

# Supporting the Ukrainian resistance. Six questions

Wednesday 20 April 2022, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2022).

**Russia's war on Ukraine is a nightmare - and for all who try to articulate our humanity actively, who not only hope for social justice and peace but try to do something about it, a test of all our ideas. The Russian government marshals young men to kill, rape and terrorise civilians ... and we who live outside Ukraine feel pretty helpless. We go on demonstrations (as usual!), donate money, and support Ukrainian refugees as we have supported other refugees before. We who see the war as intimately bound up with global systems of social and economic injustice try to mobilise direct forms of solidarity to Ukrainians and anti-war Russians (see for example [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).**

**Socialists like me, who try to frame our actions with our particular understanding of the world's hierarchies and cruelties, have found ourselves in arguments about the character of the war (e.g. is there an "anti imperialist" side to it?), and about difficult political issues (e.g. are we "in favour" of supplying weapons to Ukraine? And what would it even mean if we are?).**

**Here I try to develop my view, using a Marxist approach (which to me is not dogma but a set of ideas that can help guide actions). If you are a ghoulish post-stalinist who thinks - even after Bucha, Irpin and Mariupol - that Russia really is "denazifying" Ukraine, you can stop reading here. I am not addressing the Kremlin lies you heard from Russia Today. If you are someone who doesn't agree with other things I have written, but thinks we have to find a way of talking about the issues, I hope you'll keep going. I have set out my arguments in the form of six questions, that underlie the more immediate political issues, and my responses to them.**

## **1. What does the "national question" mean, if anything, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and specifically with respect to the "Maidan revolution"?**

Socialists who participate in the resistance define Ukraine's war as one of a small country against an imperialist power. For example, Denis Pilash said in [an interview](#):

There is a big historic tradition of supporting peoples' wars in smaller countries that are being attacked or oppressed by grand imperial powers. It has been an integral part of leftist political projects since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since the support of the First International for the Polish struggles and the Irish struggles and so on, and later with the support for decolonisation of many countries.

In Ukraine, national and social struggles have combined in different ways over at least a century and a half (see [here](#) about the period around the 1917 revolution). The turning point in post-Soviet times was the overthrow of president Viktor Yanukovich by popular action in 2014. That led to the eight-year war in Donbass, between Ukraine and Russian-supported separatists, the direct predecessor of

the wider war that started on 24 February this year.

Was the 2014 unrest about resisting imperialism, or national revolution? What do these terms mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in an era of globalisation?

Assumptions widely shared by Marxists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, about the potentially progressive role of the national bourgeoisie, were shown in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to be false, in my view. Time and again, e.g. in Egypt, in India, in South Africa and other African countries, the national bourgeoisie showed itself unable to push beyond the constraints imposed by capital. From the 1980s even the most stridently “anti imperialist” of these governments helped to impose the harsh consequences of globalisation on their people.

But imperialism did not disappear. In many ways it became stronger – although its methods switched from direct colonisation to a combination of economic domination and military intervention.

The Soviet Union, while suppressing many features of capitalism economically, preserved the form of the Russian empire: economic domination – and at different times, different degrees of cultural assimilation – of surrounding territories. This collapsed in 1991. Since the mid 2000s, the Russian elite under Putin has sought to re-establish aspects of Russia’s imperial domination.

With regard to Ukraine, Russia’s oldest colony, prior to 2014 these efforts were mainly in the economic, political and diplomatic spheres. Moscow gave limited support to politicians it trusted, and supported Russian companies’ efforts to control, or at least participate in, parts of the Ukrainian economy. Yuliya Yurchenko, the Ukrainian socialist who has written on the parasitic form of capitalism that took root in Ukraine, said in [a recent interview](#) that the competition between oligarchs (politically powerful businessmen) “overlapped” with territorial and linguistic divisions between Ukrainian and Russian speakers.

The oligarchs stoked these divisions for their own political gain during electoral campaigns. In the process, the oligarchs turned pre-existing and largely non-conflictual differences into new animosities and prejudices. This was an effective strategy to divide and rule the population that kept resisting the plunder with waves of resistance from below, from the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Maidan uprising in 2013. These divisions were further amplified by the different oligarchs’ relationships with the European Union (EU) and Russia. They would play up the divisions to stake out relations with either of those powers. All of this came to a head during Maidan. People rose up against the oligarchs and the government, right-wing nationalists exploited it, and their parties tried to hijack it.

In contrast to this view of Maidan, set in the context of post-Soviet Ukraine’s social dynamics, swathes of “leftist” opinion outside Ukraine focused on the influence of the US and European powers.

Let’s leave aside the Kremlin-inspired nonsense that the Maidan was a “fascist coup”, manipulated into existence by US State Department officials. Still, much analysis focused on the as-yet-preliminary hopes of US, German, British and other firms of plundering Ukraine’s natural and human resources and taking control of parts of its economy.

