

The Japanese Left Responds to the Russo-Ukrainian War

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In May last year 28 German intellectuals published an [open letter in the feminist journal Emma](#) calling on Chancellor Gerhard Scholz to refrain from sending heavy weapons to Ukraine, and to help negotiate a ceasefire in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The letter expressed anti-war convictions dear to older German progressives, invoking Germany's "historic responsibility" to help end the war in light of its own 20th century legacy of militarism and genocide. The letter provoked [heated debate](#) over its apparent "bothsidesist" assumption that Ukrainians and Russians shared responsibility to end the war. Meanwhile, younger German progressives such as Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock continued to [support heavy weapons deliveries to Ukraine](#).

A similar but much less-known debate has also unfolded among progressives in Japan, where the Russo-Ukrainian War is being anxiously watched. I will examine here three divergent publicized responses by the Japanese left to this war: by a group of "Concerned Japanese historians", by the Japanese Communist Party, and by the Trotskyite "60th International Antiwar Assembly". I also consider what moral authority such responses have for a Japanese public shaken by the war.

The Concerned Japanese Historians' Peace Initiative

The Russo-Ukrainian War has provoked deeper concern in Japan than in many other industrialized nations, reflecting fears over the fate of a rules-governed global order that most Japanese believe their country owes its post-1945 prosperity and peace to. An [Open Society Foundation Yougov survey](#) conducted in July-August 2022 showed just under 50% of Japanese respondents rating the Ukraine War as one of "the three most important challenges facing the world today", ahead of the other 21 nationalities surveyed. It also found that about 63% of Japanese respondents agreed that the war would be resolved if Russia withdrew "from all parts of Ukrainian territory it currently controls", ranking Japan just behind the United States and ahead of France in the polling. For many outside Japan, Japanese reactions were personified in a video of Asahi Television news anchor Matsuo Yumiko [struggling to maintain her composure](#) after reading news that President Putin had publicly honored a Russian army unit implicated in war crimes in Bucha.

In this anxious public atmosphere, some Japanese scholars calling themselves the "Group of Concerned Japanese Historians" issued a ceasefire proposal for the war. The group's spokespeople include prominent scholars such as Wada Haruki, a historian of modern Korea and Russia, Haba Kumiko, an international relations scholar specializing in European studies, and Isezaki Kenji, an expert in peace and conflict studies.

The group's [first public statement](#) in March, published in the left-leaning newspaper *Choshu News*, called for an immediate cessation of fighting "at current locations". The group recommended ceasefire talks be mediated by Japan, China and India - whose relations with Russia, in its view, suited them to be neutral arbitrators. No mention was made about how the relations of these

countries with Ukraine might also have fitted them for this arbitrator role. At [a press conference](#) held at Tokyo's Foreign Correspondents Press Club of Japan in August, Wada Haruki explained that in March he and his peers visited the Japanese Foreign Ministry and the Russian embassy in Tokyo to discuss their proposal. There was apparently no similar visit to Ukraine's embassy.

In May the group followed up this declaration with an [open letter](#) titled "A Japanese Initiative for Peace in the Russia-Ukraine War", signed by 69 scholars and intellectuals, mostly from Japan and South Korea. This letter also called upon "neutral large countries such as the Republic of South Africa, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the ASEAN countries" to intervene with demands for an immediate ceasefire, and to act as arbitrators in negotiations to end the war.

The letter criticised the war's conduct, claiming that initial progress towards ceasefire talks in March stalled with the discovery of "bodies of citizens" in Bucha. These discoveries, it states, had fueled accusations of war crimes against Russia, incited a "redoubled war effort" by a Ukrainian army now "seething with rage", and encouraged increased supply of large weaponry to Ukraine by "Member states in the Ukrainian support group", especially the United States. Like the German intellectuals' Emma letter, the Concerned Historians' letter contends that the supply of heavy weapons by "Member states in the Ukrainian support group" risks expanding the war beyond Ukraine, threatening a potential escalation to a nuclear conflict, while sanctions against Russia "could bring on famine on a global scale".

There was little public response to the letter. The responses that did come from other Japanese intellectuals and journalists were largely negative. Some denounced the group for [denying Russian war crimes](#), while [others](#) criticized it for being too close to Russia's side. A number of younger scholars accused the letter writers of a questionable bothsidesism that effectively denied the agency of the Ukrainians to resist Russian aggression. Historian Iwashita Akihiro has underlined a key background factor for understanding the letter's biases: [an anti-war sensibility](#) based on Japan's unique war experience. This sensibility, I would add, is similar in tone and inspiration to the anti-war sensibility of the German *Emma* letter.

