

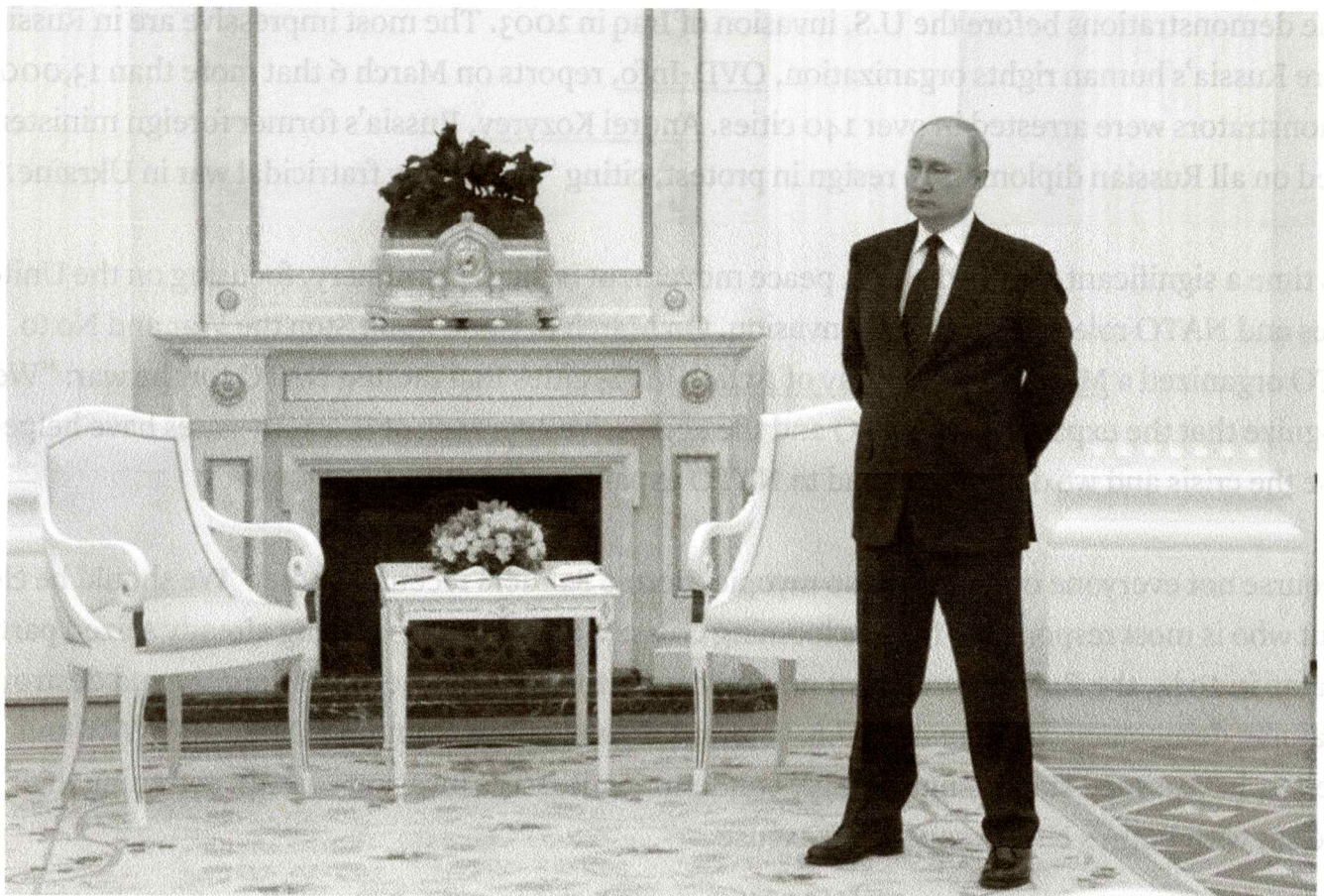
VIEWPOINT

Facts Over Ideology, Peace Over War

Russia is responsible for invading Ukraine, and we have to recognize that.

TERRY BURKE AND ANDREW BERMAN

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Russian President Vladimir Putin stands in a hall prior to a meeting with his Belarus' counterpart at the Kremlin in Moscow on March 11, 2022.

