

As in August 1914...the war fractures the left again!

Friday 27 January 2023, by [MITRALIAS Yorgos](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2023).

For the international left, Putin's war against Ukraine started like the First World War and it is possible that it will end like it. Indeed, from the very first day, both wars have caused the splintering of the international left and its division into two increasingly divergent, opposing and irreconcilable camps. Already at the beginning of the war, we had written that "it is increasingly clear that March 2022 is tending to split the international anti-liberal left as much or nearly as much as August 1914! [1] Today, eleven months later, everything indicates that March 2022 is indeed for the international left of the 21st century what August 1914 was for the 20th!

And yet, while hardly anyone privately disputes the existence of this split, there are very few on the left who have the courage to speak openly about it and even fewer who dare to seriously examine the facts of this historical division of the international left. In short, it is clear that the whole of the Left prefers rather to exorcise it rather than face up to its deep division...

In reality, both in 1914 and in 2022, the war was only the straw that broke the camel's back of pre-existing dissensions in the ranks of the international left. In both cases, and with few exceptions, the sudden breakup of the left and the no less sudden revelation of the abysmal differences that ran through it took everyone by surprise. This is why today we are first incredulous, then shocked and finally deeply traumatized when we suddenly discover that comrades with whom we have fought together for many years, now reveal themselves to be totally insensitive both to the terrible suffering imposed on the Ukrainian people by great Russian imperialist Putinism and to the ferocious repression of every democratic and progressive voice inside Russia by this same tyrannical Putinism.

It remains for us to be consoled by the story of Lenin, then in exile in Switzerland, who could not believe his eyes when, on August 5, 1914, he saw the front page of the German social-democratic daily Vorwaerts which announced the vote of the SPD parliamentarians in favor of the war credits. He was so incredulous that for a few days he believed that this issue of Vorwaerts could only be a forgery fabricated by the German Army General Staff to mislead the enemy. But once he was convinced that this terrible news was true, and of the betrayal of his mentor Kautsky whose opportunism did not let him go against the party bureaucrats, Lenin did not hesitate to write two months later: "From now on I hate and despise Kautsky more than anyone else, with his vile, dirty, and self-satisfied hypocrisy". How much better we understand him now...

Just as it happened in the international left at the beginning of the First World War, once we recovered from the first shock we looked for an explanation for what was happening to us. And by digging into the past we discovered - quite easily - that there was ultimately nothing surprising about this adherence to Putinism by this part of the international left. Why? Because **the campism of this left has its roots in the real ideological selective affinities that exist between it and Putinism, with which it shares a vision of the world that has absolutely nothing progressive about it!**

Indeed, as we wrote on July 1, 2022 (2), “the attraction or rather the fascination that Putin exerts on this part of the left cannot be fully explained if one does not take into account some of their... eclectic affinities”. And we went on to list some of the faults of this left which make these campists deeply conservative and therefore compatible with Putinism: “And to call a spade a spade, it is well known that they have always – and often ostensibly – abstained from all the major social movements of our time, such as the feminist and LGBTQ+, pro-immigrant and pro-refugee, ecological and anti-climate catastrophe movements, while they have never distinguished themselves by their fervent support for human and minority rights movements of all kinds, often not hesitating to even call them a sham and an invention of . . . imperialism, something they also say about climate change!” [2]

All these characteristics of this current of the international left have been known for a long time, but were hardly discussed until the great historical opportunity that would allow them to be expressed openly and aggressively. This opportunity was provided by Putin’s war against Ukraine. Just as the deep conservatism of the German and French social democracy, which went almost unnoticed at the beginning of the 20th century without causing any waves, only came to light when the moment of truth came in the form of the vote in favour of war credits at the beginning of August 1914!

But, alas, the present problem is not limited to the existence of these unconditional supporters of the master of the Kremlin. There is also another current of the international left which poses a problem, those who advocate peace at any price. Although they condemn the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army, they oppose the arming of the Ukrainians by the West, led by NATO and the United States, and advise the Ukrainians to resist the second most powerful army in the world, only... passively, considering that this passive resistance will be in the long run much more effective than the armed one.

A few days ago, while translating **Ernest Mandel's** important text “*Marx, Engels and the problem of double morality*” into Greek, we quickly realized that the author was not only arguing very convincingly against this current that professes peace in Ukraine at any price, but that he was also doing so in the name of the same ethics to which those who oppose the armed resistance of the Ukrainians refer to. So, let’s listen to Ernest Mandel whose centenary will be celebrated in 2023. He has important and useful things to say and to remind us of:

“Whoever does not actively resist violence on the part of the rulers, whoever does not try to eliminate that violence here and now, objectively becomes complicit in the (temporary) triumph of such violence. This is so even if they postulate that in the long run non-violent resistance would achieve superior results. In practice, this means sacrificing a whole generation, if not successive generations of people, to a long-term ideal, the achievement of which, by the way, is not certain”.

Mandel continues with a historical precedent whose protagonists advocated -already!- the same passive resistance of the victims to their imperialist executioners:

“The clearest example is that of the Third Reich during the Second World War. Those (like Gandhi) who proposed passive resistance in the occupied territories to undermine Nazi rule in the long run, forgot that in the meantime all Jews, Gypsies, ‘inferior races’, Marxists, trade unionists, humanists, etc. would literally be exterminated. Such advocates of pacifism were willing to sacrifice tens of millions of human lives to the triumph of an idea. So for the pacifists, too, the end justifies the (inhuman) means. Equally nonsensical was the infamous statement by the German Social Democratic leaders during the decisive weeks of Hitler’s seizure of power: ‘We do not want a general strike or armed resistance, because we do not want to spill workers’ blood.’ But by letting Hitler come to power without making every effort to prevent it, the blood of millions of workers was shed, certainly more than would have been shed in an armed general strike in the winter of 1932-33”.

And Mandel concluded his argument by summing up categorically:

“There is no way out of this dilemma. Faced with the terror and violence used by the ruling class and their states to perpetuate exploitation, coercion and rule, the exploited and oppressed have no option but to use all possible means for their liberation. Efficient means include certain means that go against the ethical rules that usually regulate relationships between individuals. As far as the ethical side of the Marxist attitude towards organized violence is concerned, its starting point is that it is morally irresponsible and unacceptable to identify the violence used by slavers to perpetuate slavery with the violence used by slaves to free themselves”. [3]

Our conclusion: well said comrade Ernest...

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article61921>

[2] <https://oaklandsocialist.com/2022/07/06/what-makes-putinists-and-putinissants-perpetuate-the-most-abject-traditions-of-the-international-left/>

[3] “Ernest Mandel: Marx, Engels and the problem of double morality”:
<https://www.iire.org/node/1028>