

A Ukrainian Socialist Lays Out the Aims and Struggles of Her Country's Left

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Leftists in Ukraine are simultaneously resisting Russian imperialism and the domestic imposition of neoliberalism.

On the anniversary of Russia's imperialist invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian left faces a dual challenge — resisting Russian military attacks while also fighting against their own government's imposition of neoliberalism and austerity. Meanwhile, the global left remains deeply divided in its approach to the war and its relation to Ukrainian leftists' appeals for international solidarity.

Alona Liasheva is a sociologist, researcher of urban political economy, and works at The Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen. She is a co-editor of [Commons: Journal for Social Criticism](#) and member of Ukrainian democratic socialist group [Sotsialnyi Rukh \(The Social Movement\)](#).

In this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, Ashley Smith speaks with Liasheva about the nature of the war, the conditions faced by her country's working-class majority, the popular and military resistance and the Ukrainian left's strategy in wartime and for reconstruction.

Ashley Smith: Russia has launched waves of missile attacks on Ukraine. What impact has that had on people's lives? How has it impacted popular consciousness? What effect has it had on people's determination to resist the invasion?

Alona Liasheva: Russia started launching this latest round of missile attacks on October 10. They were supposed to weaken the Ukrainian army, but it didn't work. Here in Lviv, they seemed to hit everything but the military buildings. While civilian buildings lost their electricity and suffered blackouts, the military buildings were up and running either with regular electricity or generators.

So, the victims of these missiles were civilians and civilian infrastructure. Many lost heat in the middle of winter and had to endure extremely cold conditions in their houses and apartments.

The attacks knocked power out at hospitals, turning off refrigerators that keep the COVID vaccines cold. We couldn't get vaccines for a while as a result. All sorts of people and organizations mobilized to get us new vaccines, get generators to key places, and get the electricity back on.

I think Russia hoped to break the will of the Ukrainian people. But the opposite has happened. In surveys, popular support for the military resistance to Russia has remained steadfast.

Many on the Western left persist in calling the war a proxy one between the U.S./NATO and Russia. They also call for an immediate ceasefire and a negotiated settlement to end the war. What are the problems with these positions?

Really this is an easy question. Just listen to what Putin just said in his state of the union address. He declared that his goal is to conquer Ukraine and subsume it into the Russian Federation. At the same time as he was speaking, the Russian Army was attacking and killing civilians.

So, both Putin's rhetoric and his military's action demonstrate that Russia does not recognize Ukraine as an independent nation, let alone a negotiating partner. He is certainly not interested in a just peace. With his regime dedicated to our national eradication, we have no choice but to defend ourselves.

Unfortunately, it's that simple. Most everyone understands this in Ukraine. In sociological surveys, I've asked people what they think of a ceasefire and negotiations. Almost without exception, they say that Russia cannot be trusted in any talks.

That is especially true of people who have lived in the occupied areas of Ukraine. They describe living under a regime which they did not choose, which did not represent them, and which violently rejected their right to think of themselves as Ukrainians.

That regime imposed terrible economic conditions, discriminated against women and LGBTQ people, and abducted children and sent them back to Russia. That's why Ukrainians would not accept Zelensky saying, "we're not going to fight anymore, we're going to agree to a ceasefire, and negotiate away occupied territories."

All of this has changed my own view about diplomacy, which I had advocated over the last eight years. I supported the Minsk agreements as a way to freeze if not resolve the conflict.

Putin shattered my illusions, violating the agreement and launching this invasion. Negotiating with him at this point would be the height of naivete. It would be shooting ourselves in the foot.

I know that the left tends to look for a nefarious U.S. plot behind everything. Of course, I think it's important to analyze every conflict to understand all the players, the dynamics, and who's culpable.

In the case of Ukraine, it's far simpler than many on the left think. Ukraine was attacked by an imperialist army, and as a result we are in a struggle to defend our lives and our very right to exist as a sovereign nation.

Those on the left in the U.S., especially straight white men who tend to be those most vocal in opposition to Ukraine's right to self-determination, should take a moment and reflect on their privileged position.

They are not being attacked by an imperialist army. They have not been denied the right to say, "I'm Ukrainian. I want to live in my city. I want to peacefully do my job." They have not been told you cannot be gay, or you cannot get this or that job because you're a woman.

Instead of listening to us about our experience, instead of identifying with our struggle, too many on the left construct complicated narratives about geopolitics, which frankly do not hold up under close examination. The main problem is that 44 million people are being denied their nationhood, political subjectivity, and agency.

Why is it important for the international left to support Ukraine's struggle for self-determination? What are the stakes of Ukraine's victory or defeat in the war?

In reality, everyone in the world has a stake in Ukraine's struggle for liberation from invasion and occupation. After the Second World War in Europe, countries agreed to have a red line that they

would not cross; they would not invade and occupy other countries.

