

The War in Ukraine and the Global South

March 17, 2022



On March 10, 2022, *The Guardian* published an article titled “The west v Russia: why the global south isn’t taking sides,” by David Adler, the general coordinator of the *Progressive International*. In essence, the author of the text tries to justify the position of that part of the Western Left which refused to support the resistance of the people of Ukraine against Putin’s aggression and limited itself to general calls for peace and a “diplomatic solution.” I decided to write a response to this article for several reasons. First, its main argument may seem convincing to many leftists, whereas I disagree with it; second, our *Commons Journal* is still a member of the *Progressive International*; and third, the author directly refers to my “letter to the Western Left,” hence his article is also a response to me. This is my attempt to continue that dialogue.

International Law

Adler’s article begins with a reference to an emergency session of the UN General Assembly on Russian aggression against Ukraine. Frankly, this surprised me, because against the background of the Progressive International Cabinet’s toothless statement, the UN resolution is frankly a paragon of radicalism. Unfortunately, David Adler does not explain why the unelected Cabinet of the Progressive International failed to do what 141 countries at the General Assembly did — support the demand for Russia to “immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its armed forces from Ukraine.” Instead, Adler points out that the Global South has not imposed sanctions against Russia, so it is only the “West” and its East Asian allies that are actively pressing Russia.

“[T]he true rift is not between left and right, nor even between east and west,” Adler writes, but “between north and south, between the nations that we call developed and those we call developing.” In short, by pointing to the reluctance of the Global South’s governments to impose sanctions, Adler is trying to absolve himself of responsibility and maintain his ostrich position.

I do not intend to downplay the gap between the Global South and the West. On the contrary, as a resident of the poorest country in Eastern Europe, I am sympathetic to the reluctance of poor countries to suffer obvious economic losses due to their active involvement in the conflict. Especially since it is the Global South, not the West, that will suffer from the food crisis that awaits us all

because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But I have a completely different attitude to rich countries' reluctance to impose sanctions because these would entail losses for them. Western governments have no excuse in this matter. And, for the Western left, the position of the Global South cannot serve as an excuse for trying to withdraw from this conflict.

However, the reluctance to participate actively in the conflict of countries that have been victims of Western imperialism has not only economic reasons, but also obvious historical and political ones, to which Adler refers. He also quotes Pierre Sané, president of the *Imagine Africa Institute* and former secretary general of *Amnesty International*. "Neutrality does not mean indifference," says Pierre Sané, "Neutrality means continuously calling for the respect of international laws." Pierre Sané's position is unequivocal. That of the *Progressive International*, on the other hand, isn't, and I can't help but ask again, why then did its statement not call for compliance with international law and, accordingly, demand that Russia immediately withdraw its troops from Ukraine?

As Marwan Bishara pointed out, the reluctance of many countries to get involved in the conflict "has less to do with Ukraine and more to do with America." That is understandable. But to stand up for international law now is to support the struggle of the Ukrainian people for their freedom and independence, at least through statements. Unfortunately, the *Progressive International* has not even done that.

Historical Parallels

David Adler draws a parallel between the Global South's reluctance to participate actively in the current conflict and the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. But he ignores a fundamental difference between the current conflict and the Cold War. If the West has not changed much politically since the Cold War, the other side of the conflict, Russia, has changed dramatically. Like it or not, Russia today has more in common with the Third Reich than with the Soviet Union. I do not consider Putin's regime fascist, but in this case, it is really hard to avoid parallels. In both cases we have an empire that lost the global confrontation, with which the enemy behaved arrogantly after victory, and where revanchist sentiments have taken root. A society that did not accept territorial losses and supported the use of brute military force to regain territory.

The Soviet Union, despite its authoritarianism, deportations, and massacres, offered the world a definite progressive project. Putin's regime promotes only conservatism, aggressive nationalism, and the division of the world into spheres of influence of the "great powers." In this respect, despite all the differences, the Third Reich is the closest analogy to Putin's Russia.