(PHOTO BY MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/SPUTNIK/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

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which there are diverse and differing views on the issues and organizations referred to. In These Times remains committed to offering a variety of viewpoints, and voices, on complex issues being debated on the Left.

A world on edge after two years of Covid-19 and unprecedented climate change events now faces the prospect of a large scale war in Europe. No one other than arms merchants can possibly want this war. Brave Russian intellectuals and activists risked the wrath of the Kremlin to write an open letter opposing war with Ukraine, condemning Putin for leading a “Party of War.” Thousands of people in Russia and throughout the world have gone to the streets to protest this unprovoked, preemptive invasion of Ukraine.

The protests against Russia’s war on Ukraine are taking place around the world. Berlin, Prague, Madrid, Riga, Rome, Lisbon, London, Seoul, Lahore, Tirana, Podgorica, Guayaquil, Istanbul and Washington, D.C. are some of the cities with large protests. The worldwide actions are reminiscent of the demonstrations before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The most impressive are in Russia where Russia’s human rights organization, OVD-Info, reports on March 6 that more than 13,000 demonstrators were arrested in over 140 cities. Andrei Kozyrev, Russia’s former foreign minister, called on all Russian diplomats to resign in protest, citing “the bloody fratricidal war in Ukraine.”

This time a significant part of the U.S. peace movement is on the periphery, focusing on the United States and NATO role, not on Putin’s invasion. On March 6, Code Pink, Stop the War and No to NATO organized a March 6 Global Day of Action in 125 cities that faulted NATO for the war: “We recognize that the expansion of NATO and the aggressive approach of Western states have helped cause the crisis and we demand an end to NATO expansion.”

Of course not everyone on the left is so myopic, Bernie Sanders recently wrote, “We should be clear about who is most responsible for this looming crisis: Vladimir Putin. Having already seized parts of Ukraine in 2014, the Russian president now threatens to take over the entire country and destroy Ukrainian democracy.” Progressive U.S. veterans organizations Common Defense, VVAW and VoteVets have issued statements strongly condemning Russia’s invasion without softening their criticism with Putin’s NATO expansion excuse.

Those on the U.S. Left who are not joining in solidarity with the Russian and Ukrainian protesters and demanding that Russia end its war on Ukraine, are missing an historic opportunity to join together with millions of people around the world and with the large Ukrainian-American community in a powerful anti-war movement. Unfortunately, many U.S. peace organizations have a history of viewing wars through a U.S.-centric lens, blaming every conflict on the U.S. military, ignoring the malevolent intent of President Vladimir Putin and other dictators. ✓

Putin's seven years of bombing Syrian civilians did not bring about worldwide protests and sanctions like the invasion of Ukraine has. Foreign policy analysts say that the lack of repercussions for Russia's role in Syria emboldened Putin and "paved the way for his attack on Ukraine."

While Putin would like to see NATO divided and weakened, many see other reasons behind Putin's invasion: a nationalist attempt to reclaim the Soviet empire, uniting Ukraine and Russia, shoring up his internal support through a successful war and making Russia a major player again on the world stage. As Yale History Professor Timothy Snyder has observed, economically successful democracies close to Russia threaten Russia by their very existence.

Julia Davis is a media analyst who monitors state-funded Russian TV, reported on February 16, before the invasion, that a Russian TV pundit was gleeful—in stark contrast to Putin's public posture of concern about NATO expansion. "They [the West] suddenly started to talk to us. They haven't spoken to us in years," he said. "More than that, serious divisions manifested within the European Union. Colossal divisions within NATO." Davis reported another Russian commentator boasts, "The strategy of intimidation through Moscow's show of force is working wonders ... It's exhausting them, it's exhausting the West and draining its energy."

Prior to the invasion, Margarita Simonyan, editor of the Russian Government's media outlet RT, tweeted on February 15, that the devastating impact of Putin's war games on Ukraine's economy brought her pleasure.

A NATO red herring

To debunk the notion that NATO expansion caused Putin to start his bloody war, it behooves us to look at recent NATO's history. The decision to allow NATO to grow after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Warsaw Pact was an act of supreme idiocy, made with cold war mentality that failed to understand the opportunities it squandered. Above all, that decision wasted the possibility of a lasting world peace without military alliances.

