DSA and Russia's War on Ukraine: Toward a Mass Movement of Solidarity with Ukraine

written by Dan La Botz, Stephen R. Shalom | December 26, 2022

There is an ongoing debate within Democratic Socialists of America on the question of Ukraine. Many individual DSA members and chapters have upheld the basic socialist principle of international solidarity, that a nation and people subject to foreign aggression have the fundamental right to defend themselves, and the right to obtain from wherever they can the weapons they need to carry out that self-defense. The bulk of the DSA International Committee (DSA IC), however, has failed to uphold this principle.

Despite more than nine months of war, the IC has issued only two statements on Ukraine. One, three weeks before the Russian invasion, was titled "DSA IC opposes US militarization and interventionism in Ukraine and Eastern Europe and calls for an end to NATO expansionism," which called for Washington to stop warmongering, threatening sanctions, and providing military aid, while failing to demand that Russia cease its military threats. The second, on February 26, properly condemned the Russian invasion and called for the withdrawal of Russian troops, but also expressed "opposition to unilateral coercive measures, militarization, and other forms of economic and military brinkmanship" – which is to say, opposition to all sanctions on Russia and weapon supplies to Ukraine.

Gerard Dalbon, a member of the DSA IC, has now written an article, "DSA and the War in Ukraine: Toward a Mass Socialist Anti-War Movement," in the DSA journal *Democratic Left* on December 9, 2022, still refusing to support Ukraine as it fights to defend its national sovereignty and its (flawed) democratic government against the murderous Russian invasion. And he still opposes the provision of weapons to Ukraine, without which Ukraine would long ago have succumbed to its brutal larger neighbor.

Dalbon and the DSA IC call for "peace." We too are for peace. We too are part of the peace movement. Which is precisely why when aggression takes place, we can't be indifferent. We recognize that nearly all wars end through diplomacy, but that requires a willingness of all parties to negotiate in good faith, and, as Ukrainian socialists Denys Bondar and Zakhar Popovych have documented, Russia has shown none. Moreover, a ceasefire should not allow the aggressor to hold on to territory it has seized, while it prepares further assaults.

Dalbon and the IC put the blame for the war on NATO and its expansion. But NATO was not the proximate cause of Russia's attack on Ukraine. Putin knew that NATO membership for Kyiv could only be in the distant future, given the opposition of France and Germany and the fact that NATO membership is prohibited to countries with border disputes. And any Russian worry about nuclear weapons in Ukraine was an even more remote concern, given that Washington had responded to Russia's pre-war ultimatums by offering to negotiate the issue of the placement of U.S. weapons systems in Europe. While Western powers did work to expand NATO, equally or even more

important, the Eastern European nations that had experienced Tsarist and Soviet imperialism sought security in NATO. (Indeed, in this century, Putin has become NATO's best recruiter, with his wars in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine in 2014.) We on the left have long called for a different security arrangement, one based on mutual security and demilitarization, and still do. Nevertheless, just as our criticisms of the Versailles Treaty wouldn't lead us to absolve Hitler of blame for starting World War II or failing to oppose him, so our criticisms of NATO expansion don't excuse Russia's aggression against Ukraine or eliminate our obligation to oppose it.

In its response to the Russian invasion, the IC has not spoken out strongly against the violence that has killed thousands of civilians and displaced more than ten million and forcing five million or so to seek refuge abroad. Nor against the bombings that have destroyed infrastructure and residential housing, and the many documented human rights violations such as the atrocities in Bucha, Izium, and cities across eastern Ukraine. Nor against Putin's imperialist ideology that denies the existence of a Ukrainian people and the nation of Ukraine and makes the false claims that Russia is de-Nazifying Ukraine. Dalbon too doesn't mention these. Instead, Dalbon and the IC have joined with those sectors of the "peace movement" that place blame for what's happening on the United States, the European Union, and NATO, rather than on the Russian aggressor. They express solidarity with the Russian and Ukrainian antiwar movements, but not with the Ukrainians struggling to defend their country.

