

USA: What are the Lessons of Vietnam for Ukraine Today?

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As the left did in nearly all earlier cases of struggles for colonial liberation, so in this one too it should stand with the liberation movement.

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The U.S. war against Vietnam provides a rather close analogy to the Russian war against Ukraine. An analogy, of course, is not an equivalence. There are many differences between the two cases. But there are enough similarities that some useful conclusions can be drawn. Both Vietnam and Ukraine had been colonies, and both the United States and Russia are superpowers. In each case, the war raises many moral, strategic, and political questions that require the left take a stand.

The Vietnam antiwar movement of the 1960s and 70s was a watershed in global resistance to an unjust war. For many of those who came of political age in those years, this was the defining event of their lives. For many of those who followed, opposition to the Vietnam war was the touchstone for future antiwar activity.

The war in Ukraine is serving as a similar watershed for activists today.

Making Comparisons

In both the Vietnam and Ukraine cases, a superpower launched a war of aggression against a smaller country and then underestimated the latter's resistance.

In both cases, the aggressor acted contrary to international law and morality, inflicting a terrible toll on civilians and their basic life necessities.

In both cases, the aggressor attempted to deny a former colony of its self-determination, whether by setting up a puppet regime or by annexing large swaths of its territory.

In both cases, other powers provided weapons and other aid to the victim of aggression, but without becoming directly involved in the fighting. The former Soviet Union and China provided Vietnam with massive amounts of military aid, without which Hanoi could not have survived the U.S. onslaught. Washington and its allies have done the same for Ukraine.

In both cases, there was a history of colonialism. France colonized Vietnam for more than a century, extracting an economic surplus from the country's natural resources and the exploitation of its

peasantry. When France withdrew in 1954, the United States stepped in and tried to establish a neo-colony in the South. The Tsarist regime, meanwhile, ruled over Ukraine for hundreds of years followed by several decades of Soviet rule, with only a brief interlude of genuine independence in the early 1920s. Soviet oppression reached a horrific peak in the mid-1930s as Stalin orchestrated the systematic starvation of Ukrainian peasants in the *Holodomor*.

In the 1960s and 1970s as the American left confronted the issue of Vietnam, it developed some fundamental principles to guide its actions.

A key principle of the Vietnam antiwar movement was that a country that has been invaded by another has the right of self-defense, and that includes the right to receive weapons from outside powers in order to enable that self-defense. At no point did the antiwar movement call upon the Soviet Union or China to stop providing arms to North Vietnam (the DRV) or the National Liberation Front (NLF). True, Soviet and Chinese weapons would have kept the war going longer than if, deprived of weapons, the DRV and the NLF had been forced to sue for peace. But the left didn't value peace above justice. The Vietnamese, of course, desired peace, but they had taken up arms because they were unwilling to give up their right to national self-determination. The U.S. left believed it was up to the Vietnamese to decide how much they were willing to sacrifice in order to put an end to the fighting. Even the pacifists in the U.S. peace movement didn't organize demonstrations calling on the NLF to put down their guns or for their arms suppliers to cut off their weapons.

This position, supporting the provision of weapons to Vietnam, was not without its problems. Each gun produced meant less funding for social needs. Each Vietnamese soldier deployed meant one more family deprived of a child in the flower of youth. Each minute the war went on meant the longer suffering and hardship would prevail. But the costs of surrender were also severe, and if the Vietnamese weighed the costs of surrender as greater than the costs of fighting on, it wasn't for American leftists to tell them no or to deny them the right to obtain the weapons they needed to keep the struggle going.

The Problem of Negotiations

Many in the Vietnam antiwar movement called for the U.S. government to stop its bombing of North Vietnam and open negotiations. One group called Negotiations Now! —headed by prominent liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Joseph L. Rauh of Americans for Democratic Action, and John Kenneth Galbraith—represented the “[right wing](#)’ of the peace movement.” But the radical component of the antiwar movement understood the problem with calling for negotiations. The radicals were very much influenced in this by theorists such as Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky.

In his 1967 book, *The Logic of Withdrawal*, Zinn explained:

The United States, thus, cannot gain anything for Vietnam by negotiating, and it *should not gain anything for itself*. Since this country does not belong in Vietnam it has no moral basis for negotiating any status for itself—certainly not military bases or troops; Vietnam has had enough of that.

There is something intrinsically wrong in the idea that the United States should participate in negotiations to decide the future of Vietnam. We are an outside power, and the fact that we have inundated the country with combat soldiers does not thereby give us any moral right to decide its fate. Perhaps might makes right as a historical fact, but

it *should not* make right; and it is the duty of citizens to assert the “shoulds,” however statesmen behave.

This is also true for China, the Soviet Union, England, and all the other great powers. To have the future of Vietnam decided by these outside powers at an international conference is as much a violation of self-determination as was the settlement of Czechoslovakia’s fate by Hitler, Mussolini, Daladier, and Chamberlain in 1938 at Munich.

...to ask whether the United States will be willing to negotiate with the Vietcong seems strange. Rather, the question is should the Vietcong be willing to negotiate with the United States? From a standpoint of moral principle it should not; from the standpoint of military reality it may have to. But it is the oppressive power of our country which forces this violation of moral principle, and it is the duty of American citizens—whatever the reality of power—to try to bend the power of government toward what is *right*.

And Chomsky in his 1970 essay “After Pinkville” wrote:

On 15 October 1965, an estimated 70,000 people took part in large-scale anti-war demonstrations. The demonstrators heard pleas for an end to the bombing of North Vietnam and for a serious commitment to negotiations, in response to the negotiation offers from North Vietnam and UN efforts to settle the war....