Can we describe this as a “social revolution”, or “national revolution”? If “revolution” is defined narrowly as the overthrow of a political system and the property relations that underpin it, no. But if we want to underline the intervention in history of masses of people who most of the time stay outside the political process; and if we want to describe the depth of their aspirations for change;

then “revolutionary” is a relevant term.

Maidan was not invented by the US or European bourgeoisie. It was a “wave of resistance from below”, as Yurchenko argues. It came amid economic instability caused by the 2008-09 economic crisis, and hard on the heels of the “Arab spring” of 2011-12. Hundreds of thousands of people occupied the centre of Kyiv, including overnight in sub-zero temperatures. Subsequent research by sociologists showed the high level of participation across Ukraine in local demonstrations, and in particular on attacks on police stations that led to the collapse of the police force.

A quick check on levels of inward investment on one hand, and migration on the other, would show that US and European capital were far less committed to plundering Ukraine’s resources than they were Russia’s, Poland’s or the Baltic states’. And while the EU had no interest in admitting Ukraine to membership, it welcomed an inflow of cheap migrant labour from Ukraine.

That giant crowd in Kyiv was politically heterogenous and confused, certainly. (I [wrote about it](#) at the time.) But aspirations present included, *first*, to become part of “Europe” – due in part to people’s perceptions that the labour of the millions of Ukrainian migrants to EU countries, often working under super-exploited conditions, was usually better remunerated than labour in Ukraine, and that even the east European states, treated as second or third class members of the EU, were better places for workers than pre-2014 Ukraine.

*Second* was the slogan against corruption – a cry of rage against post-Soviet capitalism, which working class Ukrainians saw as inferior to other types of capitalism, and sometimes identified with Russia.

*Third*, there were fears of excessive Russian influence on Ukrainian politics, and of a return of Russian domination, both by parts of the ruling class and parts of the working class and middle class. These fears fed into nationalist slogans.

In response to the Maidan movement came separatism in Donbass. No doubt, there were fears among working-class Russian-speaking Ukrainians about the influence of Ukrainian nationalism, including reactionary and fascist types of nationalism, in the Maidan movement – although sociological evidence shows that these fears were expressed as separatism only by a small minority. The social aspirations of the “anti-Maidan” and of the Maidan were very close, socialist activists argued in [this interview](#) in 2014.

*It was right-wing militia from Russia, and the Russian army, that militarised the conflict and suppressed the anti-Maidan’s social content.*

In 2014-15, two socialist activists in eastern Ukraine discussed these events on the Proletar Ukrainy web site. Despite being on opposite sides of the fence with regard to Ukrainian resistance to the Russian intervention in Donbass, they agreed that the Maidan movement was a deep-going expression of social discontent. (Those in western Europe who dismiss the social significance of Maidan might give this some thought.)

Aleksandr Pivtorak, who [advocated neutrality](#) in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, argued that social issues were predominant on the Maidan; it was “only patriotic and nationalist in form. Its real content was a completely bourgeois-progressive integrationist, if not internationalist, movement.” Oleg Dubrovsky, who urged participation in (and did participate in) the volunteer militia fighting the Russian-supported separatists, agreed with Pivtorak about the importance of social issues in the Maidan, but [referred to it as a “national revolution”](#). We can speak of a “national-democratic revolution, which, if it is not choked, if it is not defeated, will finally break Ukraine out of the

clutches of [Russian imperialism]”.

While at the start of 2014, the Maidan movement was a knotted mix of social and national threads, in my view, Russian intervention made it one of those wars by smaller countries that are “attacked or oppressed by grand imperial powers”, to which Denis Pilash referred.

## **2. What is the character of Russian imperialism, and of the Russian political elite around Putin?**

Vladimir Putin’s government, far from being the defiant opponent of western imperialism it poses as, is essentially imperialism’s creature. For all its claims to be fighting “NATO expansion”, it has since the mid 2000s in practice been assigned its sphere of influence by the US and European powers (notwithstanding their own rhetoric). Russia has acted as a gendarme for capital in the post-Soviet space, and in Syria. I have argued these points in other articles, [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#); now I ask whether Putin’s regime, having so intensified social discipline of Russian working people, is moving towards a form of fascism.

The origins of the Kremlin’s function as capital’s gendarme lie in the 1990s, the first post-Soviet decade. Russia was integrated into the world economy as an exporter of (mainly) oil, gas, minerals and metal products, while its state power experienced crisis. In 2000-08, with rising oil prices and a commodities boom, Putin re-centralised the state, by means of the bloody suppression of Chechen national aspirations in the war of 2000-02, and the tilting of the power balance against private capital. Simultaneously, living standards recovered from the 1990s slump. This was the heyday of post-Soviet Russian capitalism.

Russia’s export-centred economic model gave rise to a rent-seeking, parasitic form of capitalism. Capital flight raged. Russia shared these economic symptoms, sometimes described as the “resource curse”, not with so-called “great powers” but with countries in the global south. The Kremlin’s pretensions to “great power” status relied entirely on its military, and especially its nuclear weapons.