The Concerned Japanese Historians Group subscribe to a "[peace nationalism](#)" arising from Japan's World War Two experience as both a perpetrator of military aggression, and as the world's only victim of atomic bomb attacks – a nationalism which cherishes the anti-war renouncing 9th article of [Japan's Constitution](#) [1]. From this experience Japanese progressives sometimes claim for Japan a unique responsibility to promote global peace. For some of them (but not all), the military violence of aggressor states, and of those states defending themselves against aggression are to be viewed as – in their own ways – equally deplorable for their destructiveness, especially if they risk any escalation to nuclear conflict. This perspective was articulated by Haba Kumiko at the August FCCJ press conference. Identifying herself as the daughter of a Hiroshima atomic bombing survivor, Haba said that "To continue the war until it is won is to repeat the slaughter of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Okinawa".

At the press conference Isezaki Kenji stated that he and his colleagues agreed on the illegality of Russia's invasion, and that they advocated for impartial international inquiry into war crimes and abuses in the war. However, further remarks by Haba Kumiko suggested that other group members had more ambivalent opinions about where responsibility for the war lay. These latter remarks spoke to a long-standing hostility among many Japanese progressives to the United States, based on perceptions that the Japan-United States alliance subordinates the former to the latter's geopolitical and militaristic interests. Haba sketched an essentialist, ethno-national division between what she described as a United States-supported "Western Ukraine" and a Russian-supported, Russian speaking "Eastern Ukraine". In doing so she ignored [political science research](#) on the weak, shrinking correlation between Russian first language self-identification and ethnic/cultural Russian

self-identification among Ukrainians.

Haba accused the West of aiding “Western Ukrainian forces” to eliminate “Russians in ‘Eastern Ukraine’”, and the US of “striking missiles into ‘Russia’s soft underbelly and throat’”; she alleged Russia invaded Ukraine to “stop the threat of the latest weapons of war” sent by Americans and other allies to Ukraine. Haba envisaged the Concerned Historians’ project as part of a campaign to counter United States-led militarization in East Asia. Following their flawed reasoning, we can comprehend why she and colleagues [like Wada](#) would regard a “militarized” Ukraine as a proxy for the United States’ [ambitions against Russia](#). The proximity of Haba’s arguments to [Russian imperialist ideologies](#) asserting the “Russianness” of Eastern Ukrainians is much less comprehensible.

The Japanese Communist Party: Peace Diplomacy against Russian Hegemonism

In May of last year I stopped near my local train station in a downtown district of South-west Japan’s Fukuoka city to listen to a Japanese Communist Party (JCP) electoral speech, delivered to a small gathering of spectators. A local JCP representative in the National Diet, Nihi Sohei, was setting out the Japanese Communist Party’s position on the Ukraine War, and it sharply diverged from the Concerned Historians’ position. He unequivocally denounced the invasion, assailed President Putin for “trampling on international law” and demanded Russia’s withdrawal.

Nihi stated that in light of Japan’s World War Two experience, the JCP had a “special responsibility” to oppose war, and protect the 9th article of Japan’s Constitution from revision. Yet the JCP’s interpretation of that special historical responsibility also differs from the Concerned Japanese Historians’ position. The difference derives from the JCP’s development as an independent, democratic Communist party, and its principled opposition to American, Chinese and Russian “Great Power chauvinism”.

Unlike most socialist organizations in other liberal democracies, the Japanese Communist Party remains an electorally viable political party. It elected [11 representatives](#) in the Japan Diet’s upper House of Councilors election in July, claiming 6.8% of the national vote. One reason for the continued electoral viability of this century-old party lies in its full assimilation of constitutional democratic norms in the 1960’s. A [decades-long split](#) with both the Soviet Union and China beginning in the 1960’s opened ideological space for a final, explicit rejection of Marxist-Leninist authoritarianism. [JCP theorists](#) reinterpreted Marx’s analyses of [late stage capitalism](#) to argue that the transition to socialism can be attained [peacefully](#) and democratically in representative democratic states.

In foreign policy the JCP upholds United Nations authority and is an advocate for national self-determination against Great Power chauvinism and hegemonism. On February 24th, in a statement that echoed its 2003 condemnation of the United States’ [war against Iraq](#), the [JCP leadership](#) denounced Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as “an act of aggression...in violation of the United Nations Charter and international law”. For such “anti-Russian campaigning” the JCP’s chairman Shii Kazuo was soon placed on a [Russian Federation list](#) of 63 Japanese citizens declared *persona non grata* in Russia.

On April 29th the JCP published a statement titled [Russia’s Aggression against Ukraine and the Japanese Communist Party’s Position](#), a delicate exercise in [reflective equilibrium](#) between its constitutional anti-militarism, national self-determination and international law principles, and its judgements on the Russo-Ukrainian War. It “condemned the Putin administration for violating international law in three ways”: for committing an act of aggression and war crimes against Ukrainian civilians, and for threatening to use nuclear weapons. The JCP advocates [peace](#)

[diplomacy](#), based on its vision for a world “free of military alliances” and militarization, calling on governments and civil society to impose sanctions against Russia and surround it “with voices of protest”, especially through the United Nations General Assembly.

