

UK: The Lecturers' Union and the Betrayal of the Intellectuals

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Many academics in both Ukraine and the UK are horrified by the Putin-enabling posturing of far-left factions within the UCU

A few weeks ago, a congress in Glasgow of the University and College Union (UCU), of which I'm an active member, passed a 'Stop the War' [motion](#) that called for an end to military support for Ukraine. Many UCU members - not least Ukrainian academics working in the UK - were appalled by this and several immediately resigned from the union.

UCU's General Secretary, Jo Grady, [expressed herself](#) "deeply disappointed" by the motion and described it as sending "the wrong message about our union". For this, she was attacked on social media by its supporters, who alleged that her statement was undermining UCU's democratic structures. UCU Left, a grouping that had promoted the motion, also [claimed](#) that those behind it "have been subjected to a witch-hunt online and smeared as 'pro-Putin' despite this motion calling explicitly for Russian withdrawal and condemning Putin's war crimes".

It's true that the motion condemned the invasion, expressed "solidarity with ordinary Ukrainians" and called for the withdrawal of Russian troops. But in the same breath, it characterised Ukraine as "a battleground for Russian and US imperialism" and speakers arguing for it at the UCU congress explicitly blamed the war on NATO "warmongering".

The Ukrainian View - Gaslighting

For Ukrainian academics, who have seen their country's universities repeatedly targeted by Russian shells and missiles, and many of their friends and colleagues killed or maimed in attacks on civilians or while actively resisting Putin's forces, this was gaslighting of the worst sort and a gross betrayal of the most basic principles of solidarity.

Yuliya Yurchenko, a Ukrainian senior lecturer in Political Economy at the University of Greenwich, [described](#) the attitude of the 'anti-war' left, "who somehow manage to simultaneously recognise Russia's right to 'defend its interests' while denying the right of Ukrainians to defend their very lives or assert their national self-determination", summing this up memorably as "the anti-imperialism of amoral idiots".

In a long [Twitter thread](#), Tymofiy Mylovanov, President of the Kyiv School of Economics, wrote: "The union passes a resolution against freedom and self-determination of Ukrainians. Thus, the union betrays its own values." He pointed out that the motion's claim that "wars are fought by the poor and unemployed of one country killing and maiming the poor and unemployed of another" was a false description of the situation in Ukraine, where people of all classes, including many academics, have enlisted (and died) in the fight-back against the invasion.

"The union assumes that people in Ukraine do not want to defend their country and that only poor

and unemployed are drafted. This comes from complete ignorance about what is happening in Ukraine,” Mylovanov wrote, observing that insult had been added to injury when an amendment to the motion, aimed at making it clear that any peace should be based on freedom and independence for Ukraine, had been rejected by UCU congress delegates. “Can I ask the union to reflect how many more children would have died this last night if Ukraine had not had air defence?” he asked.

Many UCU members felt the same and a [statement](#) condemning the motion has now been signed by more than 550 academics. As it says: “To actively call for the disarming of the victims of imperialist aggression who are fighting for their existence as a people following invasion by another nation’s armed forces is to disregard the immediate threat that the people of Ukraine face and denies their right to defend themselves against Putin’s aggression.”

No speaker from Ukraine was heard during the congress debate on the motion, or at the fringe meeting held by the Stop the War Coalition ahead of this, where the platform comprised two members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), an Afghan refugee, and Andrew Murray, a former vice-chair of Stop the War and close adviser to Jeremy Corbyn who for many years was a leading figure in the most hard-line Stalinist faction of the Communist Party of Great Britain. A frequent guest on the Russian propaganda channel RT, Murray has been [banned from entering Ukraine](#) since 2018 on the grounds that he is “part of Putin’s global propagandist network”.

The only Ukrainian that Stop the War appears to have found to support its position on Putin’s war is Yurii Sheliashenko, a man who has [written](#) that the Ukrainian nationalist leaders and wartime Nazi collaborators Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych should be recognised as “Heroes of Ukraine” (a weird irony, as Putin regularly refers to Ukrainians as “Banderas” in an attempt to falsely depict Ukraine as a nation in the grip of Nazism).

Stop the War and the Socialist Workers’ Party

While Stop the War styles itself as a “coalition” and has succeeded in attracting support from an assortment of people broadly on the left of politics, including celebrities such as Brian Eno and Mark Rylance, it was set up essentially as a project of the SWP and the group’s convenor since its inception has been Lindsey German, who for many years was on the SWP’s central committee. It gained a large following at the time of the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, but since then has faced frequent criticism that it is concerned only to protest against Western imperialism and has failed to stand up for the victims of war criminals such as Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad.