In the boom years, the governing elite was essentially a combination of *siloviki* (former security services officers, including Putin himself) and economic modernisers; the latter spoke constantly about addressing the “resource curse” but failed to do so. The boom was brought to an end by the 2008-09 financial crisis, albeit with a delayed reaction due to high oil prices in 2009-11. Living standards stagnated. Putin faced big protest movements for the first time.

From that time onward, the character of the governing elite changed. The economic reformers’ influence faded: the departure from government of the long-time finance minister Alexei Kudrin in 2011 was symbolic. The *siloviki*, despite being deeply divided among themselves, became completely dominant. They grabbed some more of the oil industry that had been outside their control (note the expropriation of [Bashneft](#) in 2014-16) and intimidated their political opponents (note the successful fitting-up in 2016-17, by Rosneft boss Igor Sechin, of the economics minister [Alexei Ulyukayev](#) - who is now serving a long jail sentence).

A hallmark of Putin’s rule has been to compensate for its subordinate economic status with military strength. In foreign policy terms, this meant that nationalist and militarist narratives [took precedence](#) over economic ones - with the annexation of Crimea and support for Donbass separatism in 2014, and with the support for Bashar al-Assad’s bloodthirsty repression of the Syrian uprising in 2015-16.

At the same time, the state and its ideology has changed, culminating in the invasion of Ukraine this

year and the brutal domestic clampdown that went with it. In (at least) these four ways, Russia is now moving towards fascism:

*First.* Patriotism has not only become a state ideology, but, as political scientist Iskender Yasaveev [argued](#), “the Russian authorities shifted the meaning of patriotism from ‘love of the motherland’ to readiness to defend the state by military means from external and internal enemies”.

*Second.* The idea of the “Russian world” has become ethno-nationalist, and specifically anti-Ukrainian. Claims that Ukraine has no nationhood have long been made by Russian nationalists and Kremlin ideologists; these were [spelled out](#) by Putin himself in July 2021, and then [linked](#) in December 2021 with the baseless claim of “genocide”. Now, since the war began, a fascist-like justification of it has been [published by RIA Novosti](#), the government-supported news agency. The author, Timofei Sergeytsev, claims that “Ukronazism” is a greater danger than Hitler’s Nazism; that “denazification” is “aimed at the nazified bulk of the population, who technically can not be directly punished as war criminals” but should be made to suffer “the inevitable hardships of a just war against the Nazi system”; that “all organisations involved in Nazi actions must be eliminated and prohibited”; that Ukraine “can not possess sovereignty; and that purging Ukraine from the earth in this way will take one or two generations.

*Third.* Since 2014 the state has incorporated the armed section of the Russian extreme right, which was used to support the Donetsk and Luhansk [“people’s republics”](#). This follows the incorporation of the militia that rule Chechnya, headed by Ramzan Kadyrov, which are now being deployed to support the Russian army in Ukraine.

*Fourth.* These changes in the military have gone alongside a climax of repression at home: the effective closure of independent media, which now operate almost entirely from outside Russia; the effective prohibition not only of all anti-war actions, but of other forms of protest; and the punishment of dissent with heavy jail sentences. Quasi-state organisations have been set up to promote militarism in civil society, attempts made to incorporate existing educational and cultural institutions to this cause – and fascist-like groups allowed to terrorise opponents of the war.

*To say these are steps towards fascism obviously begs the question: what do we mean by fascism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

The Marxist analyses of fascism with which I was educated focussed on the process by which fascism came to power. A military-police dictatorship that “raises itself above the nation”, in order to make itself fascist needed the “political mobilisation of the petty bourgeoisie against the proletariat”, Lev Trotsky [wrote](#) after Hitler came to power in Germany. The context was the bitter battle with Communist party leaders who helped the Nazis by condemning the leaders of the other parties, including the Social Democrats, as equally bad.

In our own times, researchers of fascism have paid more attention to the combinations of forms of repression with militarism, and racist and nationalist ideology, when fascists have attained power. Their work raises the possibility that fascism can congeal in the state, without the type of mass mobilisation on which Hitler and Mussolini relied. For example, Robert Paxton wrote:

At its fullest development, fascism [in power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century] redrew the frontiers between private and public, sharply diminishing what had once been untouchably private. It changed the practice of citizenship from the enjoyment of constitutional rights and duties to participation in mass ceremonies of affirmation and conformity. It reconfigured relations between the individual and the collectivity, so that an individual had no rights outside community interest. It expanded the powers of the executive –

party and state – in a bid for total control. Finally, it unleashed aggressive emotions hitherto known in Europe only during war or social revolution. (Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Penguin, 2004), p. 11).

