

Should Leftists Support Sending Weapons To Ukraine?

Monday 10 April 2023, by [BILOUS Taras](#), [LASCARIS Dimitri](#), [MASTRACCI Davide](#) (Date first published: 3 April 2023).

Writers Taras Bilous and Dimitri Lascaris discuss whether leftists should support arms transfers to Ukraine.

Just over a year ago, Russia invaded Ukraine, in what it referred to as a “special military operation.” The invasion followed a tumultuous decade that included the 2014 toppling of (some would say coup against) Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, the Maidan protests, the Russian seizure of Crimea and eight years of military conflict in the Donbas. The invasion immediately sparked heated debate among the left in Western countries on a number of grounds.

Part of the debate centred on who was to blame for the collapse of the Minsk agreements and the invasion, with some leftists pointing the finger at NATO and the West and others arguing that Russian President Vladimir Putin was solely or overwhelmingly responsible. An additional aspect of the debate revolved on how to frame it. Was it a battle between two imperialist powers (given mass support in the West for Ukraine)? Was Ukraine engaged in an anti-colonial struggle? Was Russia acting as an anti-imperialist force fighting Western meddling?

The debate also included what should be done in response to the invasion. A faction of leftists supported Russia’s invasion. Some leftists argued that an anti-war position was needed, with the idea that pressure should be put on Western governments to help negotiate a peaceful settlement to the war that would prevent further bloodshed and escalation. As such, they opposed the transfer of weapons from Western governments, including Canada, to Ukraine. Others argued that support should be given to Ukrainians to help them either win the conflict outright or get in a much better position militarily before any sort of negotiations could be held. As a result, they supported Western governments sending weapons to Ukraine, and sometimes pushed for them to do more.

To help continue this necessary component of the discussion, Passage reached out to two writers with opposing views on the matter to have a (written) dialogue with each other. [Taras Bilous](#), a co-editor of the Ukrainian left-wing journal Commons who is currently serving in the Ukrainian army, argues that leftists should support the transfer of weapons to Ukraine. [Dimitri Lascaris](#), a lawyer, journalist and activist from Montreal, argues that leftists should oppose the transfer of weapons to Ukraine. The identity of each writer was kept secret from the other throughout their exchange. Their dialogue is below, with Taras writing first, Dimitri replying, Taras responding and then Dimitri closing off the conversation.

Passage doesn’t publish editorials representing the publication, but since the war began we’ve consistently [published articles](#) making the case for an anti-war position. However, we’ve also shared articles in our daily newsletter offering differing perspectives in the spirit of debate and discussion, as our readership is by no means solely in support of one stance. This dialogue series is also intended to continue the internal debate our readers have had.

Read through the conversation between Taras and Dimitri, and then vote at the end for which author you found to be more convincing. Feel free to leave feedback on social media or by emailing us at submissions.readpassage.com. We will share some of this feedback with our email subscribers, and may publish an additional post on our website rounding some of it up.

This is the second edition of the dialogue series at Passage. The [first edition](#) focused on whether CUPE should have kept education workers on strike in Ontario in 2022. As a leftist opinion publication, we hope to host more of these sorts of dialogues in the future, providing a space for writers to discuss various issues somewhere other than Twitter. Consider [becoming a Passage member](#) to help us do so.

Taras Bilous: Probably every Ukrainian already has friends or relatives who have been killed or wounded in this war, and no one wants this horror to end more than us. But this doesn't mean that Ukrainians are ready to capitulate for the sake of peace at any cost.

If the Kremlin had stated that it was ready to withdraw Russian troops from Ukraine under certain conditions, it would have been worth starting negotiations. Instead, Russian President Vladimir Putin has annexed territories, including parts Russia doesn't control, and is demanding the recognition of these annexations. But [at least](#) 80 per cent of Ukrainians are against territorial concessions to Russia, according to a February survey from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology. Those who know about Bucha and have seen the reaction of locals in liberated Kherson should understand why Ukrainians want to liberate the occupied territories and not let Russia occupy more.