In 2015, a group of previous supporters of Stop the War, including the veteran human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell and a number of Syrian civil society activists, [wrote](#) that: “The Stop the War Coalition has lost its moral compass and authority. Stop the War has failed to organise or support protests against the Assad dictatorship and the regime’s massacre of peaceful democracy protesters in 2011 – and since. Nor has it shown solidarity with the non-violent Syrian civil society movements for democracy and human rights and with the millions of innocent civilians killed, wounded and displaced by Assad’s barrel bombs and torture chambers.”

Although Stop the War has frequently protested outside the US Embassy in London, it has [never once done so](#) outside the Syrian or Russian embassies, and some of its prominent supporters have sought to [obfuscate or deny](#) war crimes by Assad and Putin, including well-evidenced chemical weapons attacks on civilians in Syria.

The left-wing journalist Mike Marqusee, who for a time served as a member of Stop the War’s executive, [described](#) the way the SWP dominated the organisation: “Decisions are taken by the SWP leadership and foisted on the StWC [Stop the War Coalition] with barely a semblance of democratic

consultation [...] What has disturbed me most in working with the SWP has been their flagrant ethical relativism. This is an ancient foible of the left – a conviction that the class struggle, or the building of the revolutionary party, or the sheer evil of the forces we find ourselves up against justifies any behaviour, no matter how dishonest, duplicitous, or destructive to others.”

Although Lindsey German quit the Socialist Workers Party in 2010, Stop the War remains in lockstep with the SWP position on Ukraine and it was an SWP member, Sean Vernell, who moved the ‘Stop the War’ motion at the UCU congress, where it was also supported by members of another Marxist faction, Socialist Appeal (an offshoot of the International Marxist Tendency). Socialist Appeal takes much the same line on Ukraine as Stop the War and the SWP, though it has [criticised](#) Stop the War’s “weakness when it refers to the virtues of diplomacy, the UN, and sweet reason”.

The Vanguard

The vast majority of UCU members do not belong to either of these far-left factions, which have attained influence within the union not because their views reflect those of UCU’s membership but because they understand the potential for small groups of highly motivated activists to gain power within a union simply by making sure that their members stand in internal elections for committee positions. The same ‘entryist’ strategy has been followed with various degrees of success by the SWP and Socialist Appeal in a range of other organisations, including the Labour Party.

Members of these groups think of themselves as (to use a Leninist term they themselves favour) a ‘vanguard’ of the working class: “In every outbreak of class struggle, whether in a strike or a revolution, the more advanced layers in every workplace or movement end up playing a leading role,” Socialist Appeal [explains](#) to its members. “In a revolution, this vanguard can act as a powerful leaver [sic] in leading the working class to victory, provided it is organised in a party armed with the correct ideas to change society.”

For those who brought the UCU motion on Ukraine, the “correct ideas to change society” include leaving Ukraine defenceless against Russian imperialist aggression because they believe Western imperialism is as bad or worse, and because, as a member of Socialist Appeal maintained in a [speech](#) to UCU congress that could have been a Monty Python parody of Marxist rhetoric: “All that victory for either side would mean is the subjugation and oppression of the Ukrainian people by one or the other imperialism [...] The only way to a sustainable and lasting peace is for a class struggle that cuts across all imperialist warmongering. Comrades: the main enemy is at home!”

Most UCU members had no idea that a motion of this sort was being brought at the union’s congress. Those who brought it might say that members would have known if they’d bothered to read the conference agenda, but they are well aware that most members don’t look in detail at such agendas, and – wisely or not – trust conference delegates to focus principally on matters of direct relevance to union members’ interests, such as the bitter and still unresolved dispute over pay, working conditions and pensions that have led to a series of strikes by university staff in recent months.

It is a dismaying token of the stupefying power of crudely deployed ideology that the thinking of these Marxist factions has developed so little in the past 80 years or more, and that their analysis of the Russia-Ukraine war shows no sign of having taken on board some of the most crucial lessons of 20th-century history.

This becomes starkly evident when one compares their stated positions on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (echoed in the language of the UCU motion) with that of the Communist Party of Great Britain on Hitler’s invasion of Poland in 1939.

Red Brown Complicity

One of the Communist Party of Great Britain's main propagandists in 1939 was Rajani Palme Dutt, a member of the party's central committee who was sometimes described as "Stalin's British mouthpiece", responsible for promulgating any line handed down from Moscow by the Comintern.

The SWP and Socialist Appeal dissociate themselves from Stalinism (both factions emerged from splits within the Trotskyite movement). But their language is strikingly similar to that used by Dutt to urge people in Britain not to support Poland after it was attacked by the Nazis (in concert with the Soviet Union, with which Nazi Germany had recently signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact).

