



Review of: Fred Leplat and Chris Ford (Eds.), *Ukraine: Voices of Resistance and Solidarity*, London, Resistance Books, 2022, 168 pp., ISBN 9780902869257 (print), 9780902869240 9 (e-book), £10

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has amplified divisions among the international left. During the first days of Putin's military adventurism, many progressive scholars and activists in the post-Soviet space were bewildered by the statements of antiwar political organizations and the positions outlined in the pages of renowned left-wing publications in the West.¹ The taxonomy of the international left's response entailed three renderings. One section of the left attributed the blame for the escalation entirely to US imperialism and NATO's eastward expansion. By supporting Putin's regime, it turned the notion of imperialism into an ostensibly cultural signifier to convey hatred towards the West. This position rested on the claim that all oppression in the world is the byproduct of Western machinations, which must be opposed by default, thus resurrecting the old campist adage of "my enemy's enemy is always my friend". Although acknowledging the imperialist nature of Putin's regime, another section of the left considered it to be the weaker imperialist power. In this rendition, Russia's expansionism would remain unopposed by following the dubious logic of siding with the "lesser evil". The third promulgation condemned Russia's attack and called for rapid conflict resolution through peace negotiations. However, it refused to support the arming of Ukraine because this would transform the conflict into an interimperialist war between Russia and the US. The common denominator between those interventions has been the proclivity to interpret the war

¹ While the rift has been frequently couched in the language of the division between the "Western left" and activists in the post-Soviet space, such framing lacks accuracy. The practices of excusing, if not endorsing, the invasion have been observed within left-wing circles in Russia, Belarus, and other countries in the region. Similarly, there were important exceptions in the West with several political organizations emphasizing Ukraine's right to self-determination. Progressive outlets in the West also published writings by Ukrainian activists.

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from the proverbial altar of geopolitics, where the material interests of “great powers” and their “spheres of interest” were not only paramount, but also sufficient for arrogating one’s political stance on the matter. The depiction of the war as another instance of a proxy confrontation between Washington and Moscow served to erase the agency of Ukraine and its people, the victims of aggression.

Ukraine: Voices of Resistance and Solidarity problematizes the propensities for analyzing the war in Ukraine through the reductive prism of geopolitics. Featuring a collection of interventions by Ukrainian scholars, activists, trade-union representatives, and feminists, alongside socialists from the Russian opposition and the West, the book calls for an informed assessment of the conflict, which considers rather than eschews the historical, social, and political minutiae. This undertaking centers on the voices of those who are resisting the callous Russian offensive. Intended for the Western audience in general and the international left in particular, this edited volume construes Ukraine’s struggle as a just war against an imperial aggressor. The anatomy of the struggle is examined by reflecting on the country’s political history, including its rich tradition of socialist and communist movements, evaluating the threats posed by Russia’s prospective victory, making the case for weapon deliveries to Ukraine, addressing the socioeconomic effects of the war on women, organized labor, and minority groups, and overviewing different visions for postwar reconstruction.

The collection is comprised of seventeen short chapters that revolve around five thematic leitmotifs. Setting the stage for subsequent inquiries, the first part features John-Paul Himka’s *tour de force* in providing a concise and accessible history of Ukraine. The author chronicles ten turning points from 988 to 2014, whereby each historical watershed serves to complicate the taken-for-granted narratives recycled in the debates on Russo–Ukrainian relations. This chapter seamlessly moves from the discussion on the differentiation between Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian nationalities during the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries to the incorporation of Ukrainian territories into the Tsardom of Russia, to the difficult fortunes of Ukraine’s national awakening movement—divided between the Tsarist and Habsburg empires—to the establishment of independent statehood after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the ensuing revolutionary conjunctures of 1991, 2004, and 2014.

The second thematic skein contains three chapters written by Ukrainian activists. Together they constitute an antipode to the accounts blaming the invasion on NATO’s expansionism or treating the war as a proxy clash between the US and Russia. Taras Bilous scrutinizes abstract calls for a negotiated peace settlement by arguing that any negotiations based on territorial concessions to Russia are bound to backfire. Such a “peace” would not only be rejected by most Ukrainians but also would serve to embolden the far-right. Bilous is most convincing when noting that every war is by nature a multilayered affair. Thus, the war in Ukraine is not a proxy war *tout court*. Indeed, it is no more a proxy war than the Vietnam War was a proxy war between the US on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and China, on the other. At the same time, “the [current] war is also a war of national liberation on the part of Ukrainian people, just like the Vietnam War was a national liberation war of the Vietnamese people against the United States as well as a civil war between supporters of North and South Vietnam” (p. 60). If Vietnam’s struggle was supported by the international left and the defeat of the US had a significant (if temporary) deterrent effect on American

imperialism, the same logic, Bilous asserts, should apply in the case of Ukraine. Another contribution in this part of the book is the interview conducted with Ukrainian political economist and member of Ukrainian left-wing organization *Sotsialnyi Rukh* (SR)—Yuliya Yurchenko. Yurchenko’s panoramic glance at the activities undertaken by left-wing activists in the country both prior to and after February 24 amounts to an illustration of how an agency-centered account of the conflict might be scaffolded. Yurchenko notes that before the invasion, SR focused on establishing partnerships with independent trade unions, organizing demonstrations, and participating in industrial action. The movement also ran a legal advice service for those whose rights have been violated and organized reading clubs and summer schools to raise workers’ consciousness. Since February, the movement has built volunteering networks and helped source medicine, food, clothing, and protective gear for the territorial defense. Furthermore, SR has coordinated the international campaign for the cancellation of Ukraine’s foreign debt and developed progressive blueprints for the country’s postwar reconstruction (explored in the fourth thematic part of this collection).