We need a discussion about the extent to which these changes have already taken place in Russia. We need also to consider Yassin al-Haj Saleh's analysis of the Baathist regime in Syria as fascist, by which he means:

[V]iolent aggression against civilians and disregard for their lives; the use of punitive campaigns in response to any objections; and shelling towns, locales and villages – all at the hands of a wealthy ruling clique, immune from any accountability, acting under the pretext of “defending the security of the homeland” (Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution* (Hurst, 2017), p. 92).

Saleh's description of the way that Syrian repression is structured around Arabism and sectarianism may also help us to understand the way in which anti-Ukrainian xenophobia and nationalism is now being mobilised in Russia.

### **3. What has been the character of the Russian wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and of the forces against which Russia has fought? What is the character of Ukraine's defensive war now?**

In its role as a gendarme for capital, Russia has fought wars in: Chechnya (2000-03); Georgia (2008); eastern Ukraine (2014 to the present); Syria (2015 to the present); and Ukraine (2022). It has made military interventions in Belarus (2020) and Kazakhstan (2022).

These Russian wars have been imperialist. In Chechnya, the objective was to reinforce Russia's state borders and to annihilate Chechen nationalism. In all other cases:

- (i) Military intervention was used to support “pro Russian” regimes or military forces.
- (ii) With the exception of Georgia, the interventions were directed not only against states and states' armies, but against social movements that threatened “pro Russian” regimes. In this respect, they continue the pattern set by the Soviet army's interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). And the greatest threat to Russian power from these social movements came in Ukraine, its oldest colony, with Yanukovich's overthrow.
- (iii) Russia has shown little sign either of wanting to acquire territory, beyond enclaves with a majority of Russian speakers, or of being able to dominate it economically.

Russia, despite its underlying economic weakness, has sought in this way to rival the US-UK alliance, which has in this period waged war in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and supported the Saudi war in Yemen, the Israeli war on Palestine and other proxy wars.

The direct precursor for Russia's war on Ukrainian civilians was in Syria. In 2011-12, the Assad regime used Russian-supplied weapons and intelligence to attack civilians, protected from international censure in the UN by Russia. In 2015-16, Russian armed forces intervened directly, supposedly to attack the Islamist group ISIS, but in fact to support Assad's slaughter of civilians. Russian bombers targeted hospitals and civilian infrastructure.

*Given the imperialist character of the present Russian war in Ukraine, and the extent to which it is aimed not just against the state and armed forces, but also against the population, Ukrainian socialists and others have designated the resistance a “people's war”. Is this meaningful?*



Many, perhaps most, wars combine conflict between states and conflict between states and populations. The second world war, for example, was both a confrontation between two blocs of imperialist powers, and an array of wars by states against populations, and of state-people alliances against other states. In Europe, such state-people alliances against German aggression took many different forms.

Historians of the Soviet Union have shown that the bitter, bloody struggle between its bureaucratic rulers and its working population was effectively suspended, in order to defeat the common German enemy. In other parts of Europe, working-class and Jewish resistance to pro-Nazi governments merged into the larger European conflict. In France, working class resistance cooperated with the bourgeois leadership of Charles de Gaulle.

In the post-war period, the designation “people’s war” was often used to describe national liberation struggles, particularly those whose leaders sought the support of the Soviet Union and/or China.

Socialists in rich countries not only glamorised these “people’s wars”, but glorified their bourgeois leaders, even as the class elements of these struggles came into conflict with, or was suppressed by, those leaderships. (Think of the rich-country fan clubs of the Vietnamese Communist Party, ZANU in Zimbabwe or the Baath party in Iraq.) But that is a problem of the political history of the “left” in rich countries. The lesson is not that there is no such thing as “people’s war”, but that it needs to be defined, and its relationship with inter-state and inter-imperialist wars thought about.

“People’s war” could be defined as armed conflict in which a significant section of the population is engaged, alongside or independently of the state, and in which social, labour and democratic issues figure along with national ones, in my view.

If that is the definition, it would apply to the current Ukrainian war in three ways:

*First*, the Russian army’s shockingly anti-popular methods, a continuation of its methods in Chechnya and Syria. These methods, like those used by France and the US in Vietnam, and the US and UK in Iraq, impart the defensive war with a popular character, since it becomes a war for survival.

*Second*, while millions of people have chosen to flee Ukraine, there are also millions who have not done so, and, among them, hundreds of thousands of people who have signed up to territorial defence units, or participate in the war effort in non-military capacities.

*Third*, a significant section of the population of the areas occupied by the Russian army in south-eastern Ukraine has turned out every week, and in some places every day, since that army’s arrival, to demonstrate against it. Efforts to intimidate local officials, journalists and other activists in these areas is meeting with fierce resistance.

While we should avoid reading our own discourses into these brave people’s actions, there is plenty of evidence that they believe that democratic and social rights are at stake, as well as national rights.

We should also avoid reading our own discourses into the actions of unarmed civilians who flee towns under Russian bombardment. [One commentary](#), arguing against actively siding with the Ukrainian resistance, sees the movement of refugees as a sign that “most working class people are trying to avoid getting drawn into this ‘peoples’ war’”.