"We are told that this is a war in defence of peace against aggression, and that therefore all defenders of peace and collective security should support it. There never was a bigger lie," Dutt [frothed](#), as Hitler's troops massacred Polish civilians and Stalin's NKVD deported tens of thousands of Polish army officers to be slaughtered in Katyn Forest.

"Poland was deliberately sacrificed by the British and French statesmen in order to provide the occasion for their predatory war," he alleged, going on to explain that Chamberlain's aim was "to reimpose the feudal landlords' regime of the Polish militarists and fascists, whose puppet Government, under General Sikorski, is installed in Paris."

Just like his latter-day counterparts, Dutt could not acknowledge that a country invaded by a fascist aggressor could have any agency of its own, or that those who wished to assist the Poles in resisting this invasion could be motivated by anything but imperialist ambitions: "They want to impose on the peoples of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland puppet Governments which will be the agents of the British and French financiers and act as a brake against the socialist revolution," he wrote.

Dutt went on to urge trade unions to pass motions opposing British military support for Poland against the Nazis and "calling for a speedy termination of the war and a Peace Conference". In words that could have come straight from the pages of *Socialist Worker* or *Socialist Appeal*, he claimed that: "This war is a fight between imperialist powers over profits, colonies and world domination [...] The war is not only a war against the interests of the people. It is being used by the ruling class to increase their power and their wealth at the expense of the people."

Compare and contrast this with the words of Sean Vernell, the SWP member who brought the 'Stop the War' UCU motion. In a [sloppily written screed](#) for *Socialist Worker* that purports, preposterously, to "answer questions raised by critics", Vernell asserts that: "Ukrainians are used by the West as cannon fodder who fight and die in order to in horrific numbers in order to [sic] extend the power and reach of the West and the US in particular," and that "It was NATO that escalated the tensions that ultimately led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine."

Denying Ukrainians any agency in their resistance to Russian war criminals, just as Dutt denied agency to the Poles facing Nazi invasion, Vernell makes it clear that he does not wish to see Ukraine succeed in expelling Putin's forces, as he claims that this would "see Ukraine reduced to a vassal state - only this time it will be the West who calls the shots. Ukraine will be wholly dependent on NATO military strength and be a plaything of US imperialism."

In 1939, Dutt's contorted application of Marxist ideology aligned the British Communist Party with the far-right appeasers of Hitler, who were also pressing for an accommodation with the Nazis. Many British communists were, to their credit, disgusted by this policy of "revolutionary defeatism" and left the party as a result; nor were British trade unions eager to bring forward motions calling for peace with Hitler.

Objectively Pro-Fascist

Eighty-four years later, groups such as the SWP, Socialist Appeal and Stop the War are using the same sort of ideological contortions to justify abandoning Ukrainians to occupation, torture and mass murder at the hands of another [genocida](#) dictator. In doing so, they too find themselves in alignment with far-right elements who actively support Putin's regime and also want to see Ukraine deprived of the means to resist its depredations.

This makes their claim to be anti-Putin ring deathly hollow. The only 'solution' they have to offer Ukrainians facing invasion by an imperialist tyrant is the same as that offered by Dutt to Czechs and Poles being crushed under the Nazi jackboot, and it is one that relies on magical thinking - the notion that world revolution will finally materialise to solve this and every other problem.

There are appeasers of Putin on both the right and the left, and to Ukrainian academics, socialists and human rights activists the appeasement from the left expressed in UCU's 'Stop the War' motion is particularly grotesque.

There are, no doubt, many in Stop the War who have little interest in the SWP's theories of imperialism and for whom all war is simply to be deplored. This is a principled moral position, but one that has never really found an answer to George Orwell's [observation](#) on the pacifist stance in World War II: "Pacifism is objectively pro-Fascist. This is elementary common sense. If you hamper the war effort of one side you automatically help that of the other."

Orwell went on: "What I object to is the intellectual cowardice of people who are objectively and to some extent emotionally pro-Fascist, but who don't care to say so and take refuge behind the formula 'I am just as anti-Fascist as anyone, but—'."

On one level, UCU's 'Stop the War' motion matters not a jot to the outcome of Putin's war. Unlike their Ukrainian counterparts who have enlisted in their country's armed forces, British university lecturers are not in a position to make any significant difference to this from the comfort of their campuses.

But on the level of moral solidarity, it matters a lot. It could indeed be seen as an egregious example of what the French philosopher of the interwar years Julien Benda called *la trahison des clercs* - the betrayal of the intellectuals. Many of my UCU colleagues are now working alongside the [Ukraine Solidarity Campaign](#) to make sure that this shameful position is reversed as soon as possible.

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