

# Canadian Left Responses to War in Ukraine - a Provisional Balance Sheet

Thursday 17 August 2023, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 16 August 2023).

**February 24, 2022 marked the opening of a new phase in the developing reconfiguration of global capitalist and popular forces. Russia's massive invasion of Ukraine, the prompt mobilization of resistance by Ukrainians, and the quick shift toward public support for NATO in much of Europe, confronted the international Left and progressive forces with some major challenges. The Left in Canada was no exception.**

"This conflict will change everything," wrote Quebec socialist Pierre Beaudet in a [memo](#) to the solidarity organization Alternatives that he directed, just days before Beaudet's sudden death March 8. "As in any important debate, there are theories, strategic issues, choices to make in our practice."

Beaudet pointed to some key features of the new situation:

1. Russia's determination to prevail, its denial of "the very reality of Ukraine as the sovereign state and territory of a people with the right of self-determination," risked a long war in which "resistance to the aggression is the only outcome on offer."
2. Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin's approach "borrowed from the tradition of the USSR under Stalin in imposing a centralizing and repressive state along with attempts to carve out a place in the global arena."
3. The post-Soviet expansion of NATO, and Washington's failures in its intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia, prompting Putin's belief that this was now the time to strike a major blow in Ukraine, where Russia had already annexed Crimea in 2014 and supported pro-Russian separatists in the east.

"Now that Russia has attacked, there is no turning back. Either Putin wins his bet by the subjugation of Ukraine, which would allow him to 'entrust' to a new government the job of 're-establishing order.' Or the situation will drag on into an endless conflict - unless Russia decides to wage war in the cities even if it means destroying them, with their people, as was done in Syria."

The result will be "an immense realignment of priorities and strategies.

"NATO, its relevance diminished in recent years, will return in force. The member states will be required to increase substantially their military spending and become directly involved in the strategy of counter-attacking and weakening Russia...."

4. The Canadian government will follow the U.S. line, as always. Military spending will surge, financed by severe cutbacks in other expenditures. Fossil fuel export projects - perhaps "the LNG project designed to bring Alberta's gas through Quebec" - will be relaunched as part of the "war effort."

5. “We act in solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance that aims to re-establish an inclusive and peaceful sovereignty without abuses of national minorities. Our solidarity can be exercised in the area of humanitarian assistance” which “must not be reduced to meet Ukraine’s needs.”

6. Russia’s invasion was a “blatant violation of the UN Charter and international law. The United States and their NATO allies, including Canada, have plunged us as well increasingly into this war by a flurry of sanctions and outrageous statements.” A peace process must include the United Nations, and not be left to the major protagonists like the European Union and NATO.

The analysis was prescient. With hindsight, we can think of some elements that can now be added. However, Beaudet’s argument had the virtue of centering our response on the need to support Ukraine’s defense of its territorial sovereignty and self-determination.

In the 18 months since Beaudet’s memo, his organization Alternatives has worked to promote solidarity with the Ukraine resistance while opposing Russian aggression and NATO expansion. It has also [joined the international campaign](#) for the release of Boris Kagarlitsky and other Russian antiwar prisoners. Its approach contrasts with that of the pacifist organization [Échec à la guerre](#), which claims to oppose all imperialisms - especially U.S. “military domination” — but has not rallied to defend Ukraine.

In what follows, I will outline and critically comment on some of the other responses to the war by the Canadian and Quebec left.

### **The parliamentary Left**

When it comes to membership in NATO and its alliance with U.S. imperialism — the bedrock of Canada’s foreign policy — the labour-based New Democratic Party tends to march in lockstep with whatever government holds office in Ottawa. The Ukraine war is no exception. While supporting provision of weapons needed by Ukraine - as it should - the NDP has also agreed with moves to reinforce Canada’s military spending and NATO involvement as well as sanctions designed to harm the economic needs of the Russian people.

In a [statement issued on the one-year anniversary](#) of the full-scale Russian invasion, the NDP reaffirmed its support of “the Ukrainians who are defending their country and ... those who have been forced to flee.” But it called for strengthening the sanctions regime, and failed to raise the need to cancel Ukraine’s public debt as it seeks to rebuild.

