

Sweden: Internationalen newspaper and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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After 16 months of full scale war, Internationalen, the weekly newspaper of Socialistisk Politik (Socialist Politics, SP) has more or less ceased its coverage of Ukraine. A discussion of the issues involved or of the standpoints of the organization has taken is not desired. I myself have been totally banned from contributing to Internationalen, and since a few weeks back even from a Facebook group revolving around the organization.

But it might still be reasonable to review some of the standpoints presented by SP since the full scale war started. So far, SP hasn't retreated from any of the views presented, and thus you must assume that they still approve of all that has been published by the leadership and the editors of Internationalen, even if you might sometimes have been able to spot some nuances.

It is of course preferable if you say you are in favour of Russian troops withdrawing from Ukraine, than if you are cheering Putin. In Sweden it is difficult to find people who openly support Russia's war. According to a poll in February 2023, 6 percent of Swedish respondents in favour of Russian victory, at a guess primarily supporters of the extreme right-wing Sweden Democrats party or their ilk.

But just being satisfied with vocal opposition to Russia's war seems most of all a lip service. The question is if such a position has any practical consequences. Especially if you at the same time oppose arms support to Ukraine, with the fantastic motivation that this is "not a task that socialists are able to carry". As if someone had requested that SP should provide arms deliveries to Ukraine! But apparently their position is that opposing arms to Ukraine is a task that socialists are able to carry.

In a poll by Yougov (https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/7f6du2p76v/Eurotrack_Ukraine_Feb23.pdf) one year after the full scale invasion, only 18 percent of the respondents agreed to the statement "to encourage a negotiated peace to end the fighting, even if this means Russia still has control over some parts of Ukraine". This is perhaps the target audience closest to SP, since this is probably how you should interpret their basic position?

I have previously assumed that the issue of being for or against arms deliveries to Ukraine is the foundation that other positions can be derived from. That basically it is a question of promoting a radical pacifist position or not. But I have started to doubt that it is the arms issue that is the basis for the SP positions.

If we look closer at Svenska Freds (The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society), the leading peace organization in Sweden, you sense a certain engagement for the cause of Ukraine and an anguish among many of their followers over not being able to take a stand in support for arms to Ukraine. I would define their position as radical pacifist, even though they actually state being in favour of Ukraine's right to armed self defence.

On the surface, the position on the war that Socialist Politics and their paper Internationalen have taken seems almost identical to that of Svenska Freds. But in reality, the position of SP is a lot more slippery.

There are a number of questions that you could pose in order to make a sober evaluation of a political organization's real position on the war. Like for example: Do they take part in manifestations in support of the defence struggle of Ukraine? Are they demanding extended sanctions against Russia? Are they trying to contribute to the spreading of knowledge of Russian war crimes?

If the answer is no to all of these questions, then any demands for Russia to leave Ukraine seems most of all a fig leaf that they are trying to hide behind.

And if you in addition use your publication to paint Ukraine black by repeating the central parts of Putin's narrative, then it rather seems like in actuality, you are acting in favour of a Russian victory.

I will give a few examples of what I mean.

Who is a warmonger?

A few weeks before the full-scale Russian war of aggression, in January 2022, Internationalen expressed its support to Putin's "disarmament proposals" from November, that actually expressed an ultimatum to NATO and in retrospect was obviously intended to prepare world opinion for the upcoming war.

And in the period before the full-scale invasion, Internationalen accused on several occasions those that warned about an approaching conflict of "war mongering" and of dispersing panic. On February 24, the same day that the invasion started, the SP steering committee made a statement that shamelessly downplays Russia's responsibility for the war: "Both the Putin regime, as well as NATO and the United States, bear responsibility in what is happening, both sides have been inciting war, which once more shows the bloodstained dead end of nationalism."

According to SP thinking, those that had been warning for the Russian plans were co-responsible for the war by their so-called warmongering! By the same twisted logic, the warning of climate activists ought to make them co-responsible for future climate disasters.

Russia, Ukraine and NATO

It is symptomatic that in the analyses of SP and Internationalen of the war after February 24, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the low-intensive war that Russia has been waging in Eastern Ukraine since then, are completely absent. Except that the editorial in #10/2022 actually worried that Ukraine with the support of NATO might reconquer Crimea!