That said, it is critical to understand that many of the nations that then joined NATO had solid historical reasons to fear Russia and to seek security elsewhere. The expansion of NATO began in 1999 with Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Next came Latvia and Estonia. Recall, in 1968 Russia invaded Czechoslovakia and created a strong motivation for the Czechs to escape Russia's control and find security elsewhere. In 1956 Russia invaded Hungary. Poland had a similar experience. In 1940, the Soviets executed over 20,000 Polish officers and intellectuals in the Katyn Forest, a crime later acknowledged by the Russian government. In 1940 Latvia and Estonia were

forcefully annexed by the Soviet Union. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 (aka the “Stalin-Hitler Pact”) divided Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. All five nations were thus imbued with valid reasons for fear of Russia.

After those initial five, over the next 20 years, other nations in eastern Europe followed, applying for and gaining NATO membership. They were motivated by either their own negative experiences with Russia or by seeing what those first new members experienced. Ukraine is not a member, and opposition within NATO to it joining has been strong. But with Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, that could very well change.

Ukrainian history lesson

It’s also important to understand the basics of Ukraine’s history, not just Putin’s version. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine declared its independence with massive popular support. Polls taken at that time show very little interest in joining NATO among the Ukrainian people. At that time one-third of the Soviet nuclear weapons arsenal was on Ukraine territory. To stabilize the situation, Ukraine gave up its entire nuclear arsenal and signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In response, in 1994, the United States, the United Kingdom and Russia then signed the Budapest Memorandum pledging to “respect Ukrainian independence and sovereignty in the existing borders and refrain from the threat or the use of force against Ukraine.” The Budapest Memorandum is never mentioned by Putin’s apologists. His latest moves are in direct violation of this signed treaty.

Two decades into its independence, the President of Ukraine Victor Yanukovich was overthrown in massive popular protests. Those protests were met with government violence in which over 100 people were killed. In a time of economic difficulties in Ukraine, Yanukovich was seen as corrupt and subservient to Russia. He had rejected a pending trade agreement with the European Union that the Ukraine Parliament had endorsed. The significant economic benefits that would be gained by membership in the EU had wide appeal to Ukrainians. Yanukovich wanted instead to seek enhanced ties with Russia. Ukrainians, proud of their independence, saw improved relations with the EU as a road to a higher standard of living rather than returning to economic tutelage under Russia. Ukrainians call the massive protests that overthrew Yanukovich, the “Revolution of Dignity.” The Russian government and its apologists call it a “US/CIA coup.”

In rapid response to the overthrow of Yanukovich in 2014, Russia directly and forcefully violated its solemn pledge in the Budapest Memorandum by invading Ukraine and seizing the entire Crimea region. It then began an ongoing conflict by sending soldiers and weapons into eastern Ukraine in

support of a separatist movement. Historian Timothy Snyder has noted that Russia's "invasions of Ukraine harm the global cause of nuclear non-proliferation, because they seem to indicate that countries that give up nuclear weapons get attacked by their neighbors."

In 2014 polls began to show increasing interest among Ukrainians to join NATO and the polls now show a small majority in favor of joining NATO. In other words, Russia's military actions understandably have created more support for NATO. The recent February 4 joint statement by Russia and China says that the two countries "oppose further enlargement of NATO" and nothing about reducing its size, which is very different from Putin's public statements.

In summary, we see this basic chronology:

- **1** 991: The USSR dissolves. Ukraine declares independence.
- **1** 994: Russia signs the Budapest Memorandum pledging to respect Ukraine's borders and territorial integrity after Ukraine gets rid of the vast nuclear arsenal it had inherited
- **2** 013: Widespread protests in Ukraine against the corrupt President Yanukovych who opposes an economic agreement with the EU and seeks to move Ukraine back to the Russian economic sphere of influence.
- **2** 014: Protests grow into a massive movement that is met with violence. Yanukovych is overthrown and escapes to Russia. Russia then invades Ukraine, seizes Crimea and begins military support for Ukrainian separatists
- **2** 022: Over 100,000 Russian invasion ready troops are sent to the borders of Ukraine, surrounding it on 3 sides. Military exercises are conducted there.
- **F** ebruary 24, 2022: Massive invasion of Ukraine.

A frequent slander of the present Ukrainian government is that it contains and is supported by Nazis.

