

Lenin, Ukraine, and the Amnesia of the “Anti-war Left”

August 10, 2022



Picture for a joint campaign of solidarity with Ukraine of the Social Movement and NPA, Katya Gritseva, 2022, digital art, Lviv

The most prominent institutions of the anglophone left—including *Jacobin* and Democratic Socialists of America—have deliberately set themselves against the provision of the assistance which Ukraine needs to defend itself. Leading intellectuals, such as Noam Chomsky, have joined them. Much of the remainder have temporized, choosing neutrality or vagueness in a situation of injustice.

This failure is far from universal, and a vocal minority on the left has placed itself firmly amongst Ukraine’s strongest supporters. Nonetheless, the failure is broad, deep, and serious.

Getting to the root of this failure is no simple matter. The left lacks a unified theory of geopolitics, capitalism, war, and movement strategy to act as a reference point for its internal discussion. It lacks even a range of contending, explicitly articulated theoretical perspectives drawn from within its own ranks, and consistent with its broader world view, that clearly describe the lines of debate.

What it has instead is a mess of half-examined folk-theories, sentiments, and habits of argument. These have been drawn impressionistically from recent history, borrowed selectively from philosophically incompatible traditions—such as realism—or half-excavated from the bedrock of the left’s own past.

A full account of the left’s failure would require coming to grips with all of these, and is beyond the scope of this article. But one of these roots deserves special attention: Vladimir Lenin’s writing on imperialism and war during the throes of World War I, and the socialist strategy that accompanied

it.

It deserves attention because it is the implicit backdrop to a great many socialist responses to contemporary war, but also because it is almost universally misunderstood, ripped from the historical context on which it was expressly made dependent, and rendered a misleading anachronism.

Regardless of the several mistakes within Lenin's argument, it is nonetheless more sophisticated than the folk version which is today promoted by the current that sometimes calls itself "the anti-war left." This current sometimes like to dub their opponents—who may advocate military action in certain delimited situations, such as Ukraine—the "pro-war left."

The irony is that Vladimir Lenin, a feted opponent of imperialism, would quite probably find himself swept up in this rhetorical dragnet today.



Symbolic image of the industrial city of Mariupol, destroyed by bombs, Katya Gritseva, 2022, mixed media, Lviv

Lenin on Imperialism and War during World War I

The folk version of the socialist response to war which has come down to us today from the years 1914—1918 holds that socialists always oppose all war by their own imperial states, whether against non-imperial states (e.g. colonial wars), or against other imperialist states, i.e. in all circumstances. This policy—opposition to imperialist war—is sometimes said not to be merely one amongst many socialist positions; but the very thing which distinguishes socialists (in the tradition of Lenin, Karl Liebknecht and Eugene V. Debs) from liberals (in the tradition of the Mensheviks and German SDP majority).

Lenin grounded his understanding of the wars of his time in an account of its global political economy. He called that period, from some time in the late 19th Century to WWI, "imperialism", but he acknowledged that term wasn't strictly accurate. Imperialism had been around for centuries. It would be more accurate to call the period in which he lived and wrote "high colonialism": during which the whole earth's surface had been substantially divided up between the imperial states, and a few non-colonial states.

This, Lenin said, derived from the deepening tendency of capitalism toward monopoly, and toward the power of financial monopolies over industrial monopolies. This process rendered the big banks something like the general bearers of the capitalist interest, and imperial nation states the agents of

those interests. Because industry needs both raw materials and markets, and increasing quantities of either can only be secured by force abroad, states were compelled to seek ever-greater colonial expansion. Because the geographic limits of the earth had left so few weak polities unsubordinated, there was only one mechanism by which empires could seek further aggrandizement of their monopolies: seizure of territory—colonial or metropolitan—from other colonial powers. Thus, the stage was set for inter-imperial war; not a systemic aberration, but an outgrowth of the basic character of capitalism in its era of high colonialism.

Insofar as it relates to monopoly and finance, Lenin's argument is open to question. But the thesis that the era of high colonialism contained within its basic logic—whatever its origins—the motive force which drove the imperial powers into World War I is now widely accepted; taught in schools, and a feature of mainstream histories.

It is worth quoting Lenin at some length, because the views he expressed are so contradictory to the folk understanding of them. He was clear that it was not possible to extrapolate from conclusions applicable to one era of imperialism to another. As he wrote in *Imperialism* (1916):

Colonial policy and imperialism existed before the latest stage of capitalism, and even before capitalism. Rome, founded on slavery, pursued a colonial policy and practiced imperialism. But "general" disquisitions on imperialism, which ignore, or put into the background, the fundamental difference between socio-economic formations, inevitably turn into the most vapid banality or bragging, like the comparison: "Greater Rome and Greater Britain." Even the capitalist colonial policy of *previous* stages of capitalism is essentially different from the colonial policy of finance capital. (Chapter 6)

In *Socialism and War* (1915), too, Lenin emphasized that his conclusions were specifically founded in the period of high colonialism, and indeed needed to be nuanced from war to war:

... we deem it necessary historically (from the standpoint of Marx's dialectical materialism) to study each war separately. In history there have been numerous wars which, in spite of all the horrors, atrocities, distress and suffering that inevitably accompany all wars, were progressive, i.e., benefited the development of mankind by helping to destroy the exceptionally harmful and reactionary institutions (for example, autocracy or serfdom), the most barbarous despotisms in Europe (Turkish and Russian). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the historically specific features of precisely the present war. (Chapter 1)

He continued:

... from 1789 to 1871, one of the types of wars were wars of a bourgeois-progressive, national-liberating character. In other words, the chief content and historical significance of these wars were the overthrow of absolutism and feudalism, the undermining of these institutions, the overthrow of alien oppression. Therefore, those were progressive wars . . .