I would not rush to categorise people’s desperate actions in this way. Does the author presume that workers who have fled Mariupol – no matter how little Ukrainian patriotism means to them – feel

neutral in a conflict between the Ukrainian government that failed for years to improve schools, hospitals and housing, and the Russian government that has ordered the obliteration of those schools, hospitals and homes? Between the Ukrainian government that has done too little to defend working people's rights, and the Russian government that supervises the murder, violent intimidation and rape of those people?

Another factor here is the [disaster](#) – again, not only for national and democratic rights but for social and labour rights – visited on the populations of the Donetsk and Luhansk “people's republics”. This has clearly left its mark on working-class consciousness in the region and on people's understanding of patriotism.

In short, there are mountains of evidence that the Ukrainian war against Russian aggression is being waged by an alliance of the state and large sections of the population.

It would be foolish to use the idea of “people's war” to romanticise the actions of the Ukrainian army, territorial defence units, or unarmed civilians. The dangers inherent in any “people's war”, that new forms of statehood, authority and oppression will proliferate, which have played out in Syria and elsewhere, should be thought about. (See question 5 below.) The motives of the US and other NATO countries that are arming Ukraine, and influencing its government, need to be taken into account. (See question 4 below.) But none of this alters the fact that the Ukrainian resistance is qualitatively different from Russia's aggressive, imperialist war.

The Ukrainian war can not be seriously equated with the Russian war, any more than the Iraqi war with the US-UK invasion; the Kurdish war with Turkish aggression; the Palestinian war with Israeli apartheid; or, going further back, the Vietnamese war with the US war. People who think Ukraine is fighting “a proxy war for NATO” should clarify the difference, if any, between this and the “proxy war for the Arab states” fought by Palestine, or the “proxy war for the USSR and China” fought by Vietnam.

#### **4. What is the place of this war in the crisis of capital internationally?**

The underlying causes of this war, like all recent wars, need to be understood in the context of the crisis of the world's dominant social system, capitalism. Since it is dedicated firstly to the accumulation and concentration of wealth and power, war – between states, for the domination of states over others, to reinforce the power of capital over society – is in its nature. These are very general assertions: how have they played out in practice in this case?

A key starting-point is the collapse of the Soviet Union. In relations between Russia and its neighbours, it had preserved many features of the Russian empire. But now, as Russia emerged from the 1990s slump, its relationship with those neighbours, and with the western and other imperialist blocs, had to be remade. Economically, Russia was integrated into the world economy as a subordinate supplier of raw materials. Politically, Putinism in the decade 2000-09 sought to re-establish a strong, centralised state, and from the mid-2000s to renew Russia's imperial ambitions, in a new, more limited form. (Not only are the Baltic states and Moldova, except Transdnistria, “lost” to Europe, but most of central Asia is now dominated by China, and the Caucasus is disputed.)

After the Soviet collapse, NATO expansion indeed played a role. Germany was reunified; and by 2004, seven former Soviet bloc countries, and the three Baltic states, had joined NATO. US and European strategists certainly revelled in this extension of their influence, as they did when four Balkan countries joined NATO much more recently. But their actions were as reactive as they were pro-active. As for Russia itself, they treated it as a gendarme in its own sphere of influence, giving it a free hand, most significantly, in Syria. (Those three paragraphs summarise an argument I made at



greater length [here](#).)

So, with regard to the current war, in addition to economic and social factors (question 1 above) and Russian imperial ambitions (questions 2 and 3), the place of western statecraft in the current war needs to be assessed.

Since 24 February it has mobilised, decisively, to support the Ukrainian government's war effort. But this mobilisation was essentially reactive.

To analyse this mobilisation, we need consciously to discount the effect of Kremlin propaganda, which combines the hyped up story about "NATO expansion" with a pack of lies about "Nazism", "dictatorship" etc in Ukraine. This has an impact on the western labour movement, and in the global south, as well as on the populist right. (Before the war, I responded to some of the most vocal pro-Kremlin liars in the UK [here](#).)

Apart from cynical post-stalinist hacks, though, there is a trend in socialist and radical political milieu, who – remembering the criminal violence of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and western imperialism's bloodstained history, and in some cases knowing little about Russia – assume that the western powers must have a determining hand in the frightful events in Ukraine. The story about Ukraine fighting a "proxy war for NATO" gains traction.

Friends, please study the western role, and its limits, carefully.

Over the last quarter of a century, NATO [repeatedly failed](#) to agree a membership action plan with Ukraine. Until the current war started, NATO countries provided a miniscule level of weapons and training to Ukraine – and specifically not the sort of heavy weapons they are now providing.

The easiest way for the western powers to have turned Ukraine against Russia, if this was their priority, was clearly to offer EU membership to Ukraine – and yet much of Ukraine's recent political history concerns their failure and/or refusal to do so.