This smear likely originates in Putin's disinformation apparatus because it resonates powerfully among the Russian people who suffered unspeakable crimes from Nazis in World War II. The Nazi smear generates support for Putin's aggression against Ukraine both from the Russian populace and from Putin supporters in the American left.

While it may appear to be a strange accusation against Ukraine, where a democratically elected Jew is President, there is a history of collaboration with Nazis when Ukraine was occupied during WW II, as there was in France and other European nations. But in Ukraine there is also a remnant hatred of Russia originating from the mass starvation that resulted from Stalin's forced collectivization of agriculture which led to widespread food shortages. ✓

In Ukraine today there are a small number of far right groups that promote this historic resentment of Russia. Some are paramilitary and use rhetoric and symbols associated with Nazism. They are a problem of national concern. Yet in the 2019 Ukrainian parliamentary election, all the major Ukrainian right-wing parties united but only won 2.15% of the popular vote and gained no parliamentary seats.

In the current crisis, one paramilitary group, called the Azov Battalion, now offers basic combat skill training to the general public. Given the continuing Russian intervention in Ukraine, it is no surprise that they are getting some customers. But accusing the Ukrainian government of Nazism is nothing but pro-war propaganda from Putin. Right wing militias and neo-Nazi groups are an American reality too, witness Charlottesville and the January 6 insurrection at Capitol. ✓

Disinformation researchers are an important resource during chaotic times. In 2018, Kate Starbird at the University of Washington identified an "Alternative Media Ecosystem" whose content was "interconnected with political messaging from Syrian, Russian, and Iranian government-funded media." A small number of outlets played an outsized role because the same articles could be shared by these sites and repeatedly tweeted. For example, Starbird's study found that disinformation overwhelmed the truth in her research on the Syrian White Helmets.

Some of that same media ecosystem has promoted Putin's propaganda on Ukraine. Starbird said, "So much of what we're seeing regarding Russia's disinformation surrounding Ukraine—and likely what we will see in the coming days and weeks—has precedent in Syria." RT lost its distributors in the United States and closed down. But Mint Press News, Consortium News, Information Clearinghouse, The Grayzone, The Jimmy Dore Show and Global Research all share both journalists and an anti-U.S., pro-Russia point of view. They are predictably blaming NATO and the United States for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. ✓

Well known journalist Chris Hedges has been paid for several years by the Russian government for his show on RT (Russia Today). He claimed that the Ukraine crisis has been created by desperate Democrats. "When all else fails, when you are clueless about how to halt a 7.5% inflation rate, when your Build Back Better bill is gutted...then you must make the public afraid of enemies, foreign and domestic." Glenn Greenwald recently said that NATO is the only reason for the war. In FAIR (Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting) on February 24, Bryce Greene reported, "This current escalation started because of the U.S. involvement in the Ukrainian government's politics." Yes, we should question the mainstream narrative on Ukraine, but these outlets and journalists are only doing that, not questioning Putin's claims.

Another reason for the Left's reluctance to ignore or justify Russia's military actions in the current crisis is a reaction to decades of the United States casting Russia as the enemy during the Cold War. That long-term reluctance has extended to progressive media's coverage of Putin and Russia, where there is very little reporting of Putin's mafia ties, his billionaire wealth, this support of the far right around the world, the poverty of the Russian populace, the repression of journalists and activists, his Christian nationalism, his persecution of the LGBTQ community and his magical elections.

David Swanson (World Beyond War), Norman Solomon (Roots Action), Margaret Flowers (Popular Resistance), Michael Nagler (Metta Center for Nonviolence), and members of Veterans for Peace and Code Pink signed a statement in January 2016 promoting a "multi-polar world" that is led by China and Russia, with the United States playing a secondary role. The signers ignore Russia's imperialist interventions in Syria, Ukraine, Libya, Georgia, and Moldova, claiming that, "Russia and China are the major world powers that support the concept of Multipolarity, and act as a global counterbalance to Western hegemony." There are numerous articles by UNAC, Popular Resistance, World Beyond War, and Black Agenda Report that have a pro-Russia bias and do not criticize Putin. In placing Russia and China as the counterbalance to Western power, this view denies their imperialism and avoids examining their crimes.