The other party of Canada’s parliamentary Left, the pro-Quebec sovereignty party Québec solidaire, defends Ukraine of course. However, it has limited its support to a motion in Quebec’s National Assembly, on the eve of Russia’s aggression, [\[1\]](#) and a resolution adopted by its National Council on May 28, 2022. The resolution condemned Russia, reaffirmed Ukraine’s right to self-determination while calling for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to end the aggression, and urged rapid reception of Ukrainian refugees.

The QS council resolution emphasized that “this conflict must not be used as a justification to allow the exploitation of Quebec’s oil and gas resources, or to increase exports of fossil fuels from Canada on the pretext of replacing Russian oil and gas.”

Finally, it called on its members, and citizens, to “support peace demonstrations opposing the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army....”

However, QS has not itself initiated any such demonstrations although its program [\[2\]](#) declares that the party “will participate in building international mobilizations against military interventions (of

imperialist powers) aimed at ensuring control over peoples and their wealth and attacking their sovereignty.” The party also calls for Canada’s immediate withdrawal from NATO and NORAD. [3]

### **Extraparliamentary Left**

Québec solidaire identifies itself as “a party of the streets as well as the ballot-boxes,” and it is the extraparliamentary wing of the party that has taken the lead in defense of Ukraine. The popular website *Presse-toi à gauche (PTàG)* includes among its editors and writers the most prominent left-wing activists within QS. Since the war began each weekly edition has included [a selection of articles on the war](#), the vast majority sympathetic to Ukraine.

Another left website based in Quebec, *Pivot*, has likewise supported Ukraine, although not as diligently as *PTàG*. In April it published a [powerful rejoinder](#) to a few accounts in mainstream media and left-leaning publications in Quebec that attributed the war to provocation of Russia by NATO and/or Ukraine.

In the rest of Canada, unfortunately, the major left publications and organizations have tended to ignore the Ukraine resistance or dismiss it as a “proxy” for what they portray as a NATO war against Russia. [4] *People’s Voice*, the Communist party monthly newspaper, not surprisingly supports Russia. “NATO, the US, EU and Canada have left Russia with few options,” said the CP in a [statement issued in October 2022](#) that echoed some of the Kremlin’s narratives.

A prolific blogger on the war is Yves Engler, who has a well-earned reputation as the most prominent critic of Canadian foreign policy from an anti-imperialist standpoint. The author of [many books and articles](#), Engler is associated with the [Canadian Foreign Policy Institute](#), an NGO that sponsors online seminars and petitions critical of Canadian corporate and government intervention abroad. Engler and the CFPI have campaigned against the provision of Canadian arms to Ukraine, and joined the international chorus advocating a “negotiated peace” in Ukraine that is not predicated on Russian withdrawal. [5]

Engler’s articles have been republished by some on-line “progressive” websites such as [rabble.ca](#), which otherwise have little to say about the war.

A widely-read online website [The Maple](#) publishes well-researched critiques of Canadian foreign policy but has said little about the Russian war on Ukraine. Its managing editor Alex Cosh published an article in [another left publication Briarpatch](#) that repeated much of the Kremlin narrative justifying its aggression. [6] However, *The Maple* also organized an on-line debate between Ukrainian socialist Taras Bilous and Quebec blogger Dimitri Lascaris on the issue “Should Leftists Support Sending Weapons to Ukraine?” [7] Lascaris, who once ran for leader of the Canadian Green party, is notorious for his [support of Russia as a force for peace](#). A readers’ poll conducted by *The Maple* following the debate found a substantial majority supporting Bilous in his defense of the Ukraine resistance.

### **A rare debate on the war: *Canadian Dimension***

Canadian Dimension, a Winnipeg-based monthly magazine (founded in 1963, on-line only since 2019), is undoubtedly the most prominent publication on the English-Canadian left. [Its extensive coverage of the war](#) [8] has been slanted heavily against Ukraine’s resistance, some of it authored by writers like Yves Engler and Dimitri Lascaris, as well as U.S. sources like CodePink. However, CD also published [five articles this year](#) by Russian antiwar critic Boris Kagarlitsky, and recently published a strong [editorial statement](#) protesting Kagarlitsky’s arrest and urging its readers to support the international solidarity campaign for his release.