The "anti-war" left often appeals to the First World War and the opposition of revolutionary socialists to that war. For some reason, they usually forget an [important slogan](#) of those years: "a democratic peace between the nations, without annexations and indemnities and on the basis of the free self-determination of nations." Internationalists shouldn't advocate for peace at any cost, but rather a just and lasting peace. But now the "anti-war" left, when calling for peace, usually doesn't specify what kind of peace it's advocating for, and implicitly often means the recognition of annexations.

The same people would probably never advise Palestinians to accept Israel's occupation policy, but they have no hesitation in suggesting this to Ukrainians. The same people who know that a lack of weapons doesn't stop Palestinians from resisting believe that Ukrainians will stop resisting if the West stops supplying weapons. We won't. Even if the West refused to supply weapons from the very beginning, it wouldn't have stopped the war, but merely changed its form. Stopping arms supplies will only lead to the spread of occupation, and more Ukrainians will be killed, raped, and repressed.

Of course, fatigue may take its toll. If Ukraine fails to win this year, then perhaps next year Ukraine and Russia will be exhausted enough to sign a ceasefire. But it's up to Ukrainians to decide on such a step. And if Ukrainians agree to a ceasefire, it will be with the expectation that we have weakened Russia enough to prevent it from launching a new offensive in the coming years, and with the hope that the occupied territories will be reclaimed by Ukraine in the future.

An unjust peace would also be unstable. It would be a frozen conflict that could flare up with renewed vigour at any moment. The only alternative to this scenario is Ukraine's victory, meaning that the Kremlin must be forced to agree to peace terms acceptable for Ukraine. And for this, Ukraine needs foreign arms supplies.

Dimitri Lascaris: Foreign policy should be based upon facts. That is especially true of war, given its horrific consequences. The West's arming of Ukraine is, however, divorced from the facts.

Fact: At the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, the West [assured](#) Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO wouldn't expand "one inch eastward." It repeatedly [violated](#) that assurance.

Fact: Ukraine's government [failed](#) to implement the Minsk accords, which envisioned a limited degree of autonomy for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Even worse, in the days leading up to Russia's invasion, Ukraine's military [dramatically increased](#) its shelling of rebel-controlled areas.

Fact: Ukraine is one of the world's [most corrupt](#) countries. Inevitably, much of the weaponry being sent to Ukraine will be diverted to criminal organizations, as the head of Interpol [warned](#) in June 2022.

Fact: Ukraine has a [serious](#) neo-Nazi problem. In 2018, Ukraine's parliament [declared](#) a national holiday for the odious Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, whose political organization participated in the mass slaughter of Poles, Jews and Russians.

Fact: In 2014, the United States [orchestrated](#) a violent coup that removed Ukraine's democratically elected president Viktor Yanukovich from power. So audacious was this coup that the founder of Stratfor [described](#) it as "the most blatant coup in history."

These readily verifiable facts demolish the simplistic narrative advanced to justify the arming of Ukraine. This isn't a battle between good and evil, democracy and authoritarianism, or aggression and 'the rules-based order' (whatever that means). No one's hands are clean, least of all those of NATO governments.

To solve this existentially dangerous war, we must recognize its geopolitical context, which is that the U.S. government is hell-bent on maintaining the position of global hegemony it has enjoyed since the demise of the Soviet Union.

Quite apart from these considerations, there's little reason to believe that Ukraine can defeat Russia. In virtually every respect, Russia enjoys overwhelming advantages, including in [artillery](#), [hypersonic missiles](#), [combat aircraft](#), [naval forces](#), [energy resources](#) and [manpower](#). If by some miracle Ukraine was on the cusp of defeating Russia, Russia might well [resort](#) to nuclear weapons because it [regards](#) this NATO proxy war as an existential threat. Whether we believe Russia is right about that is irrelevant — being right will not protect us from the nuclear fallout.

Finally, it's no answer to say that it's entirely up to Ukraine whether to negotiate a peace deal and that, until it decides to do so, NATO must arm Ukraine. This argument disregards the agency of NATO governments, whose overarching duty is to protect the interests of their own citizens. Nothing could be more violative of their interests than escalating a war with a nuclear-armed state.

NATO is under no legal obligation to support Ukraine. It's free to withdraw its support or condition its support on immediate negotiations for peace. Faced with such a condition, Ukraine would then have to decide whether to sue for peace or continue the war without NATO's support. That would be a decision for Ukraine, and Ukraine alone.

