

Why the Left Must Support Arms for Ukraine!

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[Note: This article was originally submitted to *Jacobin* in the hope of initiating a debate among the radical left. It was rejected.]

In a recent article in *Jacobin*, “What the Left’s Critics Ignore About Military Solutions to Ukraine,” Branko Marcetic argues that the left should oppose Western military aid to Ukraine. Marcetic condemns the Russian invasion and believes the Ukrainians have a right to defend themselves, but he insists they should not get arms from the United States or its allies. His case is quite unconvincing.

The first thing to note about Marcetic’s argument is that several times he says he is criticizing those leftists who call for sending “offensive” weapons to Kyiv. But this is a totally misleading way of putting things. No one on the left has called for the delivery of “offensive” weapons. An offensive weapon would be one that could attack Russia, rather than defend Ukraine. The distinction between such weapons is not always a sharp one, but, for example, antitank and anti-aircraft weapons can be used defensively against Russian forces in or over Ukrainian territory, while intermediate-range ballistic missiles could reach Russia. The transfer of weapons that would enable Ukraine to attack Russia itself has not been proposed by any one on the left. Those leftists who have explicitly discussed offensive weapons have done so precisely to reject their being provided to Ukraine.

Marcetic questions whether Western military aid has actually made any difference, suggesting that the Russian Army’s failures were due simply to its incompetence. Does he really think an unarmed Ukraine could have repelled even an inept Russian invasion? But then, he goes on to argue that

if Western military aid really has prevented a swift Ukrainian defeat against a Russian military not yet fighting at full capacity, then that has also risked simply prolonging the war and Ukrainian suffering, and eventually leading Moscow to ramp up the brutality of its assault as a solution to the stalemate.

It’s true that fighting back always carries the risk of prolonging a war and the suffering. That’s why we would never press the defenders from afar to fight on. This is a decision for the defenders to make themselves: they will bear the consequences and so only they can decide if the dangers of prolonging the fighting outweigh the costs of defeat. We say, however, that if and only if the victims

of an unjust attack want to resist, they should be given the means to do so. Marcetic's view seems to be that it is up to him and other outsiders to decide whether surrender is a better course than resistance. As Volodymyr Artiukh, a Ukrainian socialist and an editor of *Commons: Journal of Social Criticism*, a leftwing Ukrainian publication, remarked after Russia's retreat from the towns and villages around Kiev revealed the brutal and systematic massacre of civilians:

This is graphic, but not surprising or something one could not predict. There is also no reason to think this will not repeat in other occupied places. This raises the following question. What is the cost of a ban on supplying weapons to Ukraine's army that many on the left advocate? I think that it is legitimate to debate the issue of supplying weapons. There are reasons pro and contra.

But those who take a stance should also acknowledge the costs and take the responsibility for such a stance.

And the possible costs are increasingly looking horrendous.

Every time people fighting a just war are provided with the means to defend themselves, there is a danger that it will lead to more suffering. Soviet and Chinese arms to Vietnam gave the North Vietnamese and the NLF the ability to fight on and may, in retrospect, have caused more suffering to the people of Vietnam, than, say, the decision of the Danish government not to have resisted the Nazi invasion of its country in 1940. Any feeling person would be concerned about this, but did this mean that the international left should have called for Moscow and Beijing to stop their arms deliveries to Vietnam, to confine their support to non-military approaches? Or should they have left this decision up to the Vietnamese and backed their right to get the weapons they needed and requested?

Now it might be that at some point in a conflict one has reason to believe that the decision to continue fighting is being made not by the people of the nation under attack but by an elite undemocratically deciding in the name of the people. None of the reporting from Ukraine suggests that Zelensky is compelling the population to fight on against their wishes. And nothing suggests that it is Ukrainian government intransigence in negotiations that is keeping the war going, unless refusing total surrender is intransigence. (Ukraine has offered, in return for international guarantees, to proclaim itself a neutral state, promising not to join any military coalitions or host any foreign military bases or troop contingents and to refrain from developing nuclear weapons, and to resolve issues related to Crimea through negotiations with Russia for a period of 15 years, pledging not to try to resolve these issues by military means.)

Marcetic asks:

But is the call for providing offensive support, practicalities be damned, to a country being invaded or repressed by a larger power really a principle today's liberal interventionists would apply consistently?

Note again the use of the word "offensive" to describe the weapons. And note his reference to "liberal interventionists" as a way of implying that supporting Ukraine's right to self-defense somehow necessarily makes you a "liberal interventionist" rather than a socialist internationalist. In any event, however, no one is damning practicalities. No one is proposing taking actions that risk world war. If Marcetic thinks otherwise, he needs to name those who have made such proposals and

not imply that this charge applies to those who expressly oppose them.

Marcetic proposes several analogies to support his opposition to U.S. arms for Ukraine. No one, he says, called for China or Russia to deliver weapons to Iraq in 2003, even though we opposed the U.S. invasion. But the reason no one called for external arms to Saddam Hussein is that 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. In another analogy, Marcetic asks

should the Left abandon its demands for Washington to broker and actually implement a settlement between Israelis and Palestinians, and instead push for sending billions of dollars of weapons to Hamas in Gaza?

