

Contemptuous Denial of Agency in the Name of Geopolitics and/or Peace

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The antiwar anti-imperialist left worldwide has been deeply divided on the war in Ukraine along quite unusual lines, due to the novelty of the situation represented by Russia's invasion of a weaker neighboring country with openly stated nationalistic expansionist ambitions, along with NATO's active and substantial support for the invaded country's resistance. The same left had already been facing division over Russia's murderous intervention in Syria after Iran's, but the conditions were very different.

Moscow intervened on behalf of the existing Syrian government, a fact that some took as a pretext to justify or excuse it. The same would vehemently denounce the equally murderous Saudi-led intervention in Yemen even though the latter likewise took place on behalf of an existing government—an undoubtedly more legitimate government than the now over 50-year-old Syrian dictatorship. (Yemen's government resulted from elections held in the wake of the 2011 uprising that ousted that country's long-standing dictator.)

Support to Russia's military intervention in Syria or, at best, refusal to condemn it were in most cases predicated on a geopolitical one-sided "anti-imperialism" that considered the fate of the Syrian people as subordinate to the supreme goal of opposing U.S.-led Western imperialism seen as supportive of the Syrian uprising. Here again there was a blatant contradiction since those who held such a position did not demonstrate against the U.S.-led war on the so-called Islamic State (IS) and demand that it stop. In fact, some of those who, in the name of opposition to U.S. imperialism, wouldn't condemn Russia's intervention in shoring up the Syrian dictatorship, did support the United States' intervention on the side of the Kurdish YPD, the Syrian co-thinkers of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in its fight against IS. (The United States even and simultaneously supported Iraq's pro-Iran militias in the same fight.)

The war in Ukraine presented what looked like a simpler and more straightforward case. Russia waged a war of invasion in Ukraine similar to those waged by U.S. imperialism in various countries since World War II, from Korea to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan. But since it wasn't Washington but Moscow that was invading, and since those fighting against the invasion weren't supported by Moscow and Beijing but by Washington and its NATO allies, most of the antiwar anti-imperialist left reacted very differently. One section of that left, taking its neo-campist single-minded opposition to

U.S. imperialism and its allies to the extreme, supported Russia, labelling it as “anti-imperialist” by turning the concept of imperialism from one based on the critique of capitalism into one based on a quasi-cultural hatred of the West. Another section acknowledged the imperialist nature of the present Russian state but deemed it to be a lesser imperialist power that ought not to be opposed according to the logic of the “lesser evil” rightly criticized by Jeffrey St Clair.

Still another section of the antiwar anti-imperialist left, acknowledging likewise the imperialist nature of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, condemned it, and demanded that it stop. However, it fell short of supporting Ukraine’s resistance to the invasion, except by piously wishing it success, while refusing to support its right to get the weapons it needs for its defense. Worse still, most of the same *oppose* the delivery of such weapons by the NATO powers in a blatant subordination of the fate of the Ukrainians to the presumed “supreme” consideration of anti-Western anti-imperialism.

The most hypocritical iteration of this attitude has consisted in feigning concern for Ukrainians who are represented as being used by NATO as cannon fodder in a proxy inter-imperialist war. In that respect, much is made of an interview with Chas Freeman, a 79-year-old former U.S. official who retired from government service in 1994 after holding a series of positions, including that of U.S. ambassador to the Saudi kingdom at the time of the 1991 U.S. destruction of Iraq. The interview was conducted by the Russian-propaganda, antivaxx, and conspiracy-theorist Grayzone website. Asked what he thought of Ukraine’s president Zelensky saying, according to Grayzone, that he was told by NATO members that they were not going to let his country into NATO, but would publicly leave the door open, Freeman replied:

I think this is remarkably cynical, or perhaps it was naïve and unrealistic on the part of leaders in the West. Zelenskyy is obviously a very intelligent man, and he saw what the consequences of being put in what he called limbo would be: namely, Ukraine would be hung out to dry. And the West was basically saying, ‘We will fight to the last Ukrainian for Ukrainian independence,’ which essentially remains our stand.

