

A Simple Question for Socialists



RUSSIAN OFFICIALS and spokesmen have been denouncing the Ukrainian government as ultra-right. Sometimes they call Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his ministers Nazis or fascists, but when the Kremlin crowd are feeling more relaxed, they refer to the regime in Kyiv as “nationalist”.

As Kremlin politicians spread out, elbowing their way into Georgia, Odessa, and are now embarked on the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they insist that the Russian Federation is not “nationalist”. Indeed, Russia cannot be described as a state constrained or limited by ambitions as parochial as nationalism. They are goosestepping expansionists, seeking to enlarge their territory, by annexing new lands, hurrahing as they march along, seeking to establish political and military control over their neighbours.

This has thrown the socialist left in Britain into turmoil and some confusion, because most socialists

have always at a soft spot for Russia. In 1916 Lenin wrote chapter and verse about the concentration of wealth, the role of banking, the export of capital, and rivalry between big capitalist powers in his booklet, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. It was published as a pamphlet in Petrograd a year later in the spring of 1917.

This little book has influenced the left for many decades. It has enabled them to discuss Western imperialism and ignore the expansionism of the Soviet Union or of the Russian Federation. Because these Russian developments are thought to be motivated by political and military concerns many of the left cannot bear to put them into the same bag as Western imperialism. For example, Russia's invasion of Poland arm-in-arm with Adolf Hitler in 1939, and the annexation of eastern Poland, and of the three Baltic States the following year, together with the invasion of Finland and Bessarabia (Moldova), are seen as purely defensive moves. Nothing to do with profits or banking like the blood-soaked capitalists.

This trope was echoed in the years after 1991 as the Russian Federation nibbled away at Georgia, confirming its seizure of one fifth of the country's territory with the full-scale invasion of 2008. It did this for ostensibly defensive reasons, because Georgia wanted to pivot to the West by joining NATO and the European Union. So, to put it bluntly, much of the left sees the West driven by money and profits, while Russia is motivated only by concern for peace, safety, and defence of the Motherland.

It is a fact that peace and socialism were rhetorically and imaginatively inextricably chained together throughout the twentieth century. Pablo Picasso's dove, and the internationalist kitsch of figures in particoloured national costumes holding hands around the globe were a staple of Stalinist iconography. While the West was embroiled in the pursuit of profits and war, actually existing socialism was committed to peace and disarmament.

The reality of North Vietnam, North Korea, of

Che's adventures in Bolivia, of the Derg in Ethiopia, or Cuba's military incursions into Southern Africa, never once undermined the "peace and socialism" trope. These were purely defensive struggles against the West's oppression, injustice, and profit-driven imperialism. In this way most of the left became accustomed to explaining massacres and repression carried out by socialist parties, states, armies, and guerrillas as contingencies imposed upon the progressive forces by the pressure of circumstance. Bloody disasters and famines could be seen as the results of mistakes and missteps. Catastrophes authored by socialists were never integral to their regimes, parties, or the liberation armies in question.

The same could not be said of the West. This was, as Lenin had so perceptively indicated, the nature of the beast – the highest stage of capitalism. Consequently, what we now call the West is intrinsically profit-driven, subjected to the tyranny of a tiny elite of bankers and money-men, interested only in their own domination of the planet.

Surprisingly, this outlook was not dislodged or undermined in the years 1989 to 1991. The disintegration of actually existing socialism did not weaken the left's hatred for the West and its imperialism. It did result in some strange new alliances as the left had to cope with the reality that the most prominent modern enemies of imperialism turned out to be dictators or tyrannical Islamists of one kind or another. This has resulted in some strange moments, like Tariq Ali welcoming the fall of Kabul to the Taliban (but not endorsing its 'social policy').

The idea that the repression of women and the murder of homosexuals by theocratic regimes can be referred to as "unfortunate social policies" rather than absolutely integral to their nature, is truly bizarre. Similarly, the hatred of Jews promoted by Hezbollah, and Hamas, together with the widespread publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, in many Islamic countries, is quietly ignored, as the left noisily insists on the illegitimacy of Jewish nationalism, while

tirelessly endorsing Palestinian nationhood.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in many people on the left facing both ways. They are stalwart opponents of the invasion, while simultaneously reiterating Russia's legitimate security concerns, and calling for an immediate ceasefire so that Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin can bring an end to the war with a negotiated settlement, in which Ukraine cedes territory, and accepts that it will no longer try to join either NATO or the European Union.

These are the weasel words being spouted throughout the left. I'm unsure why weasels have got such a bad press, but 'facing both ways' is in any event the perfidious and dishonest position of many so-called socialists. To suggest that the Ukraine should agree a ceasefire while Russia is in possession of great swathes of its territory, and clearly intends to make its occupation permanent, is to concede that Moscow has the right to control Ukraine and determine what alliances and associations Kyiv chooses to join.

Furthermore, it is argued that in supporting Ukraine with the supply of arms and ammunition NATO, and associated states like Japan, are fighting a "proxy war". Consequently, the invasion of Ukraine can be presented, not as the unprovoked invasion of a sovereign state, but as more of a war in which the West – imperialism, no less – is engaged in a surreptitious attack on the Russia Federation, a state that merely wants to protect its borders, in a fight for peace, against the nationalists and Nazis led by Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

These members of the ersatz left surely know that Zelenskyy is a politician freely elected in 2019. They undoubtedly know that the ultra-right or fascist elements polled less than two per cent of the vote, and were unable to secure any representation in Ukraine's parliament. They know that Ukraine is a bourgeois democracy that has the support of the overwhelming mass of the country's population, both of Russian and

Ukrainian speakers – indeed Kyiv’s armed forces could not have put up such a sterling resistance if this were not the case. All this is widely known on the pro-Russian left.

Now, of course, the members of the left making the anti-imperialist argument, hotly deny that they are “pro-Russian” – they prefer to present themselves as even-handed peace-loving people, appalled by the destruction and suffering brought about by the war, they just want a negotiated settlement, in which Russia’s concerns are given equal weight in any negotiation.

They face both ways – opposed to Russia’s invasion – but want Russia to be appeased with reasonable land grants of Ukrainian territory – and an end to the imperialist powers stirring the pot by supplying and arming Kyiv’s forces.

To them I will only ask one simple question: –

“Do you want Ukrainian forces and the Ukrainian state to regain its sovereign territory?”

No doubt, the West’s invasion of Iraq and attacks upon Libya – grotesque hypocrisy – will be thrown up, in an attempt to blindside the simple question. But if a person cannot answer this question in the affirmative, they are on Russia’s side, and their hatred of the West and of “Western Imperialism”, evidently trumps their commitment to upholding the rights of democratic governments, international peace, and the sovereignty of independent states.