The following four chapters (6, 7, 8, and 9) then bring the voices of Ukrainian civil society groups—feminist organizations and independent trade unions—to the forefront. Contained herein is the (re-)publication of the Feminist Manifesto written by Ukrainian activists and an interview with one of its authors, Viktoriia Pihul. In the light of war, as Pihul declares (p. 92), the inequality in representation of female and male roles has been disguised still further—today virtually all attention is focused on military operations and men’s role in it. At the same time, many women are increasingly forced to leave homes and possessions behind and spend protracted amounts of time caring for their children and the elderly. Even though they are now at risk of violence both from the invading forces and domestic psychological abuse, this does not mean that women ought to be treated as passive victims. Pihul shows how at the onset of the invasion, feminist organizations in Ukraine have been preoccupied with the provision of aid focused on survival and humanitarian needs—“finding humanitarian aid, medicines for trans representatives, creating shelters, helping women with children to find or provide babysitting services” (p. 91). The focus on marginalized groups in society is reinforced in the informative interview with Nataliya Levytska, the Deputy Chairperson of NGPU (Independent Mineworkers Union of Ukraine). According to the trade-union representative, while the activities of independent labor organizations were already banned by the occupation authorities in the so-called “DNR” and “LNR”, this past February has worsened the predicament considerably. With almost the entire territory of Luhansk falling under Russia’s control, most industrial enterprises were destroyed, and all seven mines halted their operations. Although a similar situation could be observed in Donetsk where the mines were subjected to shelling, the miners therein continued to work despite a constant threat to their lives (p. 105).

The fourth thematic leitmotif examines a duopoly of war-related issues that frequently figure in the margins of public and intellectual attention, notably Ukraine’s toxic (prewar) debt dependency and policy designs for postwar reconstruction. Regarding the former, Eric Toussaint (a spokesperson of the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt) offers a critique of the Ukrainian government’s unwavering commitment to servicing external debt owed to multilateral financial institutions.

During the war, the determination of the Ukrainian government to retain credibility in the eyes of financial markets has resulted in the lengthening of working hours, easing of layoff procedures, and workers being forced to take less leave of work (p. 133). Toussaint calls for the suspension of debt repayments, the seizing of the assets of Ukrainian oligarchs to fund a reconstruction fund as well as the implementation of a fairer taxation system. The urge for an economic model based on the principles of inclusion and justice is also articulated in Vitalii Dudin's contribution. The latter is dedicated to questioning the building blocks of the "Marshall Plan" proposed by the European Union and frequently repeated calls to restructure postwar Ukraine through a policy menu composed of flexible employment contracts, government subsidies to attract foreign investors, large-scale privatization, credit support for the export sector, and the technocratic management of aid distribution. Any viable blueprint for relaunching Ukraine's industry after the war will have to be guided by active government interventionism, state-directed financing of employment programs, and policies of wealth redistribution to realize the long-held promise of deoligarchization.

The last two parts feature contributions by the members of the Russian opposition (Ilya Budraitskis and Niko Vorobyov) and Western scholars sympathetic to Ukraine's resistance. While each chapter constitutes a highly informative reading, it is the contribution by Gilbert Achcar that deserves special attention among those interested in a nuanced defense of Ukraine's right to resist. Though Achcar acknowledges that the war in Ukraine has evolved "into a proxy confrontation between Russian imperialism and Western imperialist powers" (p. 149), this does not justify the opposition to Ukraine's calls for weapon deliveries. Here, the author invokes a distinction between a "direct war between imperialist countries" in which every side is trying to grab a part of the world, and an "invasion by an imperialist power of a non-imperialist country", where the latter is backed by another imperialist power using it as a proxy in interimperialist rivalry. In the first case, working-class internationalism requires that workers oppose the war on both sides. In the second, revolutionary defeatism is required only from workers and soldiers who belong to the aggressor imperialist country. Workers of the oppressed nation (in this case the Ukrainian nation), have every right to defend their country and must be supported by internationalists worldwide. "It is through the angle of such practical consequences of political positions", Achcar maintains, "that the attitude towards the ongoing war must be defined" (p. 150).

Ukraine: Voices of Resistance and Solidarity is an important and long-awaited collection of progressive writings on the war. It realizes its stated objective to provide a nuanced understanding of "what Ukrainians think, feel, and need" (p. 14). At times, however, it feels that this collection would have benefited from an attempt to both conceptualize the terms used such as "Russian imperialism" and "Russian fascism" more sufficiently and engage with the causes of war from a "multilayered" conceptual perspective. This tiny codicil notwithstanding, the book is an essential read for activists and scholars alike, which promises to have an appeal across the disciplinary boundaries of political philosophy, international relations, area studies, and political economy.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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