The reluctance of the Global South to support Western pressure on Russia is also comparable to the reluctance of anti-colonial movements to support their metropolises' wars with the Axis countries. It is often glossed over now, but the African and Asian colonies of European states had different attitudes toward participation in World War II. Chandra Bose, one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, even cooperated with the Germans and Japanese and participated in the formation of the SS Legion of Free India. And he was far from alone — as historian David Motadel notes:

At the height of the Second World War, scores of anticolonial revolutionaries flocked to Germany from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia, turning wartime Berlin into a hub of global anti-imperial revolutionary activism. Driven by the contingencies of war, German officials made increasing efforts to mobilize anti-imperial movements, reaching out to the subjects of the British and French empires and the minorities of the Soviet Union.

I do not mention this to judge the people who took part in these anti-colonial movements. There is no ambiguity about the Third Reich, but anti-colonial movements that chose to collaborate with it and with the Japanese deserve more understanding. Especially on the part of citizens of Western countries that never faced such a difficult choice as colonized nations did during the Second World War. People fighting for their freedom have to pick their allies not in circumstances of their own choosing, but under circumstances that already exist. By recalling this episode, I simply want to show that the position of the Global South countries cannot be an argument in the discussion of the Russian aggression against Ukraine any more than it was 80 years ago.

But enough of the historical digressions. Fortunately, modern Russia is not the Third Reich, and it will not be able to wage a large-scale war for long. We must not allow the war to escalate into World War III, so the international left must not support the direct involvement of other states in the war. But socialists must unequivocally condemn the aggressor and support political and economic pressure on him. At the same time, the international left must not see Ukrainians only as victims – we, too, have our own views on what we would like our country to be, and we are ready to fight for them. And we need international help in our struggle. Support the demand to give Ukraine airplanes and air defense. If you don't want to pressure your governments on this issue, at least support the demand to write off Ukraine's foreign debt and call for tough sanctions, especially against the oligarchs.

Global South

In conclusion, I would like to address the people of the Global South. For the past two weeks I have been reading surprised responses from Syrians who ask why the world did not react as actively when Russian planes bombed their homes, and why Syrian refugees were not treated with such hospitality. Obviously, one of the reasons is that we are more "white." I'm sorry that you were treated differently. But at the same time, the current situation gives the whole world a chance.

One of the features of Hitler's policy was that he transferred European colonial practices intended for "non-whites" to Europe. This helped to discredit colonial policy as such, and Germany's defeat contributed to the collapse of other colonial empires. Something similar could happen again now. Putin decided to repeat what the U.S. did with Iraq, but did not consider that the reaction to the aggression of an authoritarian empire against a more democratic Eastern European republic would be so different. And this allows us to finally put an end to such politics around the world.

I understand the reluctance to support your former colonialists in their struggle against another imperialism and the warnings that a stronger U.S. would impact you negatively. But let's not forget that last year U.S. troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan in disgrace — for a while it will discourage them from pursuing aggressive policies.

At the same time, as we now see, other imperialist predators can profit from this situation. Russia already bombed Syria, it has subjugated the governments of Central Africa and Mali, to say nothing of its imperial dominance over Kazakhstan and Central Asia. If it wins in Ukraine, it will be able to meddle in your countries' affairs, too. Whereas its defeat can restrain not only Russia but also other global and regional powers. And the sooner this war is over, the less negative its consequences will be, including in terms of the food crisis.

This does not mean that Ukraine's victory will have no negative consequences. And while I now wish with all my heart for Russia to be defeated as soon as possible, I am also concerned that a weakening of Russia in the South Caucasus would allow Azerbaijan to resume the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. My friends live in Armenia, and although they do not like their country's dependence on Russia any more than I like Ukraine's dependence on the West, in both cases dependence offers

weak but certain security guarantees. And understanding the position of Armenia, I do not expect much from them — on the contrary, I am grateful that in the UN General Assembly Armenia at least abstained and did not vote against the resolution.

But preserving this system is not the solution. We need to develop and strengthen the global system of international security. And in Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, the security issue could be partially solved by replacing Russian “peacekeepers” with UN peacekeepers. At the same time, the solution of Ukrainian problems could help you as well. For example, writing off our foreign debt would set a precedent, which I hope you could then use.

Tough times are coming. But there is only one thing worse than a crisis: missing the chance it offers. Ukraine should become Russia’s Vietnam, but for this we need international aid, the same way Vietnam needed it during the US invasion. Currently we don’t even have enough of Kalashnikovs. Please help us. If you cannot impose sanctions, help us in whatever other way you can. And after Russia is defeated, we will have to work jointly on the democratization of the global order.

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