Since the claim that NATO plotted to use Ukraine as an attack dog against Russia disintegrates under examination of actual events, its supporters fall back on pointing to the imperialistic intentions of sections of the US ruling elite.

Some socialists are fond of citing John Mearsheimer, the "realist" political scientist, who traces those intentions, but pays little attention to what happened to those intentions in reality. (See **Note at the end** for detail on Mearsheimer.)

This focus on US elite intentions – with minimal reference to how they play out in real life, to the Russian state's actions or to the Ukrainian state and people who are actual parties to conflict – is as far from a Marxist approach to the war as you can get. It is the ultimate denial of Ukrainian people's agency, as Gilbert Achcar recently [argued](#).

There is another, much more compelling, critique of the western powers' approach to the former Soviet countries, by Mary Kaldor at the London School of Economics. Ten days before the war began, she [wrote](#):

To what extent can it be argued that NATO expansion contributed to Putin's paranoia? Undoubtedly, NATO expansion was a mistake. At the end of the Cold War, there were high hopes for demilitarisation of Europe. [...] Yet, NATO continued its existence and, indeed, expanded, partly in response to requests by newly democratised Central and

East European states, but also reflecting pressures from what used to be called the military-industrial complex. [...] Nevertheless, NATO expansion is a pretext for Putin. [...]

Where the West does bear some responsibility is in the economic policy it pursued after the end of the Cold War. [...] This was the high point of market fundamentalism. Neoliberal strategies of public expenditure cuts, trade liberalisation and privatisation did not produce the form of bourgeois capitalism that liberal democrats had hoped for. Rather, in most cases, and especially in Russia, it resulted in a criminalised kleptocratic autocracy.

It is this autocracy, Kaldor wrote [elsewhere](#), that was threatened by the “Ukrainian democratic experiment”

This argument is a starting-point for understanding the war’s causes. It raises the question of whether a crisis-free, neo-liberalism-free version of capitalism was possible in the 1990s. In my view, neoliberalism was a choice made by the western elites, but it was made in a context formed by powerful economic and social shocks over which they had little control.

The western powers failed to integrate Russian capitalism effectively. And they failed to act on climate change. Whether it could have been different is now a historical, rather than political, argument.

The globalisation, financialisation, and assaults on regulation and the social-democratic welfare states were not aberrations, but manifestations of the true nature of capitalism. The parasitic, rent-seeking practices of the new Russian ruling class were not an aberration, but were part of what capitalism was becoming in the 1990s.

This is the sense in which the Russian war on Ukraine is a product of world capitalism, in my view: not because Russia comprised an obstacle to NATO expansion, but because world capitalism was bound to produce a parasitic, rent-seeking regime in the post-Soviet space, and Putinism was the means by which the state evolved to manage that form of capitalism.

## **5. How do we understand the danger of a wider war, arising e.g. from the western powers’ involvement in the conflict?**

The dangers that the war in Ukraine will spread into a wider or longer-lasting conflict are inherent. The types of danger most often mentioned (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)) are:

- (a) That Putin’s nuclear brinkmanship will provoke a response, and some type of nuclear war will follow.
- (b) That the war will expand to include Russia on one side and NATO states on the other, using conventional weapons.
- (c) That the conflict will result in NATO expansion (the very thing Putin said he wanted to avoid) in eastern Europe, and substantial investment in armaments in preparation for future war/s.
- (d) That the supply of arms to Ukraine will result in a long-running attritional conflict, and/or to the strengthening of right-wing paramilitary forces in Ukraine, with serious consequences for its future, in particular for civil society and labour.

For (a), or even (b), to happen, there would have to be a substantial political shift in the ruling class in the US, Germany and other western states. In the short term this seems [unlikely](#), not least because the populations of these states have a long record of revulsion at their direct participation in military conflict.

Since the war began, the US has had a position of supplying weapons but not a no-fly zone. Germany has switched from a position of not supplying weapons, to supplying some weapons but not all or any. The UK government is opportunistically playing this situation to its own advantage, by offering more weapons more quickly.

But clearly there are limits, as the dispute over the supply of fighter aircraft between the US and Poland showed.

It's very easy, especially in the US, to find [evidence](#) of calls to expand the conflict. But as far as I can see, at present these come from academics, think tanks and fringe figures. Like all the dangers that lurk in the US ruling class, we need, in my view, to be aware of them but not overwhelmed by fear of them.

(c), the expansion of NATO and extensive arms spending in Europe, seems inevitable, as the discussion about the possible accession of Finland and Sweden shows. This, combined with and largely driven by Russian aggression, will indeed make Europe a more dangerous place.

(d), the militarisation of Ukrainian society, is the greatest danger, in my view. In fact, we have been living with this danger since 2014. The Russian intervention in the Donbass militarised what had previously been a civil conflict. Russian arms poured into the separatist-controlled areas. Volunteer formations on the Ukrainian side joined the conflict, including some with fascist participation.