Later on, in the same interview, Freeman was asked about the view that Ukraine is used as cannon fodder against Russia, a view that is prevalent in Washington according to Grayzone. Freeman replied: “*This is essentially cost-free from the United States as long as we don’t cross some Russian red line that leads to escalation against us.*” In his responses, Freeman sounded more like blaming NATO for not letting Ukraine in, and the United States for not fighting for Ukraine, as if he wished that the Alliance get directly involved in the defense of Ukraine’s territory and sovereignty instead of putting it in limbo.

And yet, the quote about fighting to the last Ukrainian has been interpreted as a statement by Freeman himself that Washington is using the Ukrainians as proxy soldiers and pushing them to fight until the last of them and treated as if it were an official statement of U.S. policy. Vladimir Putin himself repeated the same “until the last Ukrainian” sentence on April 12. Hence, a phony show of pity for the Ukrainians depicted as being cynically sent weapons by NATO powers so that they carry on fighting until total exhaustion. This allows those expressing such views to oppose NATO governments’ delivery of defensive weapons to the Ukrainians in the guise of humanistic concerns about them.

This fake sympathy, however, totally obliterates the Ukrainians’ agency, to the point of contradicting the most obvious: not a single day has passed since the Russian invasion began without the Ukrainian president publicly blaming NATO powers for not sending enough weapons, both quantitatively and qualitatively! If NATO imperialist powers were cynically using the Ukrainians to drain their Russian imperialist rival, as that type of incoherent analysis would have it, they would certainly not need to be begged to send more weapons.

The truth is that key NATO powers—not least among them France and Germany, both of them major suppliers of weapons to Ukraine—are eager to see the war stop. Although the war has substantial benefits to their military industrial complexes, such specific sectors' gains are far outweighed by the overall impact of looming energy shortages, rising inflation, massive refugee crisis, and disruption to the international capitalist system as a whole, at a time of global political uncertainty and rise of the far right.

Finally, another section of the global antiwar anti-imperialist left rejects the provision of weapons to the Ukrainians in the name of peace, advocating negotiations as an alternative to war. One could believe that we were back to the time of the Vietnam war, when the antiwar movement was split between pro-Moscow Communist Parties who advocated peace and the radical left that openly wished for Vietnam's victory against the U.S. invasion. The situation today is quite different, however. At the time of Vietnam, both wings of the antiwar movement were in full solidarity with the Vietnamese. Both supported the Vietnamese's right to acquire weapons for their defense. Their disagreement was tactical, about which slogan to put forward in order to most effectively build an antiwar movement that could help Vietnam in its national struggle.

Today, on the other hand, those who advocate "peace" while opposing the Ukrainians' right to acquire weapons for their defense are counterposing peace to fighting. In other words, they are wishing for the capitulation of Ukraine—for which "peace" could have resulted if the Ukrainians had not been armed and hence not been able to defend their country? We could have been writing "Order prevails in Kyiv!" today, but that would have been the New Order forced by Moscow on the Ukrainian nation under the most deceitful pretext of "denazification".

Negotiations are going on between Kyiv and Moscow, under the aegis of NATO member Turkey. They won't lead to a peace treaty except in one of two ways. One is that Ukraine will no longer be able to carry on fighting and will have to capitulate and accept Moscow's diktat, even if this diktat has been considerably watered down from Putin's initially stated goals due to the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian armed forces and population. The second possibility is that Russia will no longer be able to carry on fighting, either militarily because of the moral exhaustion of its troops, or economically because of widespread dissatisfaction among the Russian population—in the same way that, in the First World War, the difficulties encountered by Czarist Russia's troops and the economic consequences of the war on the Russian population led the latter to rise up and bring Czarism down in 1917 (a similar cause led to the failed 1905 Revolution in the wake of Russia's defeat in its war against Japan).

True internationalists, antiwar advocates, and anti-imperialists can only be wholeheartedly in favor of the second scenario. They must therefore support the Ukrainians' right to get the weapons they need for their defense. The opposite position amounts to support for Russia's imperialist aggression, whatever claim to the contrary may go along with it.