Or as Håkan Blomqvist wrote in #15/2022:

"But that NATO has encircled Russia ever closer is uncontroversial, as is the fact that Ukraine NATO membership would aggravate this development. From the point of view of the Putin regime, the security status of Russian occupied Crimea and Donbas would drastically deteriorate. Something unacceptable for a regime whose self-perception is an unwavering defence of Russianness."

So SP showed an understanding for Putin feeling compelled to invade Ukraine to defend his previous annexations. In other words, Ukraine actually provoked the war by its approaching NATO, which was above all caused by Russia annexing part of the territory of the country.

You might call that a circular argument!

But reality is that a future membership in NATO for Ukraine has only become a real possibility during the last year, since the big powers in NATO were against membership for Ukraine before the full-scale invasion. The main reason is that NATO criteria will not allow a country that is involved in a border conflict to become a member.

Throughout the years there have been a long series of opinion polls in Ukraine about the support for applying to membership in NATO. As late as 2012, under 20 percent favoured a membership application. In 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, the number had risen to 40-50 percent. After the full-scale invasion the figure is clearly over 80 percent.

Maybe nothing to wonder about. In the same way as regarding public opinion in Sweden and Finland, Putin has turned out to be NATO's best friend. But when it comes to Ukraine it is probably of less importance to Putin, since the goal is that Ukraine and those that insist of being Ukrainians should anyway be annihilated as an independent nation.

In the narratives of both Putin and Internationalen, you are often reminded of a promise that US Secretary of State James Baker is supposed to have given Gorbachev in 1990, that they might agree on a NATO commitment not to expand to the East. No such agreement was made, however - this wasn't conceived as an important issue by that time.

On the other hand, Internationalen never comments the Budapest memorandum from 1994 that was agreed upon when Ukraine surrendered the Soviet nuclear weapons that had been stationed in the country to Russia. In that treaty the nuclear powers Russia, Great Britain and the United States promised to respect the borders of Ukraine and to desist from threatening the country militarily or economically. Note that the assurances made by the US and Great Britain for the event of Russia betraying its promises, turned out to be null and void when Russia annexed Crimea.

SP and Internationalen have kept repeating the myth of NATO encirclement of Russia, which in their opinion has put an enormous pressure on Putin, something that is supposed to have been the main motivation for the full-scale invasion.

Then it is appropriate to remind of what Putin himself said in connection to the expansion of NATO. In March 2004, NATO welcomed seven new members in Eastern Europe, the latest major expansion (after this occasion only Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and now Finland have been added).

Putin met with the NATO general secretary shortly after the new members were accepted. Did he protest? No, he insisted that "every country has the right to choose the option that it considers most effective for ensuring its own security" (https://brill.com/view/journals/joah/4/1-2/article-p126_10.xml). One year later Russian foreign minister Sergej Lavrov stated regarding the right of Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO: "That is their choice. We respect the right of every state — including our neighbours — to choose their own partners, to decide for themselves which organization they wish to join."

Whatever happened since 2004-05 that made Putin and Lavrov change their mind so drastically? Well, hardly because of an intensified encirclement from NATO, in spite of Peter Widén and Håkan Blomqvist insistently repeating that tune. But rather because of Putin's ever stronger fixation to walk in the footsteps of Peter the Great and Stalin, and go to history by expanding Russia as an empire by returning to its old borders.

It is fantastic that SP refuses to realize this or even comment on it! To make Putin an alleged victim of the relentless pressure from the US and NATO, instead of understanding the similarities between

the Great Russian dreams and those of Hitler Germany. Instead, they seem to prefer the ideas of some bourgeois power philosophers according to which Russia must have the right to maintain its spheres of influence at the expense of surrounding states, thereby ignoring what the peoples of these countries want for themselves. SP has from the beginning made clear that they believe that Ukraine cannot possibly win without a direct intervention from the US and NATO, and for this reason they demand an immediate cease-fire, that is, the Ukrainians should immediately cease their efforts to regain their home areas from the control of the occupying forces.

This is why Internationalen, perhaps more than any other paper in Sweden, has tried inflating Putin's nuclear blackmail as a reality that you must bow for in the name of peace. It was almost tragi-comical when Per Leander wrote on the editorial page in #47/2022 about the missile that in November by mistake landed on the Polish side of the border to Ukraine. Leander was of the opinion that "had it been a Russian missile that flew into Poland, it would, even if it was a mistake, in a worst case scenario have risked escalating to a World War III. This demonstrates how insanely dangerous this war is and why an immediate cease-fire is necessary before an even worse mistake is made."