But increasingly, imperialist powers started crossing this line around the world. Russia did the same first in Chechnya and then Syria, Georgia, Donbas and Crimea. If Russia were to succeed with its invasion of Ukraine, it would set a precedent for other imperialist powers and states to do the same — invade, occupy, shoot and kill civilians with impunity.

That's why the invasion is not simply a regional conflict; Russia is setting a process in motion that could lead to higher and higher levels of imperialist interventionism and potentially a Third World War between nuclear armed powers. So, solidarity with Ukraine is in everyone's interests.

Really it should not even be a question. Support for struggles for self-determination from Palestine to Ukraine is a principle for the international left, or it should be. At its best, the left has always defended the right of oppressed nations to struggle for their liberation.

Any compromise of that principle discredits the left in the eyes of oppressed peoples. By contrast, international solidarity with all struggles of the oppressed strengthens our collective power to resist all imperialist powers and fight for progressive social change throughout the world.

This is not an abstract question for us. The international left can make a material difference in whether we are able to win or lose. The more solidarity with us, the more humanitarian aid, the more support for our unions, and the more support for our left will strengthen our capacity to resist Russian imperialism and fight for a progressive future in Ukraine and indeed in all of Eastern Europe.

Betrayal of that internationalism will weaken our struggle and it will discredit the left inside Ukraine and internationally. Who would join a left that justifies and excuses imperialist war or ignores the struggles of the oppressed for liberation?

Can you talk more about your experience with the international left? Have you found support? Have you been able to forge ties with Russian socialists and anti-war activists?

Unfortunately, many in the international community used a Cold War framework to understand the war. Most of these ended up ignoring or refusing to support our struggle for self-determination.

They variously sided with Russia, excused its aggression, or wrongly portrayed the war as an inter-imperial one between the U.S./NATO and Russia. The worst of these have gone so far as to blame Ukraine for being attacked. That is like blaming a woman for being raped because she wore a short skirt.

Others on the left sought out Ukrainians to talk with or read our books and articles to understand the war from our point of view. Whether they knew it or not, they were adopting a method that should be a principle on the left — listening to those who are being oppressed.

They built solidarity with our struggle for self-determination. Such leftists, trade unionists, and particularly international feminist networks, which I am part of, have played an important role. They have lobbied for Ukrainian interests, including supporting our right to secure weapons, which are essential for our ability to defend ourselves.

They have also provided humanitarian assistance, joined our international campaign to get our debt canceled, supported our unions' struggle to defend our labor rights, and helped with many other campaigns. In Eastern Europe we have gotten lots of support from [Razem in Poland](#) in particular. They have played a pivotal role in [our struggle for debt cancellation](#).

We have also gotten support from many Russian organizations and activists. Some, however, adopted the position of those on the Western left that blamed Ukraine for the war or the U.S. or NATO. They recycle Putin's talking points verbatim.

But for most of our Russian allies, it was really an easy question. Being in an imperialist country, it was not a complicated theoretical problem. They saw that Putin ordered an invasion of another country, Ukraine, and said the solution was simple — Russia had to get out.

Those Russian organizations and activists, especially [Feminist Antiwar Resistance](#), organized protests right after the invasion. But the Russian regime has repressed them, jailed many and forced huge numbers of activists to leave the country or go into hiding.

As a result, we cannot say that there is an antiwar movement in Russia now. Despite this we maintain close relations with Russian organizations and networks of militants both abroad and in Russia itself.

One of the challenges the Ukrainian left faces is how to support the struggle for liberation and at the same time protest the government's neoliberal policies and attacks on the labor movement. How have your group, Sotsialnyi Rukh, and others navigated this?

It is not as hard as it would seem. In reality everyone criticizes the government. That vibrant political discussion is a result of the war itself. The horrible truth is that when bombs are hitting your house, you are forced to ask why this is happening, how to resist it, what the government is doing to defend you, how they can do it better, and what you can do to make the resistance more effective.

Fear and anger have motivated people to do everything from volunteer to fight to organize mutual aid to help one another through the catastrophe of war. People gravitate to one another in emergencies. No one wants to be alone; you want to join a collective and improve your conditions.

Inevitably such politicization spills over into every other arena of Ukrainian society. People start thinking about their rights as workers, as women, as LGBTQI people, and so on. That's why a lot of Ukrainians are joining different political groups and organizations. Some people have gravitated to right wing organizations and their traditionalist ideas or religious ideas.

At the same time, the left has grown as people search for progressive solutions. Our organization has recruited a lot over the last year. We have way more members to do way more work. People are more active, ready to organize, and eager to mobilize for all kinds of initiatives.

