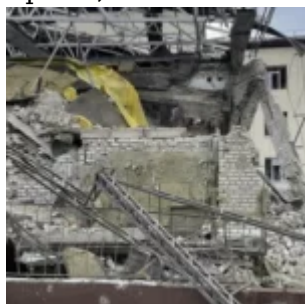


Coherence and Incoherence about the War in Ukraine

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Let us imagine that the United States invaded Venezuela, as it contemplated doing for a while under Donald Trump, and that Russia decided to supply the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro with weapons to help it fight the invaders. US troops are meeting a fierce resistance in the barrios and countryside of Venezuela. Negotiations between Washington and Caracas have started in Colombia, while Washington is trying to force the Venezuelan government to capitulate to its diktat.

Unless one believes that Russia is not an imperialist country—which implies that one does not subscribe to a materialist analysis but adheres to a political definition of imperialism according to which only “Western countries” can be imperialist—the situation described above would clearly be one of a just war waged by Venezuela against a U.S. imperialist invasion, against the background of an ongoing conflict between U.S. imperialism and Russian imperialism. Venezuela’s just war would therefore be at the same time a “proxy war” between two imperialist powers, in the same way that most conflicts during the Cold War—such as the Korean war or the Vietnam war—were wars of national liberation as well as “proxy wars” between Washington and Moscow.

What would the right position be for internationalist anti-imperialists? Unless you are an absolute pacifist believing in “turning the other cheek,” you would need to support arms deliveries to the Venezuelan resistance to enable it to defend its population and achieve a position from which it could avoid capitulation and lessen the price to pay in the negotiations. If anyone said, “We support the Venezuelan resistance, but oppose both Russian arms deliveries to the Maduro government and economic pressure on the United States,” this attitude would rightly be regarded as unserious.

For such a position would be proclaiming support to the Venezuelans while depriving them of the means to resist and opposing that economic pressure be put on their aggressor. At best, this would be an utterly inconsistent position. At worst, a hypocritical position disguising an indifference to the fate of the Venezuelans—seen as sacrificial lambs on the altar of anti-imperialism (Russian imperialism in this case)—behind a pretense of wishing them success in their just resistance.

Readers will have understood, of course, that in the above allegory Venezuela stands for Ukraine, and U.S. imperialism for its Russian counterpart. This brings us back to the key distinction between a direct war between imperialist countries in which every side is trying to grab a part of the world, as

was most classically the case in the First World War, and an invasion by an imperialist power of a non-imperialist country, where the latter is backed by another imperialist power using it as a proxy in inter-imperialist rivalry.

In the first case, working-class internationalism requires that workers, including workers in uniform (i.e. soldiers), oppose the war on both sides, each opposing their own government's war, even if that would contribute to its defeat (this is the meaning of "revolutionary defeatism"). In the second case, revolutionary defeatism is required only from workers and soldiers who belong to the aggressor imperialist country, and in a much more active way than indirectly. They are required to sabotage their country's war machine. Workers of the oppressed nation, on the other hand, have every right and duty to defend their country and families and must be supported by internationalists worldwide.

The attitude consisting in expressing sorrow for the Ukrainians and claiming to care for their fate by supporting negotiations and "peace" in the abstract (which peace?) is rightly seen as hypocritical by Ukrainian socialists. Ukraine's government has been actively engaged in negotiations with the Russian side for weeks now: these are organized by NATO member country, Turkey, and held on its territory. They are fully supported by most NATO governments, which are eager to see the war come to an end before its global economic consequences turn irreversibly catastrophic. So, it is certainly not like some side is refusing to negotiate. Now, it doesn't take much expertise in war history to understand that negotiations depend on the balance of forces achieved on the ground. The Chinese and Vietnamese have a long experience in this respect, summarized by the famous Maoist dictum: "Da Da Tan Tan" (Fight, fight, talk, talk).

Supporting Ukraine's position in negotiations about its own national territory requires a support to its resistance and its right to acquire the weapons that are necessary for its defense from whichever source possesses such weapons and is willing to provide them. Refusing Ukraine's right to acquire such weapons is basically a call for it to capitulate. In the face of an overwhelmingly armed and most brutal invader, this is actually defeatism on the wrong side, amounting virtually to support for the invader.