On the Senate floor, Senator Mansfield denounced the “sense of utter irresponsibility” shown by the demonstrators....

In a sense, Senator Mansfield was right in speaking of the sense of utter irresponsibility shown by demonstrators. They should have been demanding not an end to the bombing of North Vietnam and negotiations, but a complete and immediate withdrawal of all American troops and *materiel*—an end to any forceful interference in the internal affairs of Vietnam or any other nation. They should have been demanding not merely that the US adhere to international law and its own treaty obligations - thus removing itself forthwith from Vietnam; but they should also have exercised their right and duty to resist the violence of the state, which was as vicious in practice as it was illegal in principle.

[By late 1967] [T]hose who had demanded no more than an end to the bombing of North Vietnam and a commitment to negotiations saw their demands being realized, and lapsed into silence.

These demands, however, had always been beside the point. As to negotiations, there is, in fact, very little to negotiate. As long as an American army of occupation remains in Vietnam, the war will continue. Withdrawal of American troops must be a unilateral act, as the invasion of Vietnam by the American government was a unilateral act in the first place. Those who had been calling for “negotiations now” were deluding themselves and others, just as those who now call for a cease-fire that will leave an American expeditionary force in Vietnam are not facing reality.

Some groups, like the Progressive Labor Party, denounced Hanoi for agreeing to talks and the Paris Peace Treaty. But the dominant radical view was that even though the United States had no moral

right to negotiate, it was up to the Vietnamese, and not holier-than-thou outsiders, to decide if and when the costs of fighting required them to come to the table and make concessions. The left was critical of Moscow and Beijing for pressuring Hanoi to make concessions in 1954 but believed the DRV had every right to make concessions when *it* chose to do so. The left also welcomed UN and other international diplomacy that might lead to a U.S. withdrawal, while remaining wary of big power efforts to impose a settlement on Vietnam.

Challenges to the Vietnam Analogy

Some might argue that the reason to support Vietnam's right to defend itself and receive outside weapons, but not Ukraine's, is that the former was a leftist regime and the latter a neoliberal one.

It's true that many leftists in the Vietnam antiwar movement considered the DRV and the NLF to embody their Marxist, socialist ideals. Others had no illusions about Ho Chi Minh's authoritarianism, including his training by Stalin and Mao and his brutal treatment of Vietnamese Trotskyists and anarchists. But despite differences regarding the nature of the regime, the antiwar movement as a whole believed that Vietnam had the right to defend itself from big power aggression. The movement stood in solidarity with Vietnam's struggle for independence, even if it was critical of its government.

In general, this has been the position of the left over the years. The struggles for independence and self-determination of many colonies, semi-colonies, and former colonies were supported by the left, even though those struggles were not led by leftists. When Italy attacked Haile Selassie's Ethiopia in 1935, the latter was a thoroughly undemocratic state. Nevertheless, all sectors of the left called for its support. Even though the Soviet Union, which wanted an alliance with Italy at the time, vacillated, the U.S. Communist Party [claimed](#) to be "exerting all energies to build a mass movement in defense of Ethiopia against a bestial fascist assault," according to party leader Earl Browder. Trotsky and his followers too called for supporting Ethiopia's just resistance. In the same way, one can support Ukraine in its just struggle against aggression, a struggle that seems to be widely supported by the Ukrainian people, without having to endorse the domestic policies of the Ukrainian government.

A second argument why the Ukraine-Vietnam analogy doesn't work is that the left's primary obligation is to fight the wrongdoing of its own government, and, therefore, in both wars the U.S. left should be opposing U.S. imperialism. But while of course U.S. leftists should always oppose U.S. imperialism, that doesn't mean that they should define themselves in opposition to whatever position the U.S. government takes in every case. For example, when the U.S. government—for its own reasons, of course—ultimately pushed for the Netherlands to end its colonial rule in Indonesia in 1949, the U.S. left didn't and shouldn't have opposed Washington's position. And who would deny support to the Kurdish movement in Syria against Turkish attack simply because the U.S. government too supports the Kurds?

As for the Russian left, surely internationalism cannot mean that it should work to bring the Russian invasion of Ukraine to heel, while the U.S. left should work to deny weapons to the Ukrainian victims of the Russian invasion. Western arms to Ukraine no more invalidate the legitimacy of Ukraine's right to self-defense than Russian arms discredited the Vietnamese cause.

Since the end of World War II, the left both in the United States and internationally has rallied to the struggles of people living in colonies and neo-colonies. Yet today, mostly because of a lack of information and understanding, this same support has not been extended to Ukraine, which is just as much a former colony as any of the others.

In 1991, citizens of Ukraine voted overwhelmingly for independence from the Soviet Union. Some 32 million registered voters (84 percent of the electorate) took part in the referendum, and over 90 percent of them voted "Yes." Independence was supported by over 80 percent of the population in every region of the country, including Donetsk and Luhansk, with the exception only of Crimea (54 percent) and Sebastopol City (57 percent). This feeling of Ukrainian nationalism may have lessened somewhat over the next three decades, in the face of economic hardship. But it received a major boost in 2014 as a result of Vladimir Putin's aggressions and has grown much stronger since the horrors of Russia's all-out invasion.

As the left did in nearly all earlier cases of struggles for colonial liberation, so in this one too it should stand with the liberation movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, the left said regarding Vietnam, "Out Now!" So today we should address this same slogan to Putin: "Out Now!"

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