When *Canadian Dimension* introduced an [article by Kagarlitsky](#) with the headline “Clear-eyed veteran Russian leftist dissident offers a courageous and politically indispensable take on the Russia-Ukraine war,” Toronto socialist Sam Gindin and Montreal-based professor David Mandel wrote an angry “[reply to Kagarlitsky](#)” deriding his analysis as “shallow” and “simple-minded.” Their article was largely a defense of Putin based on a selective discourse analysis purporting to show that “there is no hint here, or indeed anywhere in Putin’s speeches or writing, of a denial of the right of the Ukrainian state or people to exist” – deliberately overlooking the ample well-documented evidence to the contrary. [9] As for Gindin and Mandel, they argued that Ukraine could not possibly strive for sovereignty given its reliance on US support. It was just a “proxy” for US imperialism in its attempt to weaken Russia.

In a [subsequent article](#), Mandel repeated many of the now-familiar (and false) Kremlin talking points in its narrative of defensive war. *Canadian Dimension* has now published [a devastating rebuttal](#), refuting many of Mandel’s “myths” one by one.

The Gindin-Mandel piece was a clear illustration of how viewing the war as a defensive reaction by Russia to U.S. aggression tends to translate into support of Russia and justification of its action. Both authors had been developing this position on an internal discussion list of the Toronto-based [Socialist Project](#) over the past 18 months. In Gindin’s case, it seemed to reflect the disorienting impact of the war’s outbreak on a thesis he had long defended with the late Leo Panitch, articulated at length in their magnum opus *The Making of Global Capitalism*. [10] As I have summarized it:

“The book’s central thesis is that the United States has dominated the planet since World War II, integrating other powers (and countries) by way of subordination to its ‘informal empire.’ This portrayal is distinguished from the conditions of inter-imperialist rivalry that Lenin had characterized as a central element of prewar capitalism.... This new world superpower has integrated ‘all the other major capitalist powers into an effective system of coordination under its aegis’.” [11]

Clearly, this portrayal of a harmonized (if competitive) global capitalism was a long shot from the brutal imperial savagery of capitalist Russia’s violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. Gindin seems unable to explain this contradiction, and has fallen back on a more classic, but still unipolar, image of a U.S. empire determined to discipline, even militarily defeat a recalcitrant subaltern in its global order.

(If, as some argue, the war is fundamentally an inter-imperialist conflict, revolutionary socialists would support neither side, although they [might still defend Ukraine state sovereignty](#).)

Gindin is by far the pre-eminent member of Socialist Project’s steering committee. Following his lead, the SP has refrained from campaigning in defense of the Ukrainian resistance. Instead, the few articles on the war published in its on-line [Bulletin](#) have promoted pacifist themes and opposition to providing Ukraine with defensive weapons. The Bulletin has also published two articles by David Mandel that attempt to “explain” and excuse the Russian invasion. Both articles proclaim that Ukrainian resistance is futile and should immediately cease.

It should also be noted that Socialist Project, unlike many groups and individuals representing a diversity of political perspectives, has not even endorsed the international campaign of [protest against the arrest of Boris Kagarlitsky](#). [12]

### **Ex-Trotskyists rejecting Ukraine solidarity**

Among the other political casualties of the war are some of the small groups with roots in various

wings of the international Trotskyist movement. The Toronto-based International Socialists published a [statement on February 24, 2022](#) denouncing “Russian expansionism” and calling for Russian withdrawal from Ukraine... and Canadian withdrawal from Eastern Europe, referring to its role in NATO “training fascists within the Ukrainian military.” Ukraine, it said, “is once again paying the price as a state stuck in between two major imperialist rivals,” Russia and NATO. The IS newspaper *Socialist Worker* has published several articles along the same lines since the invasion, all of them produced by their co-thinkers in Britain.

*Spring*, the on-line publication of a group that broke with the IS a few years ago, has reposted many articles on the war by Yves Engler, and two or three of its own. [David Bush](#) denounces the Russian aggression but insists “the main enemy is at home.” This means opposing “troop deployments and arms shipments” to Ukraine. [James Clark](#), once a leader in the Canadian movement against U.S. aggression in the Middle East and Afghanistan, wrote a four-part series of articles on the antiwar movement of ten years ago, but made no attempt to link its lessons to the war on Ukraine.

Fightback (in Quebec, La Riposte, a recognized collective within Québec solidaire) is the Canadian member of the British-based International Marxist Tendency. At the outset of the war, its publications featured [a lengthy statement by the IMT](#) dismissing the Ukrainian resistance:

“All the talk of Ukrainian sovereignty is contradicted by the fact that the country has been under growing domination from the US since the victory of the 2014 Euromaidan movement. All the key levers of economic and political power are in the hands of a corrupt oligarchy and its government, which, in turn, is the puppet of US imperialism and a pawn in its hands.... In fact, the current war is to a large extent a US-Russia conflict, being played out in the territory of Ukraine.”

