

Voices of the Ukrainian Resistance

Category: Anti-imperialism, Imperialism, War and peace

written by Phil Gasper | February 25, 2023



Review: Fred Leplat and Chris Ford (eds.), *Ukraine: Voices of Resistance and Solidarity* (London: Resistance Books and Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, 2022)

It has been nearly a year since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite many expectations of a short war, the Ukrainians have held firm in the face of the onslaught and seen many successes driving back the Russian forces.

Much of the international left, including much of the would-be Marxist left, has taken a very skewed view of the conflict at odds with how our political tradition has tended to approach anti-colonial wars. To be clear, there are many shades to this broad standpoint, ranging from straightforward Putin apologism to insisting that “peace” be achieved any cost, including Ukrainian surrender. Sometimes the matter is framed in terms of purely negativist or campist anti-imperialism; that is, the idea that, by virtue of being in political conflict with the Western imperial powers, Russia is anti-imperialist. Other times, it is framed in what one might call pseudo-Third-Campist terms, with left-wingers correctly recognizing Russia as an imperialist power in competition with those of the West, but then misleadingly painting the war as simply an inter-imperialist conflict between Russia and the Western powers (particularly NATO), with Ukraine as a mere “proxy” for the latter. What these approaches have in common is an erasure of the Ukrainian people’s agency, a delegitimization of their efforts to defend themselves from an invading force that is trying to subjugate them, and an explicit or implicit deflection of blame from the Putin regime by painting the Russian invasion as a kind of reflexive response to NATO expansion.

I admit upfront that, while I was politically educated in the Third Camp Trotskyist tradition, unlike most socialists with that background, I do not consider the “right to self-determination” a helpful framework for understanding national oppression. Due to limits of space and scope, I cannot elaborate here, but in short, I think that even critically minded applications of that framework underestimate the danger of nationalism and make too many concessions to it. While I use these labels extremely cautiously, on the national question I am more “Luxemburgist” than “Leninist”.

Nevertheless, as far as immediate, concrete measures are concerned, I broadly agree with many of

my comrades in Ukraine solidarity activism who hold a more “classical Leninist” view. The Ukrainians should be able to defend themselves from Russia’s war of colonial conquest, which includes asking for arms from whatever sources they can find. Socialists should campaign for no strings to be attached to other countries’ aid to Ukraine and for foreign debt cancellation, as the Ukrainian left party Sotsialniy Rukh (Social Movement), the Polish left party Razem, and others have already campaigned on impressively. Socialists should support the Ukrainian working class against both the Russian invasion and the measures introduced by the Zelenskyy government to deregulate the labor market, create a precarious workforce, and shrink trade union influence in the name of national defense. Likewise, socialists should build practical, meaningful links between their country’s trade unions and those in Ukraine and fight for their countries to let in and provide for refugees.

This brings me to *Ukraine: Voices of Resistance and Solidarity*, a new book by the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign that compiles a range of writings on pertinent issues arising from the Russo-Ukrainian War. Most of its contributions are by left-wing Ukrainian writers and campaigners, including Yuliya Yurchenko, Taras Bilous, and Vitalii Dudin, who provide appreciable commentary via articles or interviews. The collection also reprints direct appeals from Ukrainian unions and a manifesto by Ukrainian feminists. Between them, the Ukrainian contributors address such vital matters as the challenges the invasion has created for women, the economic effects of the war, and why the left should fight to ensure that Ukraine’s postwar reconstruction is conducted in the interests of workers, not the interests of capital. Other contributors, including Gilbert Achcar, Simon Pirani, and two of *New Politics*’ own editors, Stephen Shalom and Dan La Botz, mostly focus on the aforementioned failure of large sections of the international left and “peace” movement to show solidarity with Ukraine. While it perhaps takes up too space for a 167-page book, John-Paul Himka’s brief overview of Ukrainian history since 988 BCE helps readers place recent events within a long-term context.

Despite its short length, the book provides a useful cross-section of perspectives on Ukraine that one is unlikely to find in many prominent left-wing outlets in the West: a cross-section that rightly centers Ukrainian voices. To be clear, I do not mean this in an identity politics sense; that is, I am not insisting that we foreground one’s identity category (in this context, one’s nationality) as decisive for political organizing and for the truth or moral authority of one’s claims and actions. Rather, I am making the point that, in order to provide a viable basis for pluralistic collective action for emancipatory struggles, we as socialists need to recognize the legitimacy of the existing, organically emerging movement’s mass demands for democratic and other political rights as a form of self-activity. Otherwise, we will fail to make substantial relationships with the organizations and activists already mobilizing within that movement, thereby making it harder for us as socialists to engage critically in a way that can help us offer the movement better practical alternatives to its reactionary elements.[1] From this perspective, socialists outside Ukraine should find the book valuable as an avenue for building connections with the Ukrainian left and labor movement that enable meaningful, political engagement.

This brings me back to the issue of the wider left and “peace” movement’s response to the war; in particular, to the numerous, highly questionable arguments made against giving solidarity to the Ukrainian resistance. In this respect, it is perhaps most worth highlighting Oksana Dutchak’s amusingly polemical contribution, which lists and skewers ten such “leftist” arguments. This includes the arguments that Russia and Ukraine should simply negotiate, that the West should stop supplying weapons to Ukraine because it might escalate into nuclear war, that Ukrainian and Russian workers should simply turn their guns on their own governments, and that the far-right’s participation on the Ukrainian side of the conflict should preclude us from supporting Ukraine against the invasion.

