

From Ukraine to Palestine: the right of peoples to self-determination

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Ukraine was not an “artificial creation” of Lenin, as Putin [1] claimed. And Palestine was not “a land without a people for a people without a land” - or even a “Promised Land”. The occultation of “Great Russian” colonization was the result of ideologies and contexts other than those organically associated with the realization of the Zionist project and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. However, the right to self-determination of the Ukrainian people, like that of the Palestinian people, still comes up against these obscurations in a variety of dramatic ways. Especially when this right is identified - rightly or wrongly - by various but major sections of world public opinion, with extreme right-wing currents*.

The right to self-determination of peoples is at the heart of the decolonization struggles - and it is still today the essential driving force behind the “right to resist” [2] of the Ukrainian and Palestinian people, in different configurations. In both cases, there is a dramatic crisis of egalitarian and decolonial socialist alternatives in the countries concerned and on an international scale. The worst violence is taking place in the ongoing wars - the outcome of which is totally uncertain. It depends on the direct and international components of the struggle, and in particular on the practical orientations of the currents that refer to the right of peoples to self-determination.

And in both cases, there will be no peace without justice, for equal rights - and against all war crimes and crimes against humanity.

From “fascist” Ukraine...

The “special military operation”, launched by Putin against a backdrop of deep crisis in Nato (and not a threat to Russia), counted on the rapid fall of President Zelensky and the establishment of a power claiming to belong to the “Russian world”. He would have put an end to the power of the “Ukrainian fascists”, who had emerged from a “Nazi coup d’état supported by NATO” (2014), and were threatening Russian speakers. Putin’s discourse and project were inspired by both the Tsarist Empire and Stalin, against the right of peoples to self-determination [3], against Lenin, who had made such a right the precondition for the construction of a strong and attractive socialist union (and international) in the rest of the world.

Yet, among the Bolsheviks (and Marxists), workerist and economist approaches dominated, defying national aspirations perceived as a legacy of the past and of the peasants - an essential social base of the Ukrainian nation. Decolonial and egalitarian advances were precarious. The great famine of the 1930s that accompanied forced collectivization in the countryside is perceived in Ukraine as a “Holodomore” associated with a project of forced Russification. The deportation of populations far from their homelands - such as the Crimean Tatars, alleged collaborators of the Nazis; or the carving up of republics to exploit minorities (as in Nagorno-Karabakh) combine to form various phases of the “Soviet century” [4].

The reality of Ukraine as a nation remained contested by some on the international left, despite its independence ratified in 1991 by a massive, positive popular vote throughout its territory [5]. It often equates any assertion of Ukrainian nationhood with its far-right “anti-Russian” component, evoking the anti-Semitic, anti-Polish and anti-Roma pogroms of the “Banderists” - named after the national hero Bandera, who allied himself (and then clashed) with the Nazis against Stalin. And, in fact, it also ties in with Putin’s interpretation of the 2014 “Revolution of Dignity” as a fascist coup d’état. Except that the new oligarch president Poroshenko (on an extremely right-wing course) elected in 2014 was swept aside by the next elections, in 2019: all over Ukraine it was a tidal wave for a candidate unknown to the institutional parties, the Jewish and Russian-speaking comedian Volodymyr Zelensky promising to peacefully resolve the Donbass conflict and put an end to corruption. It should be obvious that this power is not “Nazi”.

...to Ukrainian and Palestinian resistance

But, dismissing this caricature, some on the left see him as a mere pawn of Nato. The war would be directly inter-imperialist, without Ukrainian society fighting for its liberation. A concrete analysis of the war scenarios shows the war crimes committed by Russian forces radicalizing Ukrainian popular resistance. And while Nato profited from the war, it was this (unexpected) popular resistance, led by Zelensky, that inflicted the first defeats on Putin’s offensive on Kiev and the ensuing occupation. The ongoing conflicts between Zelensky and NATO’s general staff are obvious. Weapons are being referred to in order to save civilian lives and infrastructure under bombardment - causing appalling human and ecological damage. To guarantee lasting peace, Russia’s occupation and neo-colonial policies must come to an end.

But there are other neo-colonial policies lurking behind the “aid” to Ukraine. And how can Ukrainian popular self-determination - which cannot be reduced to state power - be expressed and supported? An article by Ukrainian historian Hanna Perekhoda worries: “If, in the name of ‘peace’, we betray the Ukrainians, like the Palestinians” [6].

Like its author, I support the logic of the “European Network in Solidarity with Ukraine” (RESU/ENSU) [7] in helping from below - its need for weapons wherever they come from, and its struggles on several fronts: direct links with left-wing political associations, feminists, trade unionists, LGBTQ, ecologists who are resisting both with Zelensky against the invasion, and against the social attacks of his neoliberal policies.

But if the way to support a national liberation struggle belongs to each current, the way to lead it belongs to the currents of resistance - and it’s up to the populations concerned to know who represents them.

The massacres of civilian populations committed by Hamas are unbearable and highly visible crimes, in contrast to those committed by the Israeli state and its apartheid policy [8]: “In the space of a few days,” writes Israeli journalist Amira Hass in Haaretz (October 10), “Israelis have experienced what Palestinians have routinely experienced for decades: military incursions, death, cruelty, murdered children, bodies piled up in the streets, siege, fear, anguish for loved ones, being the target of revenge, indiscriminate fire on fighters and civilians, a position of inferiority, destruction of buildings, religious celebrations scorned, weakness and powerlessness in the face of armed men, and bitter humiliation.”

And as Elias Sanbar [9] says, “In their fight for their rights, the Palestinians refer to international law. And international law is clear: any attack on civilians is a war crime. To refer to the law is to apply all the provisions of the law. But not everything in this conflict is a war crime. Attacking an occupying army is perfectly legitimate”.

Catherine Samary

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P.S.

L'Anticapitaliste

<https://lanticapitaliste.org/arguments/international/de-lukraine-la-palestine-le-droit-des-peuples-disposer-deux-memes>

Footnotes

[1] Listen to or read Ukrainian historian Hanna Perekhoda, especially her chapter in the collective book *L'invasion de l'Ukraine. History, conflicts and popular resistance*. La Dispute, 2023.

[2] This is the title of the Manifesto of Ukrainian Feminists: in various languages: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScgsYAJIh9y0qwZHucPHsnmmzUiou-USkOuRIlxxisrpWkAw/viewform> ; see also Alain Gresh, "Gaza-Palestine. Le droit de résister à l'oppression", *Orient XXI*, October 9, 2023.

[3] See the writings of the recently deceased Ukrainian anti-Stalinist Marxist Marko Bojcun, on the Éditions Syllepse website.

[4] The title of one of Soviet historian Moshe Lewin's works.

[5] https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C3%A9f%C3%A9rendum_sur_l'ind%C3%A9pendance_de_l'Ukraine

[6] Hanna Perekhoda, "Si au nom de la "paix" nous trahissons les Ukrainiens, comme les Palestiniens...", *Le Courrier d'Europe centrale*, October 12, 2023.

[7] See the ENSU website <https://ukraine-solidarity.eu/>, its platform, campaigns and analyses.

[8] See Amnesty International's report on this subject.

[9] Palestinian intellectual, former Palestinian ambassador to Unesco, interview in *Le Monde* (website), Thursday October 12, 2023. Catherine S