Ukraine's unarmed fascists, no more or less significant than those in other east European countries, became armed, in large part thanks to Russian aggression. While their role has been [exaggerated](#) by relentless Kremlin propaganda, their access to arms has changed their role in civil society. They have made physical attacks on the left, on Roma people and other minorities.

But this danger has not overwhelmed Ukrainian civil society. Since 2014, bourgeois democracy – including the rights to free speech, to protest, and to organise in the workplace – has functioned, of course with constant assaults on it from the state and from capital. Civil society has functioned, imperfectly, except in the Donetsk and Luhansk “people's republics”, where the lawless, Russian-supported authorities have almost completely stamped it out.

The most immediately relevant example of the damage done to society by the militarisation of conflict is Syria. The intervention by Russia, and to a lesser extent other outside military forces, combined with the supply of large quantities of weapons to armed forces representing a variety of interests (the Syrian Free Army, at least two Islamist formations, and Kurdish nationalists, as well as the regime's own armed forces). Civil society was mostly overwhelmed and silenced.

There are other examples of long-lasting damage to society from war, but also examples of war giving way to a development of civic society, and of course instances of war giving rise to social struggles for change. Factors such as poverty, and the prior economic and social structure, count.

The danger of a long-running attritional conflict, and/or the strengthening of right-wing paramilitary forces in Ukraine, in my view, is potential, and not inevitable. That is a crucial difference.

## **6. What to do?**

War is a disaster for society, a disaster for socialism. Can anything good come out of it at all? I don't have an answer to that. I made some comments about things we in labour and social movements outside Ukraine might do, in an earlier article, [here \(numbered list at the end\)](#). I hope that we can learn to build new forms of solidarity – direct, practical solidarity to communities – and I've highlighted such efforts on this blog, e.g. [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Now I offer some comments about a political issue that has come up, about our attitude to weapons supply to Ukraine. There's a caveat, though.

#### *A caveat*

When I say “political”, I am talking about action by labour and social movements. I have long believed that the obsession with setting out “political positions”, in terms of what a social-democratic or socialist party might do if it took office in the capitalist state – or, at another layer of unreality, how a “workers' state” might act in a given situation – reflects the deterioration of Marxism as an effective guide to action.

We all know that social-democratic parties that take office in the capitalist state (for example, recently in Greece) usually face a series of impossible dilemmas, and that their ability to deal with them depends on the strength of the movement as a whole. We also know that the movement can achieve a great deal (i) outside of attaining office in the capitalist state, and (ii) by retaining a perspective of superceding that state in some way, in the course of superceding capital. We should bear these things in mind when thinking about policy issues.

#### *Weapons supply*

The issue of weapons supply to Ukraine will be settled almost entirely by the western powers, according to their own interests. Germany's hesitation about supplying heavy weapons, and the US's reluctance to facilitate the supply of fighter aircraft, show how sensitive the issue is and gives us a glimpse of the divisions among political elites.

What should the movement do? One European solidarity network in which friends of mine are active, the Permanent Assembly Against the War, [argues](#) that while opposition to weapons supplies is “consistent with a radical refusal of war”, resistance in Ukraine “can not but be armed resistance”. It asks whether a discussion on supporting weapons supplies, or not, can help us to answer what grassroots movements, feminist collectives, unions or migrant collectives can do – and concludes that it can not. Instead, it points to a range of initiatives – the international workers' convoy organised by trade unions; sabotage in Belarus; the feminist antiwar movement in Russia; migrants and antiracist movements organising to support refugees from Ukraine and elsewhere; moves by dock workers to block shipments to Russia – and urges building links between them.

I welcome those initiatives, and see them as foundations for a solidarity movement. But I don't think we can avoid the issue of weapons supply. Notwithstanding the fact that the big decisions are in governments' hands, workers can interfere with it – and have.

Greek rail workers, and (reportedly) Italian airport workers, have tried to obstruct the delivery of arms to Ukraine. Such actions have been welcomed by the pro-Kremlin lobby in the workers' movement, and by those claiming neutrality. A [statement](#) by Greek trade unions, and numerous groups (including [so-called “Marxists”](#)), emphasise, disingenuously, that these are “NATO weapons”. Nothing is said about the non-NATO country, facing a monstrous one-sided imperialist assault, to which the weapons were bound.

If I lived in Greece, I would try to convince those rail workers to change their decision. Whatever

their intentions, blocking these arms at this point would have an effect similar to blocking arms supplied by the Allied imperialists to the Greek resistance in the 1940s.

[One response](#) to my earlier comments started with the unproven preconception that all possible outcomes of weapons supply are more disastrous than the alternatives – and so “whoever supports the continuation of the war through weapons supply will have to explain why it is worth risking further deaths and atrocities”. I could respond – but I won’t – that whoever opposes weapons supply should, at least, try to show that, by leaving Ukrainians to fight Russian tanks with their bare hands, the number of deaths and atrocities will be reduced.