But this is silly. Weapons should be sent to allow people to defend themselves in a just war only when there is no non-violent way to defend them. In the case of Israel-Palestine, the United States doesn't have to apply military force against Israel to get it to remove its boot from the Palestinians' necks. It needs only to stop supporting Israel. If Washington announced that it was going to support Security Council sanctions against Israel and cut off its military aid, it's hard to imagine Israel continuing its violations of international and humanitarian law. And if Israel *did* continue, a Security Council resolution authorizing peacekeepers or a no-fly zone over Gaza to protect Palestinians would be appropriate—and possible if Washington, as in this highly unrealistic scenario, changed its position.

There are countless cases where the United States had only to give the word to get its brutal subordinates to desist. So in 1986, it was unnecessary to send arms to the People's Power protesters in the Philippines calling on Marcos to step down. All that was needed was for a Senator close to Reagan to call the Philippine dictator on the phone and say the time had come to leave. Marcos was on the next plane out of the country.

Marcetic raises the problem of the far-right Azov brigade (and, no surprise, it's a photo of Azov veterans that accompanies Marcetic's article). He asks:

What might happen if such groups have ready access to the copious weaponry now spreading through the country? What might it mean for the future of Ukraine's brittle democracy or even Zelensky's rule? What could it mean for vulnerable minorities like the Roma and LGBTQ community, both of which have been serially targeted with violence by these groups? How might it impact the prospects for a lasting peace, or at least stability, in the region once the war ends?

But what does Marcetic think it will mean for Ukraine's brittle democracy if the country is conquered by its more authoritarian neighbor?

What will it mean for Ukraine's sexual minorities if Kyiv is defeated by an enemy that considers LGBTQ rights to be a weapon used by the West to weaken and destabilize Russia? Societal prejudice has long made life difficult for LGBTQ Ukrainians; nevertheless, Ukraine had been before the war a refuge for LGBTQ people from elsewhere in Eastern Europe. As the co-founder of Ukrainian Pride explained, "If Russia wins, LGBTQ people in Ukraine will lose everything they have achieved in recent years." This is why many members of Ukraine's LGBTQ community have been fighting in the Ukrainian army.

Likewise, Roma have indeed been terribly treated in Ukraine, but their view of what a Russian victory would mean for them can be seen in the fact that they are willingly volunteering to defend Ukraine. As Sean Benstead has written:

Despite Putin’s bogus claims of a fascist junta in Kiev, the liberal democratic state—however incompetent and corrupted by institutional prejudice—retains semi-responsive democratic institutions, and at least the promise of a return to a less authoritarian order once peace has returned. To Ukrainian Roma, this is worth defending with their lives. Within the scope of the Ukrainian liberal democratic state, however damaged and dysfunctional, it is still possible to build social movements, benefit from the counsel of human rights organizations, and gain concessions from political and civil institutions.

But of course, neither Roma nor the LGBTQ community nor democratic activists in general can defend the limited rights they have secured if they don’t have weapons.

Ukraine’s left knows all about rightwing violence; they have faced it themselves. But this has not led them to call for Ukraine to be denied arms. Taras Bilous of the Ukrainian democratic socialist organization Sotsialnyi Rukh wrote on Twitter:

Before the war, I did everything I could with this problem. After I showed up at an anti-fascist protest with a picket sign calling for the disbanding of the far-Right Azov regiment (pictured) I was threatened and had to hide for some time.



Nevertheless, he has no doubts that social progress requires Ukraine getting arms to defend itself, even if this means that some of the arms will end up in the hands of far-right fighters, who represent a small fraction of Ukraine’s armed forces.

Marcetic goes on to discuss the case of the Spanish civil war. While it made sense for the left to call for sending arms to the Spanish Republic, he says, that’s no argument for arming Ukraine: “the Spanish were fighting fascists, while in this case the outcome of Western policy is indirectly arming fascists.” This is a disgraceful formulation. The Ukrainians are “fighting fascists”—they are trying to repel a brutal, rightwing, imperialist, ethnonationalist invader that denies the existence of their state and their people. And recall that there were rotten folks on the side of the Spanish Republic, and indeed they held a much stronger position in Spain than the small number of fascists do in Ukraine.

But don't get me wrong, says Marcetic: "That of course doesn't mean Ukraine isn't deserving of our solidarity and support, but it does mean one should think carefully about the form that support takes." Translation: you have our solidarity and support except insofar as it may extend to actually allowing you the means to defend yourself.

Marcetic worries that U.S. and British officials are hoping to turn Ukraine into a repeat of Afghanistan, creating a quagmire for Russia no matter the human cost. So, yes, if Washington or London were forcing weapons on Ukraine despite its wish to surrender, that would be morally unacceptable. But that is the opposite of what is going on. As Gilbert Achcar has noted, "not a single day has passed since the Russian invasion began without the Ukrainian president publicly blaming NATO powers for not sending enough weapons, both quantitatively and qualitatively."

Can we really say to Ukrainians: for your own good we are going to turn a deaf ear to your pleas for the means of defending yourselves?

Stephen R. Shalom is on the editorial board of *New Politics*. He is a member of DSA, Internationalism from Below, and Jewish Voice for Peace.