrust on principle anything that comes from our own imperialist centres of power.

An ‘anti-imperialism’ of fools

Our left’s lack of seriousness and inability to analyse is shown by the fact that up until the 1980s it defined the Soviet Union at the time of Khrushchev and Brezhnev as a “social-imperialist” power while today, after all that has taken place, it considers Russia a positive force in defence of the planet’s “multipolar character”.

In this regard it is useful to remember that the geopolitical chaos that marked the planet after the US defeat in Vietnam, after that in Iraq, and finally after that in Afghanistan in August 2021—the chaos that had led even French President Macron to describe NATO as being in a “state of brain death”—that chaos is getting reordered precisely thanks to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Over the last 10 months, the US imperialism’s central role has definitely been reaffirmed, NATO has cleverly been able to reconstruct a “function” it had lost with the end of the Cold War, and its popularity is unfortunately growing exponentially (witness its new members and the consensus it is gaining in large parts of the world, not only among governments but also in public opinion).

Yet empathy doesn’t only mean reacting to the suffering of the Ukrainian people with compassion and solidarity: that would lead us to restricting ourselves to supporting solidarity initiatives (such as sending to Ukraine food, blankets, electric generators, etc), initiatives that in any case in Italy the left has totally ignored or even looked upon with distrust and left (with a few praiseworthy exceptions) to religious and lay organisations. For an internationalist, empathy precisely means “putting oneself in the other person’s shoes” and from our own comfort zone asking what we internationalists would do if we were where they are.

The left should have already done this for Syria, starting in 2011 when the first protests and

uprisings against Bashar al-Assad's regime broke out. What were the alternatives? To take sides in defence of the regime, even to the point of hailing as positive the criminal Russian and Assad army bombings that have razed the city of Aleppo and many other smaller towns to the ground, to consider as fake news against all evidence the reports of the regime's and the Russians' use of thermobaric [vacuum] bombs or chemical weapons? Or to choose to support the popular rebellion, obviously while retaining independence of analysis and initiative?

Similarly, how would we have behaved if we had been in Ukraine on February 24? We are a little too fond of Carl von Clausewitz's statement in *On War* that "war is the continuation of politics by other means". That statement conceals (especially from the inattentive reader) that, unlike a situation where "politics" still operates, war does not allow too many choices and does not admit of clever posturing at neutrality. The choices available were and are essentially three:

- To greet the Russian invasion as liberating, and choose to collaborate with it in one way or another;
- To flee and abandon to the regular army alone defence of homes, infrastructure and the lives of those who cannot not flee, and of the country's political independence itself;
- Or to take part, in one way or another, in the Ukrainian anti-Russian resistance, trying to make one's own contribution, armed or unarmed, to the defence of the country.

It is obvious that a large part of the collective Italian "radical leftist", had he or she happened to be in the place of the "young Ukrainian", would have adopted the first position, or at best the second, but practically never the third.

The idea of 'defeatism towards both sides'

As for the position of so-called "revolutionary defeatism", it is a convenient ploy for those who agitate for it thousands of kilometres away from the bombing. Those who try to practise it in the Ukrainian context, such as the Workers' Front of Ukraine (Робітничий Фронт України, РФУ)—taken as a point of reference by the adherents to the document that emerged from the [October 16 conference "No to imperialist war!"](#)—can only give it form in purely and impotently propagandistic statements like: "there is a key to ending this cycle of war and exploitation-socialism, in which every human being is a brother to every other human being" (quote from a Front document).

For those who are losing their homes, for those who do not know what to eat, for those who have nothing to keep them warm, for those who cross their fingers daily to avoid being torn apart by bombs or snipers, "socialism" cannot be proposed as a solution. Particularly in a part of the world, in a situation, where for so many the term "socialism" has an ambiguous, if not disturbing, ring. All the more so from an organisation like the Front, which, with its references to Stalin and the Soviet period, does not even clarify which socialism it is referring to ... or perhaps clarifies it all too well. As for the Russian Federation, the Front claims that:

In Russia, where capitalism is quite democratic, socialist ideology is not restricted by prohibitions, whereas in Ukraine there is a real fascism/Nazism, against which the Russian Federation is now openly fighting. So, this is a just anti-fascist struggle.