Amongst these wars were those that Marx—another "pro-war socialist", to adopt the contemporary usage—enthusiastically supported, including the Union's war against the Confederacy¹, and Poland's wars to resist Tsarist domination².

This did not mean Lenin was naïve about the political character of these wars, which were profoundly mixed. Nonetheless, he discerned their fundamental historical meaning, both from amidst their malign political effects, and the mass slaughter they produced:

For example, the revolutionary wars waged by France contained an element of plunder and

conquest of alien territory by the French, but this does not in the least alter the fundamental historical significance of these wars, which destroyed and shattered feudalism and absolutism in the whole of old, serf-ridden Europe. In the Franco-Prussian war, Germany plundered France, but this does not alter the fundamental historical significance of this war, which liberated tens of millions of German people from feudal disintegration and from the oppression of two despots, the Russian tsar and Napoleon III.

(In this latter case, Lenin notes that Marx had approved of a vote against war credits in Germany, even at the outset of the war, on grounds of the need for an independent working-class policy. As noted above, however, in the cases of the U.S. Civil War and Poland, Marx advocated practical support, rather than abstention. The variations of circumstance from war to war are innumerable; so are the appropriate responses.)

It should be clear then, that Lenin's view was not that the wars of imperial states were to be opposed as a matter of eternal principle. On the contrary the wars of imperialist states may, under certain circumstances, be progressive—but those circumstances did not include his own time, in which the conditions of high colonialism rendered that impossible. To understand his logic, turn to his discussion of the invasion of Belgium by Germany, which triggered the entry of Britain into WWI.

Let us suppose that all the states interested in the observation of international treaties declared war on Germany with the demand for the liberation and indemnification of Belgium. In such a case, the sympathies of Socialists would, of course, be on the side of Germany's enemies. But the whole point is that the "triple (and quadruple) entente" is waging war *not* over Belgium . . .

Rather, he says, each power sought to use the opportunity of the war to conquer new territories from the other powers; including on the edges of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Thus "it is *impossible* to help Belgium *without* helping to strangle Austria or Turkey, etc." Why was this impossible, in his view? Precisely because of the political economy of high colonialism, which embedded the drive for territorial expansion deep in the heart of global geopolitics. The idea was not merely that imperial powers happened to be hypocritical, for this was always true, but that high colonialism made it *structurally inevitable* that national liberation through war in one theatre would *dynamically produce*, through an expanding military conflagration, national oppression in another.

Consequently, he argued, it was not possible to extrapolate from socialist policy in relation to the wars of the early-mid 19th century to socialist policy in WWI. The same principle is true of extrapolation between Lenin's day and ours, in which the structural conditions of high colonialism no longer hold. Whatever we say about war, to be worthwhile it must be grounded in a specific account of the conditions of our time.

If we consider the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is self-evident that the conditions which determined Lenin's attitude to Belgium no longer exist. Colonial blocs are no longer the organizing basis of world capitalism; there is no general imperative toward territorial expansion, and there is no sense in which Western support for Ukraine carries with it any dynamic necessity for national oppression elsewhere.

The conditions relevant to the formation of socialist policy must also include the historic position of the socialist movement. The "revolutionary defeatism" of Lenin and the official Second International congresses—a policy of working to overthrow one's own government, with military defeat as a necessary corollary—was wholly contingent on the revolutionary ferment of its time.

Again, stressing the historical contingency of his position, he wrote that in that earlier era:

there was *no* modern imperialism, *no* ripe objective conditions for Socialism, and *no* mass Socialist parties *in any* of the belligerent countries, i.e., none of the conditions from which the Basle Manifesto deduced the tactics of “proletarian revolution” *in connection* with a war between the great powers.

Indeed, in *The Defeat of One's Own Government in the Imperialist War* (1915), Lenin seems scarcely at all concerned with war policy from either a humanitarian or geopolitical aspect. He is almost entirely absorbed with that policy as a tool to facilitate the domestic empowerment of the Bolsheviks. The same sentiment appears in *Imperialism*, where Lenin wrote that were a revolution springing from war impossible, the defeatist position would not apply.

Even in WWI, the universal wisdom of the defeatist position was doubtable. It most clearly applied to the aggressor powers. But it is less obvious that it made sense for socialists in the other countries of Europe. In Russia, defeatism helped bring the Bolsheviks to power, but the subordination of their political project to the Kaiser was then only averted by those of their erstwhile allies who continued to fight in the West.