Is there anybody else, or only Per Leander who believes that this is a credible scenario for how World War III might start? When in addition only Putin has been threatening with nuclear escalation? But when it comes to promoting the slogan of "immediate cease-fire", all arguments seem to be justified.

SP and the solidarity movement

One year ago SP tried to kick off an alternative international "peace movement", The Association for a Global Left Conference for Peace, an organization that in contrast to the already existing left-wing network ENSU (European network in solidarity with Ukraine and against war) would oppose arms deliveries to Ukraine.

Among the obscure organizations that took part in the "preparatory conference" that the new movement held in May last year, some of them demanded that soldiers both on the Russian and Ukrainian side should unite in a "class war" against their own oppressors. Something they can hardly themselves have perceived as realistic. Why hadn't they in that case started a "class war" at home in their own NATO countries? Quite an odd excuse for not supporting the Ukrainian cause!

The only organization present that claimed to be active inside Ukraine, Workers' Front of Ukraine, was a short time before the start of the invasion one of the undersigners of a manifesto from November 24, 2021 about the situation in Donbas, where a number of stalinist and putinist "communist parties" among other things declared that "during the last seven years Ukraine has developed into a real fascist state", and where Russia was criticized for not intervening with more force in Donbas.

Note that this was the only Ukrainian partner that SP could find!

After the "preparatory conference" not a sound has been heard from the new "peace movement". Best that way.

Democracy in Ukraine and Russia

Internationalen's coverage of Russia and Ukraine has to a great deal centered on showing that Ukraine is as undemocratic as is Russia. Everybody that have been following the news from other sources than Internationalen realize that this is nonsense.

While the democratic restrictions that have been introduced in Ukraine during the state of war has

received quite a lot of coverage in *Internationalen*, there has been a lot less written about the growing fascism in Russia, where all protests against the war are punished inexorably. A simple liking on social media of an anti-war message may result in many years in prison.

In a war it is often hard to find out the truth of what is happening. You can never trust official information to be correct and the war situation itself will lead to many things being secret and military information to be censored. But to conclude from this that both sides are equally bad is plain stupid.

While Russia has step by step suppressed all access to independent media, the flow of information in Ukraine is free, except when it comes to things like figures of losses in the war or military troop allocations. In contrast to the Russian public, people in Ukraine have full access to the internet. There are loads of journalists from all over the world inside Ukraine reporting on the war. The only "opposition" that is tolerated in Russia are the military bloggers and analysts on state censored television that demand that Russia should attack even more ferociously inside Ukraine - like Prigozhin, Strelkov and Soloviev. Many of the "experts" on television demand that Russia should attack Western European cities with nuclear weapons, something that is intended to give greater credibility to Putin's nuclear blackmail.

It is remarkable when you go back to study the coverage of SP and *Internationalen* of Ukraine how they time after time lapse into formulations that echo Putin's narrative.

The Maidan insurrection of 2013-2014 was a massive popular uprising, where president Yanukovich finally was abandoned by even his own supporters and realized that the game was over for him. In *Internationalen*, while referring to the extreme right-wing playing an important role during the insurrection, they have described Yanukovich's resignation from his office as a "coup" - in spite of the president being dismissed by a unanimous parliament after he had chosen to flee from Kyiv.

And *Internationalen* has on numerous occasions enlarged the attempts to restrict the status of the Russian language after Maidan almost ten years ago. On the other hand they have hardly mentioned how the Ukrainian language is suppressed by all means in the occupied areas. They have never explained about Putin's and his spokesmen's repeated claims that Ukraine does not really exist, that no Ukraine language nor Ukraine history exists. Or described how thousands of Ukraine children have been kidnapped to Russia where they are indoctrinated into forgetting their Ukraine origin and to celebrate Putin - an obvious violation of the Genocide Convention, which led to an arrest warrant for Putin being issued by the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

The paper has twisted the truth about the pro-Russian parties that have been banned in Ukraine and depicted all opposition as being suppressed, although all the parliamentarians from the various parties that were elected in 2019 have been able to continue working in the Rada, and in spite of a left wing organization like *Sotsialnyi Rukh* openly continuing its operations.