We can not know what the outcome of weapons supply will be: it depends on too many military, social and other factors. These issues are horribly complex, and taking wild, dogma-driven swipes at them is a disservice to Ukrainian friends and comrades.

I would rather start with some concrete questions: (i) Are Greek railway workers, or anyone else, helping Ukrainian working people – or the cause of peace and social change more generally – by blocking arms deliveries to the Ukrainian state? (ii) Is blocking arms supplies, in the full knowledge that Ukrainian working-class opinion (verifiable from a mass of sources) fervently hopes that they will be delivered, such a wonderful act of working-class solidarity?

I would answer both those questions with “no”.

I would not derive this conclusion automatically from a mechanical understanding of “national self-determination”. The way that principle works depends on the circumstances. I have presented a view of the current circumstances: Ukraine’s resistance to Russia as both a national and a social struggle; Russia’s imperialist war, and the shift of its regime towards fascism; and the fact that Ukraine can not be dismissively categorised as a NATO proxy. The completely unequal character of the war is self-evident in the large-scale massacres of civilians.

These are reasons for the labour movement to question the Greek rail workers’ actions, and to support the delivery of weapons.

That is not the be-all and end-all of solidarity, but it is an issue we can not avoid.

## Note

It has become common in “left” discussions on Ukraine to refer to [John Mearsheimer](#), the US political scientist. That Mearsheimer works in the scholarly field of international relations – which deals with relations between states, and by its nature tends to downplay the economic and class dynamics that are central to Marxism – should give people pause when citing him. But it doesn’t.

Closely examined, Mearsheimer’s assertions about US-Ukraine relations are not only almost bereft of consideration of those economic and class dynamics, but also exaggerated for effect (because he is arguing his case within US elite circles) and/or downright wrong.

Mearsheimer’s argument, as [summarised](#) in *The Economist* (19 March) is that “the West, and especially America, is principally responsible for the [Ukraine] crisis”. (By “America” he means the US, itself a telling designation.) In a brief passage to substantiate this, he writes:

□ “The trouble over Ukraine actually started at NATO’s Bucharest summit in April 2008”, when the Bush administration pushed to announce that Ukraine and Georgia would become NATO members. *One-sided and exaggerated*. Mearsheimer speculates about what was said at the summit behind closed doors, but writes nothing about the actual war that followed in Georgia. Buoyed by US

promises and provoked by Russian support for South Ossetian and Abkhazian separatism, the Georgian government attacked Russia – only to find that the US support it expected was lacking. This re-confirmed that the US policy in practice was to define Russia's sphere of influence, not to encroach on it.

□ The US strategy “to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border” included two other elements, “bringing Ukraine closer to the EU” and “making it a pro-American democracy”. *Wrong*. Actually, the EU's focus was on trying to promote European business interests in Ukraine, while denying it EU membership (as it did to Turkey). Critics of Brussels policy think that, by driving an impossibly hard bargain with the Yanukovych government in negotiations on Ukraine's EU Association Agreement, the European Commission forced Yanukovych back into Moscow's orbit and helped provoke the 2014 Maidan events.

□ Mearsheimer mentions in passing “an uprising (which was supported by America)” in 2014. *One-sided*. Naturally, from him, no mention of the Ukrainian population as a possible factor in deciding its own fate.

□ From 2017, the Trump administration “decided to sell Kyiv ‘defensive weapons’, [but] what counts as ‘defensive’ is hardly clear-cut [...] and these weapons certainly looked offensive to Moscow and its allies in the Donbas region”. *Seriously wrong*. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute register of US weapons delivered to Ukraine in 2016-21 (accessible via the [Forum on the Arms Trade site](#)) mentions anti-tank missiles, patrol craft, radar systems and four-wheel-drive armoured vehicles. France sent four second-hand helicopters and border patrol craft; and Czechia and Poland – self-propelled guns and infantry fighting vehicles. No long-range or heavy weapons. The nearest imports to offensive arms were drones supplied by Turkey.

□ In 2021, “Ukraine and America co-hosted a major naval exercise in the Black Sea region involving navies from 32 countries”. *Deliberately confusing*. Mearsheimer portrayed this as a mounting threat to Russia; in fact [the exercise](#) has been conducted [annually](#) since 1996.

□ The US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership, signed in November 2021, was a key element in the “evolving situation” that Moscow found “intolerable”. *One-sided and exaggerated; mixing up cause and effect*. The wording in [the charter](#), an update of earlier documents, was indeed focused on “security” – but this came after Russia's troop build-up on the Ukrainian border and the failure of the Minsk talks process. It's clear in retrospect that the Russian government was already contemplating more extensive military action against Ukraine by this time.

In my short time as a university teacher, I was always lenient with students' essays. But six substantial errors in four paragraphs would have tested even my patience. It's clear why Mearsheimer makes these mistakes. He sees the world in US-centric terms, focused on great power relations. It's less clear why socialists cite him as gospel.

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**Simon Pirani**

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**P.S.**



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