Subsequent articles on the war have replicated this approach.

Finally, it is worth noting the fate of a tiny current that originated in some 2004 expulsions from the U.S. Socialist Workers Party because they had questioned the SWP’s support of the Pentagon overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. John Riddell and Roger Annis, joined by Ian Angus, founded an on-line journal *Socialist Voice* and invited some other Marxists (including myself) to participate in its production. An on-line archive of the issues and pamphlets published before its demise in 2011 may be accessed [here](#).

As it explains, *Socialist Voice* ceased publication because its key editors had become heavily committed to other enterprises. John Riddell had resumed publication of his massive volumes on the proceedings of the Communist International in Lenin’s day. [13] Ian Angus was publishing his website [Climate & Capitalism](#) and writing books on [Ecosocialism](#).

As for Roger Annis, he travelled to Ukraine with two other Canadians - Radhika Desai and Alan Freeman - in 2014, at the invitation of Boris Kagarlitsky, and emerged as a [supporter of Russia’s annexation of Crimea](#) and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. He has since transformed his blog [A Socialist in Canada](#) into a shameless propaganda mouthpiece for Putin’s regime and its aggression, occupation and annexations in Ukraine. Independently of Annis, Desai and Freeman (he is a former Trotskyist, in Britain) have created their own [website](#) and authored a [Manifesto](#) that praises today’s China as “the indispensable nation in humankind’s struggle for socialism, offering aid and inspiration as a worthy example of a country pursuing socialism in accordance with its national conditions.” Among the initial signatories of the Manifesto is John Riddell.

The group praises China - and Russia - as paragons of “multipolarity,” the alternative they promote to U.S. unipolar hegemony. What this means for Ukraine is described by Radhika Desai in her [recent book](#): “[T]his war takes the form of a US-led NATO war against Russia over Ukraine. In this war,

Ukraine is the terrain, and a pawn—one that can be and is being sacrificed with the apparent cooperation of its West-oriented leadership.”

## Conclusion

As in other countries, Canadian left responses to Russia’s war have tended to divide along two conflicting fault lines. Crudely put, there are those who see the war as a Russian imperialist assault on Ukraine and seek to mobilize solidarity with Ukraine’s popular resistance, including its right to acquire the weapons it needs for its defense. In contrast, there are those who reduce the war to a conflict between NATO and Russia, the Ukrainians being simply pawns of the Pentagon and its European allies. The first group call for immediate Russian withdrawal from Ukraine as the only path to a peaceful solution. The second claim that Russia has some legitimate interest in occupying all or part of Ukraine, and invent narratives to justify its aggression and deny Ukraine’s right of national self-determination. These differences cannot be reconciled. It is a fundamental rift.

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## P.S.

Life on the Left

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2023/08/canadian-left-responses-to-war-in.html>

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## Footnotes

[1] “L’Assemblée nationale adopte une motion unanime de soutien à l’Ukraine,” February 23, 2022.

<https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/politique/2022-02-23/l-assemblee-nationale-adopte-une-motion-unanime-de-soutien-a-l-ukraine.php>.

[2] [Programme de Québec solidaire](#). See, in particular, para. 9.2.1.

[3] North American Air Defense Agreement (NORAD).

[4] For a critical analysis of this convoluted reasoning, see “[The war in Ukraine: four reductions we must avoid](#).”

[5] A typical article: “[Cutting through Canada’s war propaganda](#).”

[6] See also “[Yes, The Ukraine War Could Have Been Prevented](#),” by Alex Cosh, arguing that the war is a “NATO proxy war.”

[7] “[Should Leftists Support Sending Weapons to Ukraine?](#)”

[8] See the section “Crisis in Ukraine” on the CD website.

[9] See, for example, [Putin's speech on February 23, 2023](#) justifying his decision to invade Ukraine.

[10] *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (Verso, 2013).

[11] Richard Fidler, "[Remembering Leo Panitch](#)." See the text following the subhead "Global capitalism."

[12] As one of the very few SP members on its discussion list to dispute Gindin and Mandel, I was barred by the steering committee from posting any comment on "the Ukraine-Russia war" (sic) for two months earlier this year.

[13] [Pathfinder Press](#) and [Haymarket](#).