Taras Bilous: Let's look at the facts my opponent mentions.

Many years ago, the U.S. made a verbal promise to the leader of a state that doesn't exist anymore. Now one of the former parts of that state (Russia), with the support of another (Belarus), has invaded a third (Ukraine). These are the same co-founding republics that [dissolved](#) the Soviet Union in 1991 by a joint decision.

So, why should the first fact be so considerable for current policy? I understand why Putin uses it to justify his imperialist policy, but what do we care about? Isn't it more important that in 1997 Russia [signed](#) a treaty with NATO agreeing to its expansion? We can say NATO's open-door policy was [wrong](#), but it's now as irrelevant as the injustice of the Treaty of Versailles was in 1939.

Let's move on to the Minsk agreements. Two months after the Minsk Protocol was signed, "elections" were held in the Russian-controlled part of Donbas in [violation](#) of [paragraph nine](#). The "election" results [were](#) simply invented. Within a week of signing Minsk II, Russian-backed separatist forces [seized](#) Debaltseve, violating the ceasefire and [agreed-upon](#) demarcation line. For years, Russia has also been [sabotaging](#) the implementation of paragraph four of the Minsk Protocol, according to which the OSCE mission was to be monitoring the border in the conflict zone.

My opponent wrote about Ukraine's failure to implement the agreements, but didn't mention these and other violations by the other side. By the way, one of the Russians that worked on the agreements, Vladislav Surkov, [stated](#) that he had no plans to implement them. Last year, Putin tore up the Minsk agreements, but my opponent repeats old Russian statements on this topic instead of [asking](#) why they really failed.

The Minsk agreements [were](#) the result of Ukraine's military defeat in the face of the regular Russian army's offensive in August 2014. It seems the opinion of my opponent is that when an imperialist state forces a weaker country to sign an agreement, the latter must comply no matter what, while the former may not. Is this a just approach?

My opponent still believes in the Russian claims that on the eve of the invasion, Ukraine suddenly intensified its shelling of Donetsk. Why can't they [try to understand](#) this topic in a little more detail? Russia claimed this as a *casus belli*, just as the U.S. claimed WMD in Iraq. But now even Russian military commanders [admit](#) Ukraine was preparing for a defensive war.

My opponent would have made fewer mistakes if he had taken an interest in the analysis of the Ukrainian left on the [Minsk agreements](#), the [far-right](#) in [Ukraine](#) and the [Maidan revolution](#). Maidan was a spontaneous popular uprising. The West condemned the violence on both sides and forced the government and opposition to compromise. The protesters and the opposition overthrew Yanukovich despite the West's position.

I'm also afraid of the threat of nuclear war. For Ukraine, this risk is the greatest. But [succumbing](#) to nuclear blackmail isn't a solution. Nearly 30 years ago, the U.S. [forced](#) Ukraine to give up its nuclear arsenal to Russia and refused to provide reliable security guarantees. In exchange, Russia pledged to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. If Ukraine is now left to fend for itself because of Russia's nuclear blackmail, what kind of signal will it send to other countries? It will show the whole world that nuclear powers can blackmail weaker countries and get what they want. It will make the world a much more dangerous place.

Half a century ago, U.S. president Richard Nixon [tried](#) to blackmail Vietnam and the Soviet Union in the same way to avoid defeat there. Fortunately, they didn't succumb to blackmail then. We shouldn't do that now, either.

It's certainly a problem that Western elites are taking advantage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to increase defence spending. And yet, a Russian victory could lead to an even greater arms race. Opposing military aid to Ukraine because corporations profit from it is the same as opposing vaccination programs because Big Pharma profits from them. Moreover, the West's refusal to supply arms will only [strengthen](#) the far right in Ukraine and Russia, while Russia's defeat will provide an opportunity to fight against militarism and reaction.

Finally, I would like to thank my opponent. Many authors have covered up their proposals to force Ukrainians to capitulate by claiming that they "care" about Ukrainians. But my opponent is at least honest: they don't hide their indifference to the fate of Ukrainians. Instead of international solidarity, they write about the national interests of the richest countries in the world and wave the NATO charter to prove that they have no obligations to the people of a poorer country. Thanks for your honesty.