Left-wing student groups have developed. They organized protests against universities being closed, raised demands about their rights, and built international solidarity with student organizations around the world.

Trade unions have also raised their demands and built new organizations. Some of these grew directly out of war conditions. For example, when Kherson was occupied, some turned to one another to protect themselves against the Russian forces. Others fled together to other parts of the country where they knew few people except each other.

In both cases, people relied on one another for mutual aid, building networks in the process. These became the basis of union organization in the case of medical workers, most of whom were nurses. They have formed a union to fight for their interests and for those of their patients.

As a result of all this ferment in civil society, many, not just the left and feminist groups, have made

criticisms of how the government leads the war and its class and social policies. Of course, a majority support Zelensky as the leader of the government and military resistance, but not uncritically.

In that context, the left can both stand on the same side as Zelensky in the resistance and oppose his reactionary neoliberal laws and attacks on union rights. We are gaining an increasing audience based on this approach.

We write articles explaining why his neoliberal policies are unjust, undermine morale and compromise the resistance. We send these to government ministries and parliamentary committees. Sometimes our viewpoint is heard and has an impact.

Sometimes we're ignored. That's why we publish our positions on our website, send them to the media, and share them directly with unions and social movement organizations. We also share them internationally and draw on our allies to pressure the government.

One of our key tools is petitions. If a proposed law gets 25,000 signatures on petitions, it must be brought to the president's attention. For example, we helped with a petition for a law legalizing gay marriage. It quickly got 25,000 signatures, forcing Zelensky to publicly state that he agreed with the proposal. The government has not passed it yet, but we have helped spur a public discussion about gay marriage.

Such campaigns are how the government was forced to crack down on corruption. It was not the result of a journalist just writing an article that exposed it, but the result of long-term activity by liberals and anti-corruption activists.

Already there are discussions about the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war. Many are concerned that it will be done along neoliberal lines, using debt and dependence as means to deepen free market reforms. What kind of reconstruction do you advocate and how does the fight for that grow out of the liberation struggle?

There will be an enormous struggle over the terms of reconstruction, just as there has been an enormous struggle over the neoliberalization of Ukraine since the 2008 global financial crisis. I'm not naïve enough to believe that after our victory, Ukraine will rise up and support social democratic reforms. But we can help lead a fight for as progressive a reconstruction as possible.

There is no doubt that Zelensky and the international financial institutions have a neoliberal reconstruction planned. The Western powers and the IMF and World Bank will give out loans on the condition that Ukraine implement further free market reforms like deregulation, cuts to the welfare state, and an opening to global capitalism.

We have a great deal to defend, especially our health care system. I can go to the hospital and get basic medical services like blood work and vaccinations for free. Of course, it's underfunded, so you have to wait for some services. Because of that, people who have money go to private clinics.

But it's still better than in the U.S. Some of my friends are refugees in New York City. They have been shocked by advertising for health insurance, the cost of health insurance, the co-pays on medical visits and how much people pay for services even when they have health insurance.

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I'm confident that the struggles we have seen emerge during the war will make it possible to stop

the worst of neoliberal reconstruction. We don't want to end up like neoliberal America!

For example, the new organization of medical workers will be able to fight for better pay and working conditions and defend the entire health care system. Through such struggles, we will make the case that another, socially just reconstruction is possible.

Instead of loans we should get direct aid and most importantly reparations from Russia to rebuild our country. Our existing debt should be canceled. It would be insane to use reparations from Russia to repay debt to the international financial institutions and western banks.

Our campaign for debt cancellation should be a global precedent for all indebted countries. Debt cancellation should be the first thing done to help a country reconstruct itself after war, occupation and economic crisis.

Free of debt and more loans, Ukraine could then invest in a progressive reconstruction of the country, defend our welfare state and invest in the public sector. Our whole economy will have to be rebuilt from our agriculture to our military industry, which will be essential so that we can defend ourselves against future attacks from Russia. Such a reconstruction would be in the interests of the country's vast working-class majority.

The new fight will be similar to the one after 2008. The Ukrainian government took loans from the IMF and agreed to their neoliberal conditionalities. But people rose up against them, forcing the government to balance between the popular pressure from below and the international financial institutions.

The same pattern will happen in reconstruction. Zelensky will take the loans and agree to neoliberal terms, but then face domestic opposition. The results of that struggle will be determined by the balance of power both domestically and internationally.

That's another reason why we need solidarity from the international left, indebted countries in the Global South and international unions. Our fight is against imperialism and the entire model that has been imposed on nearly every society.

If we can win liberation and a progressive reconstruction we can set a positive example for struggles of the exploited and oppressed throughout the world.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including *Truthout*, *The International Socialist Review*, *Socialist Worker*, *ZNet*, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket Books entitled *Socialism and Anti-Imperialism*.

Alona Liasheva

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