The "multipolar" concept comes from a statement signed by Russia and China in 1997. On February 4 of this year, just prior to the Beijing Olympics, Russia and China clarified their view of multipolarity and democracy in another joint statement. Journalist Ahmed Aboudouh described the statement as "a new authoritarian playbook." It contends there are no universal standards and that a "nation can choose such forms...of implementing democracy that would best suit its particular state." For example, the Russian form of "democracy" includes a recent censorship law that could give anyone in Russia a 15 year prison sentence for referring to the "special military operation" in Ukraine as a war. As peace activists, we have to understand there is nothing positive about aligning with any of the imperial powers.

Many U.S. peace activists are accustomed to opposing U.S. foreign policy. The horrors of the Vietnam War generated a visceral hatred of America in some anti-war activists of that era. U.S. government and media lies helped build support for the wars in Central America and the Middle East. Millions of people have died in these wars. We can't ignore our history, but we also cannot assume that every conflict is framed by the U.S. government lying to lead us into war. This time it is clearly Russia that has lied and started a war. We have to recognize that Ukraine is different from Vietnam, from Iraq, from Afghanistan. We have to learn Ukraine's history and listen to Ukrainians and anti-war Russians.

Our U.S. peace movement is less effective and less relevant when we are not well informed. Analysis based on ideology rather than facts is harmful. We are less able to advocate for intelligent, peaceful solutions when we don't understand what is really happening. We isolate ourselves and cannot build a mass movement for peace and justice.

It is not pro-war to honestly critique both sides of a conflict. The argument that we are obliged to criticize only U.S. war crimes is a recipe for failure. As international peace and justice activists, we must open our eyes and speak out against war and aggression regardless of the perpetrator. All humanity is our constituency.

TERRY BURKE is an educator and longtime disability rights and peace activist, working since 2012 with the Committee in Solidarity with the People of Syria (www.cispos.org). She can be reached at mplshiker@gmail.org.

ANDREW BERMAN was a Vietnam War resister in the US Army, a lifelong peace and solidarity activist. As a telecommunications engineer, he helped repair Nicaragua's telecom equipment during the Contra war. He has worked in support of the democratic opposition to Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. Andrew can be reached at @66alive on Twitter.

From: Mike Madden
Subject: Re: Our article for In These Times
Date: March 23, 2022 at 2:50 PM
To: mapm_Listserve@googlegroups.com

Response to "Facts Over Ideology"

All together now, let's march into nuclear Armageddon chanting "Putin is Hitler!"

The anti-war left, which causes Ms. Burke so much heartbreak, stands shoulder to shoulder with anti-war protesters in Russia who are demanding an end to the military invasion of greater Ukraine.

We compliment their efforts by demanding that our own government stop adding fuel to the fire. It must cease supplying lethal weapons to the region, recall all military advisors and trainers in Ukraine, and stop encouraging mercenaries to travel to Ukraine. It must then enter into serious diplomacy with Russia to establish a new Eurasian security arrangement that acknowledges Russia's legitimate concerns.

Immediate re-entry into the INF and Open Skies Treaties would be a good start. We also demand that our government sign the ICAN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and live up to its commitments (disarmament) under the already-signed NPT.

Contrary to Timothy Snyder's simplistic propaganda, we are not witnessing a war between "the Russian army and the Ukrainian people". This is a textbook proxy war for geo-political dominance between the United States and Russia, with the unfortunate people of Ukraine being sacrificed as pawns.

Nor does the war have anything to do with saving Ukrainian democracy. Democracy fell in Ukraine on February 22nd, 2014, with the substantial assistance of the United States. Democracy only matters to the United States when the democratically elected government in question serves US interests.

The war did not begin on February 24, 2022. It began on April 15, 2014, when the illegitimate post-coup government sent its military to reclaim separatist regions by force of arms. That civil war/proxy war went on for eight years at the cost of 14,000 lives, approximately half of them civilians. Those are the unworthy victims of the war. They do not serve the 'America good, Russia evil' narrative. They are erased. They are forgotten.

Always striving to end on a note of unity, I will compliment Ms. Burke on one important observation in her article:

"The decision to allow NATO to grow after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Warsaw Pact was an act of supreme idiocy, made with cold war mentality that failed to understand the opportunities it squandered. Above all, that decision wasted the possibility of a lasting world peace without military alliances."

Even though I advocate for the complete dissolution of NATO, I can work with those who call for a NATO retreat to its 1991 membership.

Mike