Internationalen is probably the voice in Sweden that so far has been the most positive to the Amnesty International report on Ukraine from August 2022, which was severely criticized of not making a difference between aggressor and victim. On the *Internationalen* editorial page, Åke Eriksson happily thanked Amnesty for the report. The fact that Russia with reference to the report could unscrupulously continue attacking all kinds of civilian targets, without having to even excuse itself, was nothing that bothered the peace activists on the editorial board of *Internationalen*. It can be added that an internal review carried out within Amnesty in April this year harshly criticized the same report that *Internationalen* celebrated.

And why has *Internationalen* not mentioned how the "People's Governor" of the "Donetsk People's Republic" Pavel Gubarev expressed himself in the beginning of October:

“We aren’t coming to kill you, but to convince you. But if you don’t want to be convinced, we’ll kill you. We’ll kill as many as we have to: 1 million, 5 million, or exterminate all of you.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJqNfhYeM7Q>). Perhaps because you can hear similar statements daily on Russian television, so it probably had no news value?

Right-wing extremism

SP has also continued to convey Putin’s image of fascist groupings having a decisive influence over the political life in Ukraine. It deserves being repeated that while extreme right-wing parties received about 2 percent of the vote in the last parliamentary elections in Ukraine, its Swedish correspondence got ten times that number in electoral support in the elections 2022. And Putin and his kleptocrats have at the same time in practice assumed the political line of the fascist right wing - something Internationalen has hardly described.

The paper has in positive coverage described the “peace manifestation” in Europe that have opposed arms deliveries to Ukraine, and approvingly repeated the standpoint that arms to Ukraine will only prolong the war. In other words, it can only delay Russia’s unavoidable victory.

When a minority of the left in Berlin demonstrated for “peace” around the anniversary of the invasion, it was arm-in-arm with the right-wing extremists of AFD and openly fascist groups. But in spite of this being reported in mainstream media, Internationalen completely suppressed this information in their own reporting. It is striking how this news evaluation differs from how they in all circumstances try to play up the role of the extreme right in Ukraine.

The worst thing with the SP orientation is that it is a twofold betrayal of the Ukraine socialists, especially those of Sotsialnyi Rukh, who you might expect would be the closest current. Not only is it enormously depressing for them to see how socialists in the West undermine the support for the defence of Ukraine against an imperialist enemy that is fighting for merciless annihilation of everybody in favour of Ukraine independence, for democracy, against corruption and for socialism. But even worse is that SP and other “left wing” organizations in the West by their behaviour are strengthening the right-wing and neoliberal forces in Ukraine, who get an opening to win confidence when they point out all left-wing forces in Ukraine to be the same kind of campfollowers to Putin as the western left.

I consider this to be unforgivable.

The war against Ukraine is not just any political question where you can have different opinions within the left. It is a watershed, like the war in Vietnam, like the split within the international workers movement at the outbreak of World War I.

It does not matter that Internationalen may still contain good articles on what is happening in Sweden or other parts of the world. With its consciously misleading coverage of the war against Ukraine, the paper has in my view lost all credibility.

After having subscribed to the paper for over 50 years, during a number of years taking part in selling the paper and contributing dozens of articles, I have had more than enough.

Finally, in the beginning of this text I expressed my doubts whether it is the question of arms deliveries to Ukraine that is the actual basis for the standpoints that SP has taken in statements and in Internationalen. Because if we compare the motivations from the radical pacifists in Svenska Freds, we can conclude that there is no innate driving force that made it necessary for SP to line up behind Vladimir Putin’s narrative and to slander the cause of Ukraine. This is a choice that they made themselves.

So I no longer believe that the SP leadership is genuinely radical pacifist. They hardly have a background of not being able to take a clear stand in favour of armed struggle to defend a country being attacked by an imperialist great power, instead urging cease-fire, peace negotiations and implicitly an acceptance of the annexations of the great power. So it almost seems like for this reason they are trying to find different odd explanations to why Ukraine is not worth unconditional support. But - this certainly seems a very meager explanation.

So what might otherwise have motivated their horrific coverage? That question I pass on to the reader of this text to reflect on.

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