In line with its opposition to military alliances the JCP has criticized the “eastward expansion of NATO”, but it rejects arguments that NATO expansion gave any legitimate cause for Russian aggression. Moreover, it repudiates “bothsidesist” perspectives on the war that ignore differences “between the aggressor and victim”.

In line with its interpretation of the Japanese Constitution’s 9th article, the JCP argues that Japan can only send non-military, humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and in April it raised about [1.5 million US dollars](#) in aid for this goal. Shii Kazuo has invoked the 51st article of the United Nations Charter to assert that Ukraine’s military resistance against Russian aggression is a “[legitimate and legal struggle](#)” and that Japan itself could similarly resist such military aggression under its own constitution. However, the [JCP’s program](#) does also envisage the ultimate dissolution of Japan’s Self-Defence Force (SDF) [2], “based on national consensus”.

The JCP finally [draws inspiration](#) for its Russo-Ukrainian War stance from Marx and Engels’ condemnation of [Czarist Russian hegemonism](#), which they accused of stymying the self-determination of Eastern European peoples.

For the JCP’s critics, this argumentative maneuvering between seemingly divergent principles, including its anti-military principle, is [too clever by half](#). A charitable interpretation suggests that the JCP envisages a dual track to ending the war. The Ukrainians wage their national struggle against Russian aggression, taking military aid from supporting states –except Japan. On a separate track, the JCP urges non-combatant nations to use diplomatic pressure, protests and sanctions to help end the war. The ultimate aims of the latter strategy are also 1) to reform the United Nations and strengthen the authority of the General Assembly, and 2) to abolish all war and the military alliances and national militarizations that increase its likelihood.

The 60th International Antiwar Assembly: Japanese Trotskyites denounce the Petty-czar Putin

One of the most vehement Japanese criticisms of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has come from the 60th International Antiwar Assembly. Its organizers belong to two affiliated organizations with origins in Japan’s 1950’s-70’s era of radical left-wing movements: the Japan Revolutionary Communist League (Revolutionary Marxist Faction/*Kakumaru-ha*) and Federation of Students’ Self-Governing Associations [*Zengakuren*]. Their ancestors are the student and worker-based left-wing factions which acrimoniously split from the JCP in the late 1950’s, at a time when it was rejecting militant activism and aligning itself with the Soviet Union. Some factions turned to Leon Trotsky’s thought for inspiration, and wrested control of part of the student-led *Zengakuren* from the JCP. Though capable of helping organize mass student and citizen campaigns like the ANPO protests against the United States-Japan security treaty in 1959-60, radical left activists soon fell into [volent factional quarrels](#) over ideology and strategy. During the 1970’s-1980’s, *Kakumaru-ha* and its Trotskyite rival *Chukaku-ha* waged a [bloody sectarian conflict](#) against each other.

The present day, relatively peaceable *Kakumaru-ha* and its affiliated *Zengakuren* faction are now much reduced in numbers, resources, and influence. Nevertheless, their 60th International Antiwar Assembly’s “[Working people all over the world, unite to crush Putin’s war!](#)” appeal and anti-war demonstrations attracted solidarity statements from left-wing organizations abroad, including [the editorial board](#) of *Commons* journal. Their appeal therefore warrants attention.

The appeal is a fiery denunciation of Russia's "brutal war of aggression", brimming with fury at both Soviet and present-day Russian genocidal crimes against Ukrainians. Written in anticipation of a possible future global clash between "Neo-Stalinist" China and its ally Russia with the imperialist United States and its allies, the appeal calls on working people of the world to "create a storm of antiwar struggles world-wide". It also invokes Japan's war experience as "the country that suffered atomic bombing" to assert a "revolutionary left" role in mobilizing opposition to any escalation to nuclear war.

The appeal is, however, *not* pacifist. It observes that Lenin "regards it as a 'just war' when the invaded nation wages a war of counterattack against the war of aggression by a 'great power'". The appeal exhorts Ukraine's "national forces, territorial defence forces, residents and volunteers with the working class as its core" to beat back the invasion. Meanwhile the JCP, anachronistically described as "neo-Stalinist", is accused of ineffectual "chattering about a 'solution through talks in the United Nations'". In correspondence with me Kakumaru-ha representatives also criticized the Concerned Japanese Historians Group. They stated that the Group's call for both Ukrainian and Russian forces to "cease fighting at current locations" was "effectively nothing other than a demand for acceptance and securing of Russian military occupation of Ukrainian territory".

