

The Left, Ukraine and Russia

Friday 3 March 2023, by [BLANMAILLAND France](#), [TANURO Daniel](#), [VOGEL Jean](#), [VOGEL Laurent](#) (Date first published: 2 March 2023).

What the war has revealed about the nature of Ukrainian and Russian societies

Looking back on the year that has passed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we would like to take a break from the military and/or geopolitical considerations, the usual analyses devoted to this war, and focus on what it has revealed about the nature of the societies involved.

Over the past year, we have been involved, through the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine, in numerous solidarity or information actions which have enabled us to get to know Ukrainian realities better. The numerous contacts that we gained have confirmed the existence of a plural and diverse civil society. All of its branches, in all their diversity, are fully enrolled in the resistance to Russian aggression, a resistance that they conceive not as a strictly national cause but as a fight of society itself for the preservation of its way of life, its values, etc. A year ago, if Putin's Blitzkrieg failed, it was above all due to the resistance of the population, the countless initiatives by ordinary citizens to repel the invader. The state in Ukraine is weak, inefficient and deeply infected with corruption, as Zelensky's recent sweeps also illustrate. Without the miracles performed by networks of popular self-organization of all kinds, the very survival of the country would have been more than improbable.

Ukrainian society is pluralistic and the "Maidan Revolution" in 2014 gave rise to a quite remarkable flourishing of cultural and artistic production, particularly in the field of cinema. The Russian invasion, however, created a paradoxical situation. The first victims of the abuses of the occupiers are Russian-speaking Ukrainians and the resistance in the occupied zones in the East and South is mainly due to them. But as a result of the aggression, nationalist feelings have developed which reject all that is Russian, sometimes attacking Russian culture and language as a whole in an indiscriminate and irrational way. It is likely that only a common victory over the aggressors will establish a more balanced situation.

Russian society, on the other hand, is characterized above all by two things: fear and enfeeblement. Putin's regime has moved from illiberal authoritarianism to open dictatorship, and repression continues unabated. While his war arouses little more than a contrived enthusiasm, public demonstrations of opposition require great courage and remain sporadic. A majority of Russians prefer to look elsewhere and avoid talking about the war.

André Markowicz, a poet and writer who is the most eminent and passionate renovator of the French translation of great Russian literature has published a brief essay "Et si l'Ukraine librait la Russie?" [What if Ukraine were to liberate Russia?]. This goes to the heart of the matter. Ukraine is fighting first for its freedom, but it is also necessary that "Ukraine win the war so that the Putin regime collapses and there is in the ruins of this regime a democratic possibility." As indeed shown by the precedents of the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the Great War (1914-1917) and the Afghan War (1979-1989). There is a recurring history in Russia of military defeats becoming the opening for revolutions or reforming upheavals. The beautiful motto of the

Polish insurgents of 1830, “For your freedom and for ours,” remains current.

Putin’s regime is national-conservative and neo-imperialist, with special reference to the legacy of Nicholas I, the most reactionary of all 19th century czars. His alleged populism boils down to the accents used to castigate liberal opponents or disgraced public servants. But in his international policy as in the exercise of Russian soft power, Putin combines with gusto the simultaneous support and use of the most diverse currents and personalities, from the extreme right to the extreme left, to weaken other powers and disseminate his propaganda.

This is one of the reasons [1] behind the major split that the war in Ukraine has created in the ranks of the left, especially the radical left. While anti-fascism and anti-colonialism are supposed to be part of its DNA, we have seen a part of it, the importance of which varies depending on the country, take up all or part of Putin’s arguments, most often in the name of extremely sketchy geopolitical considerations (Russia is said to be surrounded!!). Seasoned militants or intellectuals who have spent their lives promoting “armed struggles for national liberation” in the four corners of the globe, now refuse, in the name of a “peace” imperative, to distinguish between the aggressor and the attacked and to support the latter.

Our action, in contrast, foregrounds the right of peoples to self-determination and therefore respect for the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine. But we also want to help strengthen the entire democratic and emancipatory potential that we see expressed in multiple forms within Ukrainian social life. This support we bring above all to the resistance pitted against the imperial will to annihilate it, but we address it as well to the progressive social forces which in Ukraine itself seek, for example, to thwart the ultra-liberal socio-economic policies of the government or the seizure of precious natural resources by certain highly-favoured oligarchs.

[The authors close with a call to readers to participate in a demonstration convened by groups promoting solidarity with Ukraine’s resistance, which was to be held in Brussels February 25.]

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P.S.

Life on the Left

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2023/03/the-left-ukraine-and-russia.html>

Footnotes

[1] The other reason being the obsession with “American imperialism” alone, as a result of which

any bloodthirsty dictator becomes a champion of the people the moment he finds himself in conflict with the United States government.