Dalbon argues that military contractors are getting rich off this war. That's true, but that's not a compelling argument to reject such spending any more than the fact that the COVID vaccine enriched big pharma was a reason to reject that spending. In both cases, if spending serves a proper social purpose (whether enabling Ukraine's self-defense or thwarting a pandemic), then the position of socialists has to be to call for either nationalization under democratic control of the relevant industries or taxes on excess profits, not blocking the spending.

Dalbon also goes out of his way to maximize the problems with military aid. He exaggerates the amount, saying it stood at $50 billion (before last week's allocation), while standard ways of calculating military assistance put it at less than 40 percent of that amount. He says the "free flow of weapons" has "ended up outside of Ukraine," when in fact the leakage to date has been miniscule. He refers to the dangers of "direct U.S. involvement," citing a report of CIA presence in the country, when it is common knowledge that the CIA and the intelligence agencies of all major powers (Russia, China, Britain, France, etc.) are involved in other nations all over the world.

Dalbon doesn't want DSA to merely mimic the position of the Biden administration. And indeed we agree that it should not. There are many demands the left needs to make regarding the Ukraine war that contradict administration policies. We should be challenging Biden's views on nuclear arms control, his position on refugees and visas, his stance on debt and neoliberalism, his acquiescence in restrictions on the media, his policies that deal with the current energy shortage by investing in carbon-based rather than renewable energy, and his failure to speak out sharply against bigotry toward Russian people or culture. But all these differences with Biden must be pursued within the context of supporting two crucial policies: the continued provision of arms to Ukraine and rejecting pressure on them to accept a ceasefire without insisting on Russian withdrawal to the pre-war lines. But the DSA IC disagrees with both these principles.

The DSA IC says the left is not needed to support weapons to Kyiv given the broad support the provision of arms enjoys. Indeed, we wouldn't have to write and organize in support of arms if that were the general left position – it would be pushing against an open door. However, because some prominent sectors of the left – including some that the DSA IC has been working with – explicitly reject the idea of providing arms to Ukraine, it has become incumbent on those who stand in solidarity with Ukraine's just struggle to stress our support for arms for two reasons: 1) not to do so

risks discrediting the left and 2) if the right pushes to stop arms to Ukraine as incoming House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy has warned it might do, then progressive support may well be necessary.

Regarding the problem of discrediting the left, consider this example. Why was it important for left voices in the United States to speak out against Stalin's show trials in the 1930s? Obviously not because they were the lone voices in American society doing so. But because if the only left voice people heard was Communist Party apologetics for Stalin, they would rightly conclude that the left was morally repugnant. The fact that there were leftists championing social justice consistently throughout the world helped keep alive the appeal of genuine internationalist socialist politics. The same applies to Ukraine today. When ordinary Americans see some leftists willing to deny aid to those fighting a just war, they may conclude that they want nothing to do with left politics in general.

What a contrast the DSA IC's position is to the way that the broad left of the 1960s and 1970s supported the Vietnamese in their struggle against U.S. imperialism. We did not call for negotiations, we called for the United States to withdraw immediately. We opposed those in the anti-war movement who at that time called for diplomacy and negotiations, because that suggested that there was something the United States was entitled to negotiate about. Our slogan was "Out Now."

Our support for Vietnam did not depend on the character of its government nor on where it got its weapons to defend itself. As democratic socialists, we did not support Ho Chi Minh or his government, but that didn't take away from Vietnam's right to fight for its national liberation against U.S. aggression. Vietnam turned to the Soviet Union for arms, and though we were opposed to the Communist government of the USSR, an imperialist power that had conquered Eastern Europe, we felt that the Vietnamese had the right to get arms wherever they could. No one in the anti-war movement of the time raised the demand that the USSR cut off weapons to Vietnam – even though arms shipments benefitted the Soviet military-industrial sector and took away from beneficial civilian spending.

The situation is very similar in Ukraine today. Ukraine, like Vietnam, is a former colony, first of Tsarist Russia then of the Soviet Union, and it has the right to fight to maintain its independence. We don't like Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his government with its neoliberal politics that are anti-democratic and anti-labor. We don't like the U.S or governments that are providing arms to Ukraine. Nevertheless we defend Ukraine's right to receive those weapons.