Yet Kakumaru-ha and Zengakuren also have to reconcile seemingly divergent principles in their affirmation of Ukrainians' right of armed national resistance against Russian aggression. When I asked Kakumaru-ha representatives about the issue of American and NATO supply of heavy weapons to Ukraine, they quoted to me the following Ukrainian socialist ["Youth 4 Ukrainian Resistance"](#) statement: "it is a matter of life and death that the Ukrainian people get the weapons they need" - including heavy weapons from other countries. However, at the same time their appeal accuses the JCP of falling into line with Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) coalition government by advocating a "practical use of Self-Defence Forces" - which the appeal dismisses as a "use of imperialist military forces". This criticism stems from Kakumaru-ha and Zengakuren's perception of the SDF as a creature of Japan's subordinate alliance with the United States. But supposing Japan was attacked by a foreign power, wouldn't the SDF function as "national forces" legitimately resisting such aggression, much as Ukraine's national forces are doing? And what level of external allied support, funding and military capabilities does the SDF require to be able to beat such aggression back?

A Crisis of Moral Authority for Japan's Left?

The Ukraine War has induced anxiety among Japan's left intelligentsia over their dwindling influence. Some fear that a Japanese public horrified by the carnage of the Russo-Ukrainian War will now be more receptive to increased defence spending, and to constitutional revisions long campaigned for by Japan's conservative LDP-led government. For the Japanese left, that raises the spectre of a re-militarized, expansionist Japan. Japan's center-left opposition parties are also in disarray, while the ruling LDP coalition enjoys seemingly insurmountable political advantages, buoyed by decades of near-complete incumbency, and by a *de-facto* [gerrymandered electoral map](#) favoring more conservative rural constituencies.

For its part the Japanese Communist Party is grappling with [a steadily declining share of the national vote](#), and with the reputational burden of being a "communist" party, which the LDP has exploited by [falsely accusing it](#) of upholding an anti-democratic ideology. In such conditions, the JCP struggles to communicate to the Japanese public its progressive messaging on democracy and human rights, and on crises such as the Russo-Ukrainian War. As a politically marginal organization with a violent past, Kakumaru-ha faces far greater domestic obstacles to communicating its messaging on the war. The murderous sectarian violence and terrorism of militant left and ["red army"](#) factions during the late 20th century has lastingly discredited radical left politics in Japan's

public sphere.

Just as concerning for the left is the generational divide between aging intellectuals whose early childhood memories are marked by the war or by post-war hardships, and younger people who have no such memories. Commenting on the lack of public uptake for the Concerned Japanese Historians' peace initiative, Wada Haruki noted [the perception gap](#) between the anti-war sentiments of his generation, and young people who are more receptive to the idea of Ukraine being supported to defeat Russia.

Nevertheless, what appears to be emerging from Japanese public reactions to the Ukraine War is a measured, cautious debate about Japan's geopolitical security, and a reassessment of dogmatic pacifism in a new era of Great Power aggression. [Long-term polling](#) has shown a slow increase in public support for revision of the Japanese constitution's 9th article. But one poll [taken after the Ukraine War started](#) revealed little change on previous results, with 50% of respondents supporting constitutional change, and 48% opposing. The LDP-led government, conscious of divided public opinion and factional differences within its coalition, appears [in no rush](#) to push for constitutional change. However, it is attempting to [increase Japan's Defence budget](#) in response to deteriorating regional and global security – an increase opposed by most Japanese progressives.

In parts of Japan's left, including the JCP, Kakumaru-ha and Zengakuren, recognition of the legitimacy of Ukraine's armed resistance is reflective of doctrinal flexibility on the question of just war. These organizations have taken a keen interest in Ukraine's plight, and have reached out to [express solidarity](#) with Ukrainian left organizations. The Group of Concerned Japanese Historians and many Anglophone left-wing organizations have attempted little solidarity outreach; perhaps not coincidentally they remain mired in narrow, dogmatic anti-American pacifism, or in ["the anti-imperialism of idiots"](#).

We might conclude, tentatively, that ["minority-to-minority"](#) international solidarity building between dissenting left organizations yields potential for the undoing of insular, self-discrediting dogmas and sectarianisms, and for the construction of new coalitions to boost their political and moral legitimacy. It also yields potential for renewed global left arguments for just war resistance against imperialism, and for a socially just peace to follow victory.

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<https://commons.com.ua/en/yaponski-livi-reaguyut-na-rosijsko-ukrayinsku-vijnu/>

Footnotes

[1] Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution reads as follows: “Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

[2] Though Japan’s Constitution appears to forbid it from exercising any military power, it has possessed a self-defence force since 1954. By convention the SDF is permitted only to be used in a defensive rather than offensive or expeditionary capacity, but SDF troops have been sent abroad for limited peace-keeping duties in recent decades. According to some estimates, the SDF ranks 5th in the world for its firepower capabilities.