Dimitri Lascaris: In deciding how to respond to the Ukraine war, Western leftists could take a number of positions.

At the extreme end of the spectrum, leftists could advocate for the West's total alignment with one party to the conflict, effectively rendering Western states co-parties to an existentially dangerous war.

In essence, that's the position NATO has taken: by [providing](#) economic and military aid to Ukraine, such as advanced weaponry, real-time battlefield intelligence and military training ([including](#) of neo-Nazi units), and by tacitly approving the [participation](#) of NATO-trained mercenaries in the conflict, Western states have become co-parties to a war against a nuclear-armed Russia.

A more moderate — and leftist — position would be to recognize that no party's hands in this conflict are clean, and that the West's response should be limited to humanitarian aid as well as vigorous and principled diplomatic efforts to end the war.

My position is the moderate one. My opponent, by contrast, argues for the extreme position. In doing so, they've aligned with NATO.

U.S. President Joe Biden and his NATO allies claim to be arming Ukraine in the name of all that is sacred to decent-minded people, but [decades](#) of U.S. aggression and lawlessness should leave no doubt in anyone's mind that the intervention has nothing to do with human rights, democracy, or international law.

Rather, the singular and obvious purpose of Western intervention into this war is to [weaken](#) a geopolitical rival (Russia) and to [improve](#) the conditions for an assault on an even more formidable one (China), and thereby perpetuate the position of global hegemony the U.S. has enjoyed since the Soviet Union's demise. In effect, NATO is using Ukrainians to promote a hegemonic agenda. Sadly, Western leftists who fail to grasp this have unwittingly rendered themselves the useful idiots of the Anglo-American empire.

Moreover, my opponent failed to address key points I made.

First, my opponent doesn't deny that the Ukrainian parliament declared a national holiday in honour of Bandera.

Second, my opponent says nothing about corruption in Ukraine or the risk of Western weapons

ending up in the hands of criminals.

Third, my opponent doesn't deny that Ukraine's government failed to honour the Minsk accords. Rather, my opponent argues that Russia and its Ukrainian allies also violated them. Even if that's true, however, it simply means that when it comes to Minsk, no one's hands are clean.

Fourth, my opponent says nothing about the insurmountable obstacles to a Ukrainian military victory. By seeking to prolong a war that Ukraine [can't win](#), these leftists fail to serve the interests of the Ukrainian people. Even as these leftists sanctimoniously accuse the anti-war left of being the enemies of Ukrainians, they help to ensure the ultimate destruction of the country. On the left, the true enemies of the Ukrainian people are those who support Biden's proxy war.

Fifth, my friend doesn't deny that the U.S. made a commitment to the Soviet government that NATO wouldn't expand eastward. Rather, my opponent argues that the U.S. commitment became null and void when the Soviet Union disintegrated. By that flawed reasoning, vital commitments made to Canada by other states would become nugatory if Quebec separated from the country.

Finally, my opponent decries the use of "nuclear blackmail" by Russia. How ironic! No one is more guilty of "nuclear blackmail" than the superpower with which my opponent's position is aligned. Only one state — the U.S. — has used nuclear weapons. Furthermore, it was the U.S. that [withdrew](#) from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001, the [nuclear deal](#) with Iran in 2018 [and](#) the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019. Predictably, these reckless U.S. policies ignited a renewed arms race.

My opponent doesn't deny that Russia's government views this war as an existential threat. That fact is precisely why my opponent's reference to Nixon's threat to use nuclear weapons in the Vietnam war is irrelevant in the current context.

The Vietnam war was fought far from American shores, whereas the Ukraine war is taking place a few hundred kilometres from Moscow. Does anyone doubt that the U.S. government would seriously contemplate the use of nuclear weapons if a massive and hostile military alliance became embroiled in a war a few hundred kilometres from Washington? Have we already forgotten how close the world came to nuclear war when the Soviet Union sought to place nukes in Cuba?

The rational and humane way to end "nuclear blackmail" isn't to play Russian roulette with the future of our children. Rather, it's to place relentless pressure on our own governments to pursue nuclear disarmament. Until then, nuclear holocaust is an existential risk with which we must contend. The best way to reduce it is to de-escalate conflict between nuclear-armed states.

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