

Why African Americans Should Support Ukraine

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Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

In part, because Ukraine is a European country, many Black Americans have been led to believe that the Russian invasion is just a conflict between Europeans or, at worst, a conflict between Russia vs. USA/NATO.

Supporting Ukraine's resistance is essential not because it is the worst example of oppression on a global scale. Rather, we need to support the resistance because it is the right thing to do in the face of injustice. Injustice cannot be excused away or ignored because there are other injustices at play. There is no "oppression Olympics" to prove who is treated the worst. When injustice surfaces anywhere, we must respond to the call for solidarity.

But so much confusion and misinformation has reigned since the invasion that it is easy to understand not being able to make heads or tails of the situation.

First, let's not forget that under Vladimir Putin's orders, Russian intelligence services carried out a well-orchestrated campaign of disinformation targeting African American voters in the 2020 Presidential elections trying to convince Black voters to support Trump against Biden. Those efforts were dismal failures.

Putin is an anti-socialist autocrat and corrupt oligarch who has rigged Russian elections to keep himself in power for the past 20 years. He is a white supremacist and Christian nationalist who has waged a bloody war against the Muslims of Chechnya and other Russian Federation regions. He is admired by racist Donald Trump and his MAGA minions as "a genius" for invading Ukraine.

Now, Putin is courting African countries with hypocrisy, lies, and false promises of economic aid. He is offering countries in the Global South a type of 21st-century neo-colonialism. Most assuredly, he and his gang are no lovers of Black, Brown, Yellow, and Indigenous peoples anywhere in the world.

In much the same way that the histories, cultures, and languages of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean have been trampled upon and their lands exploited by the USA and Western Europe, Russia has likewise chosen to enter the fray. It has sought to regain the world's respect by proving to be every bit the bully that the USA and Western Europe have proven to be over the ages.

Despite the lies and propaganda circulating on social media, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not only a violation of several international laws but also fundamentally a violation of the internationally recognized right to national self-determination and sovereignty. Furthermore, this conflict is deeply rooted in the colonial relationship that Ukraine has been subjected to by Russia for centuries.

Russia Is a Colonizer Too

Much of the world has lived with the legacy of colonialism. It has lived with big powers, particularly from Europe and the USA, stomping on them, ignoring international law, and asserting that might makes right.

The USA and its allies chose to expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), despite the predictable backlash within Russia, where many Russians saw their "sphere of influence" shrinking.

The Putin regime likes to pretend that Russia stands with countries in the Global South (Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean) because, contrary to Western Europe and the USA, Russia supposedly never had colonies. The truth is a bit more complicated. Russia had plenty of colonies; they just were not overseas.

Just as the United States expanded from 13 colonies along the Atlantic Coast into a subcontinental nation, Russia expanded over the centuries in the direction of central Europe and east towards the Pacific. Through the creation of the Russian Empire, various peoples, kingdoms, and developing nations were brought into what came to be known as the Russian-dominated "prison house of nations." Within that "prison house" was Ukraine.

The current leadership of Russia, under Vladimir Putin, wishes to restore what it sees as the greatness of the Russian Empire. It has repudiated the principles of the 1917 Russian Revolution, which upheld self-determination for nations and autonomy for less developed populations. Putin has argued forcefully that these revolutionary principles constituted nothing short of betrayal.

In the lead-up to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Putin harangued against Ukraine, not because there were deep governmental differences, but because he challenged the very legitimacy of Ukraine as an independent nation!

The Fight for Ukrainian Sovereignty

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the people of Ukraine voted for independence. In 1994, as a follow-up, a treaty was signed called the Budapest Accords, between Russia and Ukraine. In exchange for nuclear weapons possessed by Ukraine, Russia would guarantee that they would never attack them.

Twenty years later, in 2014, under the pretext of the overthrow of a pro-Russian Ukrainian

government, the Putin regime began its assault on Ukraine, seizing Crimea — which had been part of Ukraine since 1954 — and promoting secessionist uprisings in the eastern part of Ukraine. The February 2022 invasion was part two of the assault on Ukrainian sovereignty.

Common Questions About What's Happening in Ukraine

There is so much Russian-generated propaganda, so here are a few of the most frequent questions and misconceptions.

Question: Didn't Russia invade to get rid of Nazis?

Answer: It had nothing to do with Nazis. Just as there are Nazis in the USA, there are Nazis in Russia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, Ukraine has a democratically elected government.

Q: What about the stories of attacks on Russians in eastern Ukraine?

A: Eastern Ukraine has a large number of Russian speakers. There are also economic differences between the east and west. In the aftermath of the 2014 uprising, civil war broke out within Ukraine. It was bloody, especially when far-right forces on both sides got involved. It was, however, a struggle internal to Ukraine.

Q: But weren't the Russians moving in to stabilize the situation?

A: International law does not permit individual countries to enter other countries to 'stabilize' anything. This is why the actions of the United States are so often called out around the world, such as the invasion of Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, or Iraq in 2003. Only in situations where the United Nations or some other legitimate international body grants permission can there be the lawful use of force. Nothing approaching that happened with regard to Ukraine. In fact, Russia broke the international law on self-determination, the law against aggression, and the law against seizing territory. It has also committed gross human rights abuses.

Q: But these are the same things that the United States and many European powers do. So, why should we call out Russia?

A: Simply put, because they are wrong. Just as when so many people around the world responded with outrage when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, even though other European powers had colonies in Africa, any act of aggression must be condemned immediately and resisted.

Battling illegitimate actions by governments lays the foundation for challenging any government for its illegal actions. Condemning Russia for its gross violations of international law helps others see, for example, how the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands — in violation of international law — and the Moroccan occupation of 80% of Western Sahara — in violation of international law — cannot stand. Think about apartheid South Africa. As horrific as apartheid South Africa was, there were other countries that were at least as bad. Should that have meant remaining silent regarding South Africa? Of course not. People in South Africa were standing up in resistance, and they needed our support. The same thing is happening in Ukraine today. Courageous resistance to aggression deserves our support.

Q: So, why are many countries in the Global South silent on taking steps against the Russian invasion?

A: For complicated reasons. In some cases, countries in the Global South are understandably

furious with the hypocrisy of the USA and others who will, on the one hand, ignore or support aggression, as in the case of Israel/Palestine or Morocco/Western Sahara, while on the other hand condemning Russian aggression. In other cases, some governments are trying to play one power off against another in order to receive various forms of assistance, including foreign investment and military aid. And in still other cases, some very repressive regimes in the Global South have come to depend on Russian military and security support to remain in power.

Russia Needs to Withdraw Immediately

Putin and the criminal, fascistic enterprise he leads in Moscow, are modern-day manifestations of imperialism. They are attempting to annex territory illegally in a sovereign and independent country using wanton and indiscriminate attacks on Ukrainian civilians — along with documented acts of torture, rape, and a host of unspeakable war crimes. They do this while blaming NATO for their “needing” to go to war, while at other points justifying war by denying the very right of Ukraine to exist as an independent nation-state.

There is not now, nor has there ever been, a legitimate place for colonialism. There is no justification for ignoring national sovereignty. The security of big countries cannot come at the expense of small countries. Russia needs to withdraw immediately.

With the cessation of fighting and a Russian withdrawal, the conditions will arise for the re-establishment of the requirements for their peaceful coexistence based on mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of each other's countries.

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