The argument about negotiations rests on the unstated premise of “peace by any means” and, as Dutchak notes, implies that Ukraine should capitulate, thereby tacitly spreading blame for the ongoing death and destruction to the Ukrainians because they “don’t want to negotiate” (p. 82). This ignores how Russia has often used diplomacy as a smokescreen to buy time to strengthen its armed forces and to legitimize its military conquests. As the British-Nigerian writer Ralph Leonard puts it elsewhere: “A ‘peace settlement’ that confirms Russian conquests and de facto partitions of Ukraine along crude ethnolinguistic lines...would be a boon for Russian revanchism”. The argument also ignores how Ukrainian victories on the battlefield strengthen Ukraine’s hand at the negotiating table and how a Russian defeat in Ukraine might help to weaken Putin’s reactionary, authoritarian regime back home.

The argument against supplying arms to Ukraine due to the risk of nuclear escalation is tantamount to allowing nuclear powers to do whatever they please. As for saying that Ukrainian and Russian workers should overthrow their governments instead of fighting each other, it is certainly true that we as class-struggle socialists ultimately want workers of the world to unite against their exploiters. Nevertheless, that end point is not something that can simply be willed into existence, Putin’s colonial war is an existential threat for the Ukrainians, and invoking our ultimate objective in the abstract to avoid giving solidarity to the Ukrainian resistance is close to saying that we should not involve ourselves in any social struggle until there is a global, proletarian revolution. Instead, socialists should build solidarity links between Ukrainian and Russian workers for both the short- and long-term while positively supporting the Ukrainians currently fighting to defend their lives, homes, and political freedoms.

The presence of the far right within the Ukrainian resistance, especially the notorious Azov Regiment, serves as a similar fig leaf for what is essentially a Putin-apologist position. It exaggerates the political influence of the organized far-right within Ukraine, often in a way that reinforces the Putinist myth that the Maidan Revolution of 2014 was a “fascist coup”, while downplaying, firstly, the far more extensive role of fascist and far-right Orthodox Christian forces in the Putin regime and among the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas and, secondly, “how the empty signifier of ‘Nazi’ is used by Russian propaganda to dehumanize whoever they want” (p. 81). That and, as Yurchenko remarked at the book launch in London, “Show me one army in the world that doesn’t have right-wingers in it!”

This brings me to a point that several of the book’s contributors make: how the Ukrainian resistance is generally invisible to the “anti-war” left. In his chapter, Pirani makes an appeal to supporters of the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) in the UK. StWC leaders like Lindsey German have tended to take a “plague-on-both-your-houses” stance on the conflict. Pirani criticizes how the organization’s website makes no or (virtually no) mention of the Ukrainian military volunteers, medical workers, and transport workers risking their lives in the face of the Russian onslaught, or of the Ukrainians in the UK raising money for bulletproof vests and other vital supplies (p. 154-155). Nor does StWC acknowledge that Russia is waging an imperialist war of aggression against Ukraine, let alone that Russia has been doing so since its invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

As if aiming to prove the book’s timeliness, at the time of writing this review, StWC has called a demonstration in London for the first anniversary of the Russian invasion (February 25) with the demands of “stop sending arms” (to Ukraine, that is) and “immediate ceasefire and peace negotiations”. Conspicuously absent are any demands relating to the withdrawal of Russian troops. Nor does StWC seem concerned about how an immediate ceasefire would leave large swathes of Ukraine under the terror of Russian military occupation, including torture, mass arrests, and civilian massacres like the one committed in Bucha last March.

Somewhat paradoxically, one of the book’s main strengths – namely, how it provides a short,

readable cross-section of perspectives one is unlikely to find in more campist outlets on the Western left – also presents a weakness. Since *Ukraine: Voices of Resistance and Solidarity* is a compilation of short, previously published texts rather than something conceived from the outset as a single book, many of the more substantial issues are only touched upon. For example, while Ilya Butraitskis' and Niko Vorobyov's chapters provide valuable, up-close perspectives on Putin's regime from a Russian dissident perspective, and numerous contributors describe the regime as fascist, the book has little systematic discussion of why we should consider it fascist.

Likewise, topics on which there is reasonable disagreement within the pro-Ukrainian left, such as the call for tougher sanctions on Russia from several of the contributors, are left undebated. As a Venezuelan, I am extremely aware of how the campist left often points to sanctions by imperialist powers as a form of regime apologism, and one need not oppose all forms of sanctions, but given how often sanctions are ineffective or outright counterproductive (in this case, reinforcing the image Putin projects to the Russian people of a Russia besieged by a hostile West), and how many forms of sanctions hit working-class Russians rather than their rulers, these issues need to be argued out.

Nevertheless, *Ukraine: Voices of Resistance and Solidarity* is a highly commendable work that gives a needed platform to Ukrainian socialists and trade unionists. I would especially recommend distributing and discussing it at union local/branch meetings to develop perspectives on Ukraine and help build practical solidarity links.

[1] While we disagree on the right to self-determination and other issues, this approach to “listening to X voices” owes much to Promise Li's thought-provoking articulations of the matter.