What would have happened in the mid-1960s if we on the left had called for peace and negotiations in Vietnam and a stop to the delivery of Soviet weapons when the Vietnamese were fighting for their national independence? To the extent that we had an impact, we would have contributed to forcing Vietnam to surrender or at least to give up its sovereignty. Having overcome national and world opinion regarding that war, would the United States then have drawn the conclusion that a few years later it could invade what remained of independent Vietnam? Would the United States, now operating with impunity, have been emboldened to engage in even more imperial aggression than it did?

If Putin is not stopped in Ukraine today, what will discourage him from taking more or perhaps the whole country? Will he move on to make war on another neighbor? Moldova? Georgia? We know what happens when dictators of imperialist powers are encouraged or permitted to score victories. After the Munich Accord in exchange for "peace" Adolf Hitler was permitted to take the so-called Sudetenland, and after that he seized the rest of Czechoslovakia and then he invaded Poland, leading to World War II. We can't let Ukraine be the Czechoslovakia of our time

What are progressives and socialists supposed to do when an imperial power threatens or actually invades another country and attempts to subjugate them? What is our theory and what are our principles about that? Where have we on the left stood in the past? In the nineteenth century Karl Marx supported Ireland's struggle for independence from the British empire, even though at the time there were few progressive forces to lead that struggle. He supported Poland's struggle for independence from Germany, Austria, and Russia, even though the Polish leaders came from the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie. Yet at the same time he opposed the creation of the Confederate States of America because that was not a genuine movement of a people for national self-determination, but rather a scheme by landowners and slaveowners to maintain slavery. And note that Marx didn't withhold support from the North in the Civil War because of the size of Lincoln's military budget or the undemocratic nature of some of Lincoln's policies.

In the twentieth century, Lenin called for "the right of nations to self-determination," and opposed those members of his Bolshevik party who denied Ukraine its right to self-determination in the 1920s. Later in the century, in 1936 when Fascist Italy attacked Ethiopia, the left supported Ethiopia even though it was led by the reactionary monarch Haile Selassie. And of course, later in the century the left stood with non-leftists such as Mohammad Mosaddegh against the U.S. and British coup in Iran, Nasser against the UK-French-Israeli aggression of 1956, and Lebanon against Israel's 1982 invasion. One could multiply the cases, but the point is that even in the case of non-leftist governments—the left stood in solidarity with the victims of aggression. That did not mean agreement with the politics of those governments, but recognition that their people have the right to resist invasion.

It is true that no one called for China or Russia to deliver weapons to Iraq in 2003, even though we opposed that unjust and illegal U.S. invasion. But this is one of the exceptions that prove the rule. No one called for external arms to Saddam Hussein because he was a murderous dictator ruling over a people unwilling to fight on his behalf, as evidenced by the lack of popular opposition to the invasion. Contrast this with the incredible level of support that the Ukrainian people have shown for their government's resistance to the Russian invasion.

Our politics are all about solidarity: Solidarity with oppressed and struggling people everywhere, whether their oppressor is a pro-American regime, like Saudi Arabia, or Israel, or Honduras, or the Philippines, or whether it is an anti-American regime, like Russia, or Iran, or China, or Nicaragua. The DSA IC has in recent years been far more vocal in the former cases. Dalbon continues this trend by writing about Ukraine with hardly a critical word about Russia or its crimes (while of course working in a reference to Ukrainian fascists).

In Ukraine the largest socialist movement, though still small, is Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), which together with labor unions, feminists, LGBTQ folks, and anarchists have been both fighting the Russian invasion and resisting Zelenskyy's neoliberal policies. They call both for foreign weapons and support for their social program. What has the DSA IC done to express its solidarity with these comrades?

But, most of all, where is the DSA IC's solidarity with the Ukrainian people? They have decided — as public opinion polls confirm (despite Dalbon's claim to the contrary) — to risk their lives, to die by the tens of thousands in combat against Russian troops, to resist despite the destruction of their power plants, hospitals, schools, and homes, despite the rape, torture, and killing of non-combatants, despite the flight of millions abroad. And now in the freezing cold, they fight on. While it is true that the United States and other countries provide arms, this is *not* fundamentally a proxy war. It is Ukraine; it is Ukrainians who want to fight for their country's freedom. They ask the world, including progressives and socialists, to stand with them. Where is the DSA International Committee?