

Ukraine's Resistance Still Needs Our Solidarity

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Sometimes, calling for peace at all costs means siding with the oppressor.

It's been a year since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. What Vladimir Putin hoped would be a three-day conquest has turned into a prolonged stalemate. As fighting rages on, so too do debates about the role of western governments in the conflict and what position the international left should take.

My own views on the war are informed by conversations with Ukrainian socialists and trade unionists – both those seeking safety in the UK and those who are organising back home. When I speak to activists in leftist parties across eastern and northern Europe – whether that's Sotsialniy Rukh in Ukraine, Razem in Poland or the Left Alliance in Finland – they have no doubt as to whether Russia's action can be described as imperialism.

The history of Russian aggression in Europe goes back centuries. It's a past Putin keenly references in speeches, comparing himself to imperial conquerors and declaring his admiration for Catherine the Great, remembered for the partition of Poland and the first annexation of Crimea. In Ukraine, the memory of the Holodomor is still alive, as are its oldest survivors. The man-made famine, a genocide engineered by Joseph Stalin to crush resistance in Ukraine, killed around five million people.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin remained uncomfortable with Ukraine's desire for emancipation. As a response to the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, when mass protests ousted pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, Russia annexed Crimea. In his rhetoric, Putin has regularly questioned Ukraine's right to exist and referred to Ukrainians as one with the Russian people. It's clear that this war isn't only about acres of land, but the subjugation of Ukraine as part of Moscow's "sphere of influence".

[As John McDonnell writes](#), the left has a long record of opposing violent occupations. We marched against the US invasion of Iraq. We rightly condemn the Israeli occupation of Palestine. And now, we must stand with the Ukrainian people against Russian aggression.

As socialists, we abhor war, oppose militarism, and are rightfully suspicious of western involvement in foreign conflicts. Yet few of us would take an absolute pacifist stance: arguing, for example, that socialists shouldn't have supported the republicans in the Spanish civil war, or be backing the Kurds against Isis. In certain situations, to call for peace at all costs is to side with the oppressor.

Support for Ukraine isn't about our views on Nato and its role in the world. To talk about this war as a conflict between two global powers is to erase the 44 million people who are directly affected by it, and who will have to live with its outcome. Among them are trade unionists, who have often been at the forefront of both humanitarian aid and armed resistance. The Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine has [issued an appeal](#) for international support, as have [miners' unions](#) that have

been collecting funds for their members volunteering on the frontline.

It would be naive to think that governments in Europe and the US have united behind Ukraine out of pure moral conviction, without an element of geopolitical self-interest. But opposition to western hegemony is no reason to fall into another form of western-centrism and ignore a nation fighting for self-determination.

To support arming Ukraine isn't to oppose the idea of peace talks. The question is what position Ukraine would enter them from. It's right to avoid escalation into a direct conflict between Moscow and Nato. However, arming the resistance is a way to allow Ukraine to negotiate from a position of strength, not surrender.

Ultimately, what peace means is up to the Ukrainian people to decide. In October, [polling showed](#) that 70% of Ukrainians are in favour of continuing armed resistance until victory, which 91% interpreted as recapturing all occupied territory, including Crimea. What most Ukrainians deem as acceptable may or may not shift as the war goes on; either way, any possible deal isn't for us to dictate. And if Ukraine was forced to give up land, there would be little stopping Putin from coming back for more.

When I speak to Ukrainian socialists, they often emphasise that international solidarity can't end when Russian troops are pushed out. The war has already caused untold devastation to Ukraine's economy and infrastructure. Its GDP contracted by a third last year, inflation stands at around 26%, and one in four workers are unemployed. Hundreds of thousands lost their homes, and damages are estimated at \$138bn and counting.

Like the international community came together to support Ukraine's war effort, it needs to join forces to help it rebuild.

The first step would be to cancel its sovereign debt. Following campaigns by the international left, Ukraine's creditors have agreed to suspend its debt repayments for two years. While this concession is certainly helping Ukraine fight the war, it doesn't avert the risk of a crushing debt crisis later down the line. To enable the country to recover, its foreign debt has to be written off entirely. Economic support in the immediate aftermath of the war must also come in the form of grants, not loans – and certainly not ones with conditions of neoliberal reforms attached.

While western governments discuss a Marshall plan for Ukraine, organisations like Sotsialniy Rukh have raised the question of what the reconstruction process will look like. Who will decide how the billions poured into Ukraine get spent: a handful of oligarchs, foreign corporations that are already eyeing enormous profits, or the Ukrainian people themselves? Echoing Ukrainian socialists, we must call for a just, green and democratic reconstruction, with involvement from trade unions and civil society.

There has been a lot of debate around Volodymyr Zelensky's recent legislation attacking workers' rights and collective bargaining. Such decisions by the Ukrainian government are no reason to stop supporting its self-defence: Britain's own strict anti-union laws would be no justification for us to surrender to invasion and occupation by Putin, and legal strikes are all but impossible in Russia. We must, however, support Ukrainian trade unions when they fight to ensure that the laws are repealed. The invasion can't be used as a shock doctrine opportunity to discipline the working class.

When the fighting is over, the battle for the future of Ukraine will continue. The Ukrainian left and trade unions need consistent allies: both in their anti-imperial struggle and in class struggle. As the war enters its second year, let's recommit to offering that solidarity.

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