As for the Workers' Front's reading of the war, this sums it up:

The war is the continuation of the imperialist dispute over the country's rich resources, as well as its labour-power and residual Soviet-era industry. The invasion is an attempt by Russian monopoly capitalism to regain the position of strength it lost in 2014 with the westward reorientation of Ukrainian policy. We analyse the US interest in weakening

Russia, and we generally view the war in Ukraine as a prelude to a new world war.

Based on these considerations, then, one risks justifying everything that is defence of the *status quo*—the US invasion of Vietnam, the attempted US invasion of Cuba, etc. With this approach, any geopolitical choice by a country, gets transformed from being evidence of the free will of a government and a people to orient themselves politically in a different way into a simple product of the inter-imperialist contest. The peoples disappear and only the big puppeteers remain.

And the Front seems to have a preference even in its identification of the “puppeteers”, so much so that the recent “violent outbreak of reactionary nationalist ideology and Russophobia [in Ukraine] after 24 February” is seen not as a consequence of Putin’s aggression, of its crescendo of destruction and massacres, but as an effect of the “nationalist brainwashing carried out by the Zelensky government”.

Lastly, on the subject of “defeatism”, I would like to relate an anecdote: in May, our “defeatists” extolled the sizeable protest that took place in the small Ukrainian town of Chust where a hundred or so women besieged the local military recruitment centre, demanding that their men not be conscripted. I checked where that town was on the map. It is on the border with Romania and 800 kilometres from Kiev, where the conflict was then taking place. However, as the war went on and as soon as a few bombs started to fall in that part of the country, the “defeatist” mobilisations against conscription were never heard from again.

Of course, as the protests against the call-up imposed by the Russian authorities (which, moreover, were conducted with class- and race-based criteria on the country’s poorer classes and ethnic minorities) were another matter. They were just: all deserters and all acts of struggle against recruitment centres are clearly to be supported.

In any case, above and beyond NATO’s undeniable responsibilities, it is politically insensitive to put the “suffering” of Russians and Ukrainians on the same plane, in a false equivalence. A couple of hundred thousand Russian soldiers are directly involved in the conflict (mostly conscripts of course, apart from the mercenaries, but in any case corresponding to 0.1% of the population of the entire Federation) while on the Ukrainian side, not only the army but all 43 million citizens are involved and severely, materially, existentially and in some ways, emotionally affected, even those six or seven million Ukrainians who had already emigrated before February 24.

Of course, we must also be on the side of the Russian youth, dragged to fight in a war that is not in the slightest their own, and on the side of their families. However, we cannot hide the fact that there is a gigantic moral divide between those, like the Russian working classes, who are forced into a more arduous daily life and a period of greater economic hardship (all again entirely the responsibility of the Putin leadership) and those, like the Ukrainian working classes, who live daily with the reality of missiles razing entire cities to the ground.

Being internationalist

I repeat, internationalism is primarily asking the question “what would I (with my theoretical and political baggage) do if I were there?”—otherwise it’s not internationalism. There was a time when being an internationalist even led to leaving with the “international brigade”. But it must at least not lead to subordinating one’s position on Ukraine to political expediency and “positionings” determined by national interest. That is not and never can be internationalism.

What I have tried to say about the “young Ukrainian” can equally be said about the “young Russian”. Internationalism also means asking what position a Russian internationalist should take. Russian

internationalists do not experience the same urgency as the Ukrainians, but their internationalist consciousness should push them to take a similar position. And that is what thousands of young Russians and especially Russian oppositionists are doing. Should Russian democrats say (following the example of so much of the Italian left) that NATO is responsible for the situation? That Ukraine is infested with Nazis? That it is undemocratic because it outlaws the opposition? Then it would no longer be in opposition to Putin because it would share his basic positions.