The era of high-colonialism ended; not, as Lenin hoped, in socialism, but in fresh cycles of capitalist consolidation. Ultimately, it took a second imperial world war to break apart the European empires that were the organizing structure of the colonial era.

World War II itself provided further evidence that Lenin's policy was not even universal within the era of high colonialism. For all its imperial hypocrisies, the fundamental historic significance of WWII was the defeat of Nazism in Europe and the destruction of the Japanese empire in Asia. The official Communists of that time abandoned their initial opposition to the Allied war effort on direct orders from Moscow. But there has been scarcely any attempt to theorize that decision since, and to ask more general questions about what it means for socialist approaches to war and world order. The episode is recounted³ without comment in a 2019 *Jacobin* issue titled *War is a Racket* (Summer 2019). Merely a racket then, too? Or was something more at stake?

The lack of a nuanced framework in which to understand war leads to more contemporary elisions. Left-leaning outlets worldwide lent their support to Rojava, the predominantly Kurdish enclave in northern Syria formed in the midst of revolution. The very same *Jacobin* special issue sympathetically interviewed a US activist who volunteered there. Yet it is self-evident that Rojava was only born by the grace of U.S. military power, and was drastically weakened when that was substantially withdrawn. This tension is not discussed, not acknowledged: celebration of Rojava abstracted from its material preconditions lies down beside unconditional condemnations of those very same preconditions under the slogan “endless war”. There is no attempt at a resolution.

Instead, certain of Lenin's conclusions have been kept on life support, quite contrary to the intentions of their progenitor.



Picture about the importance of mutual assistance and cooperation during the Ukraine war, Katya Gritseva, 2022, digital art, Kharkiv

Contrast with the Left Today

Lenin misunderstood much about his own time. His thought should not be the foundation stone for our own today—whether in this or any other matter.

But returning to Lenin as theorist does two worthwhile things. First, it firmly dispels the idea that the contemporary mainstream left's attitudes to war rests on a foundation of classical theory—or any theory at all: just a few disembodied conclusions, expressly dependent on the conditions of a time long past.

Second, it reminds us what a materialist method in the analysis of war and the world system looks like. Every one of Lenin's claims was historically located, contingent and specific, grounded in an account of the global political economy of his time, and an awareness that every war is different.

Lenin, like Clausewitz, understood war not as an aberration arriving *deus ex machina* on a world stage with an essentially peaceful character, but as a continuation of politics by other means. He understood that the politics that war continues differs from time to time and place to place; varying both by the overarching conditions of the world system, and from war to war. He made understanding the politics which each war continued the lynchpin of his analysis. He accepted that military violence was, in certain circumstances, the indispensable motive force of progress, and not only in the hands of cadres fighting directly for socialism.

By contrast, the approach of today's mainstream left distills a mixture of horrified pacifism, banal moralism, and flatly false assertions about the left's own political history. "Opposing war has always been at the heart of socialist internationalism," Ben Burgis claims.⁴ David Broder writes⁵ that socialists should return to what he says is a "core principle": "an unrelenting rejection of the use of military force". Lenin's life and writing gives the lie to these notions, as do Marx's (and Trotsky's).

Moving beyond this would involve reckoning with the particular conditions of war in our time, including *inter alia* the predominance of civil wars over international wars, the resultant rarity of wars of total mobilization and the commonality of atrocities, nuclear weapons, the probably-terminal absence of a revolutionary conjuncture, the non-dependence of contemporary capitalism on systems of exclusive territorial control, etc.

The broad response to the Ukraine war, as to the war in Syria, has been marked not only by wrong

conclusions, but a wholesale lack of curiosity and materialism. The mainstream left has produced not one worthwhile analysis of the military balance, nor the dynamics of nuclear crisis, nor of the contemporary relationships between global political economy and war. These are made the subject of throwaway assertions, rarely even whole sentences. There have been, instead, analyses of discourse, majoring in the questions of hypocrisy and moral “standing”: reed thin, and almost entirely irrelevant to the clash now taking place in the flatlands of eastern Ukraine.

The politics which that clash continues should attract support to the Ukrainian side from the left everywhere. It pits a flawed democracy against a personal autocracy; a social system with the potential for evolution against one hard-cased by a police state; and national self-determination against colonial annexation and cultural annihilation. Whatever one thinks, strategically, of Ukraine’s manner of handling its relations with the West and Russia, these are the matters at stake, and the primary ground on which the question of military support should be decided.

Notes

1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Civil War in the United States* (International Publishers, 1937).
2. John Ganz, “Ben Burgis’s Bad History: *Jacobin*’s anti-Jacobins,” April 15, 2022.
3. David Broder, “Breaking the Chains of Command,” *Jacobin*, August 27, 2019.
4. “No, Left-Wing Opponents of War Aren’t Isolationists,” *Jacobin*, April 14, 2022.
5. “Stop Pretending the Left Is on Putin’s Side,” *Jacobin*, February 24, 2022.