On the contrary, the Russian opponents essentially adopt what was the line of the American anti-Vietnam War movement between 1966 and 1975: "Get Russia out of Ukraine", "Bring our boys home". And the more conscious sectors, as was the case with the US over 50 years ago, raise the basic slogan: "For the victory of Ukraine".

Four weights and four measures

I already know that our "radical leftists" will counter: "But we are here, we must oppose NATO." Correct. I too would argue that we must oppose NATO, but for our domestic left, opposition to and denunciation of NATO and EU responsibilities has replaced and erased all traces of solidarity with the Ukrainian people, with their resistance and with their class-oriented and internationalist left.

Our left rightly condemn the "double standards" of the pro-Atlantic media, which denounces the Russian army's injustices but remains silent or even justifies the injustices of the Americans in their numerous imperialist wars, those of the Turks against the Kurds, those of the Israelis against the Palestinians, etc. But against that "double-standardism" we find an equally shameless "double-standardism" that trivialises the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

Part of this left, to justify its own campist and sometimes explicitly "Putinist" position, has also questioned the very concept of self-determination, considered to be a remnant of the 20th century. In this regard, I refer to what I wrote in another article in June (with some minor adjustments that I now add and highlight):

A consideration on nationalism and self-determination, given that so many (on the left), in order not to take sides in favour of Ukraine, consider the validity of self-determination to be outdated (by virtue of globalisation?), a nineteenth-century holdover from the [Risorgimento](#), in any case a bourgeois value (like democracy?) and therefore not to be pursued any more. It also ends up, more or less unconsciously, endorsing the great Russian nationalism that was the tsars' and is now an instrument of Putin's fascist Bonapartism.

It is claimed that Ukrainians are not a people. That in any case centuries of union with Russia have "Russified" them. This narrative is utterly beside the point and, again-more or less unconsciously-misleading. Ethnic differences have little to do with self-determination. Often the cultural identity of a people is grasped first and foremost by intellectuals and hardly at all by the people. The history of Italy is exemplary in this regard. People were already talking about "Italy" in the Middle Ages (see Dante Alighieri). And, as [Massimo D'Azeglio](#) seems to have said, Italy was made first and "the Italians" only later.

Those who make a decisive contribution to the growth of a "national sentiment", with the discovery of its "identity", are very often the very ones who want to deny it. The anti-Ukrainian pressure that Russia has exerted on its neighbouring country, starting at least with Euromaidan, and subsequently the current war of aggression, have been the most powerful multipliers of Ukrainian national sentiment and, as a consequence, of the anti-Russian significance it has acquired.

On the other hand, that also happened for the Palestinians. For them, until the growing and then

overwhelming Zionist immigration began to arrive in the 1920s, the feeling of being a nation remained entirely confined to a few intellectuals. It was Zionism and its denial of the existence of a “Palestinian nation” that created and grew an ever-stronger national sentiment among the Arab or at least the Arab-speaking, population of the region, bringing together Palestinian Muslims, Catholics, atheists, agnostics, reactionaries and fundamentalists, Marxists, libertarians, and progressives. The denial of the existence of a Palestinian nation by the “theorists” of Zionism, combined with the criminal and now almost century-long Israeli occupation, did the rest, and today, no one, on the left at least, would feel like denying the existence and dignity of the Palestinian nation.

Finally, I would add, as a further proof of the moral crisis of internationalism, that no one in the Italian “radical left” has even thought of organising initiatives that gave voice to Ukrainian or Russian protagonists. The only exceptions were the extremely significant occasions on which the “Committee for a ‘No to War’ in Ukraine” heard Ukrainian researcher Daria Saburova, Russian sociologist Alexander Bikbov and Italian-Russian journalist Jurii Colombo.

It was the same committee that organised and held the only left-wing demonstration, near the Russian embassy in Rome last Friday, October 7.

Fabrizio Burattini

Translation: Dick Nichols

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Refrattario e Controcorrente

<https://refrattario.blogspot.com/2022/12/lucraina-e-la-crisi-della-sinistra.html>