

Opinion – The Myth of Being Anti-Racist and Anti-War in the Ukraine Conflict

Written by David Chandler

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DAVID CHANDLER, MAR 2 2022

It would be nice if the choices we are confronted with by the Russian invasion of Ukraine were pure ones. However, much of the anti-war coverage of the conflict has been overlaid with racial and colonial stereotypes. This has been picked up on in a fair amount of media coverage, with articles such as: 'Please, Stop Using Racist Language To Talk About The Ukraine And Russia Conflict: If you find yourself connecting more with this European war, ask yourself why'; 'Arabs decry 'racist' double standard in Ukraine media commentary', 'Trevor Noah slams media for racist remarks on Ukraine: War 'was Europe's entire thing', 'Coverage of Ukraine has exposed long-standing racist biases in Western media'. What has been particularly picked up on has been the media tropes of shock that war could take place in 'the heart of Europe' with the bombing of major European cities and the outrage that 'civilization' should be so rudely upset by Putin's 'medieval' thuggery.

The Washington Post, provides a disturbing snapshot:

A commentator on a French news program said, "We're not talking about Syrians fleeing bombs of the Syrian regime backed by Putin; we're talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives." On the *BBC*, a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine declared, "It's very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair ... being killed every day." Even an *Al Jazeera* anchor said, "These are not obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East," while an *ITV News* reporter said, "Now the unthinkable has happened to them, and this is not a developing, Third World nation; this is Europe."

The political or ethical purity of calling out the war and supporting the fight for Ukrainian independence would seem potentially threatened or undermined by the media double-standards of care and concern for white or European victims of conflict. Many people have been sensitised to the double standards of Western care and concern with the high profile of Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall campaigns. As students of International Relations, we are no doubt aware of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon's powerful indictments of these double standards in concern over slaughter in Europe when the violence of colonialism was ignored.[1]

This is where the calls for, what can be called 'both/and', can seem compelling. I have noticed on the social media feeds of some friends and colleagues that there is a concern to legitimate the position that one can be both for the Ukraine and also make a stand against the racializing terms of the anti-war discussion. The implication is that we can have a pure anti-war discussion without a racializing element. It is this assumption that I'd like to bring into question in this short piece.

It seems clear that the relation between being anti-war and pro-war is one of mutuality rather than opposition. Other friends of mine who have been busy on social media with anti-war work seem to have no hesitation in demonizing countries and populations already at the sharp end of US and EU sanctions and intimidation. A good example is the popular tweet 'Ukraine vs Russia: Who Does Europe Support' where the whole of Europe is united with the exceptions of the isolated and pro-Russian, Serbia and Belarus.

#StandWithUkraine pic.twitter.com/WVfVjc9AWx

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— Aidan Hehir (@FarCanals) February 26, 2022

The moral opprobrium of being pro-Russian of course is co-constitutive of the moral superiority of being pro-European and pro-Ukrainian. When even the contrarian commentator Brendan O'Neil is posting demands on social media, like 'Fuck off, Belarus', the sense of manipulation and desperation in the anti-war posturing seems too powerful to ignore.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

A post shared by Brendan O'Neill (@burntoakboy)

This anti-war posturing seems to be indistinguishable from pro-war posturing. In this feverish climate it is little surprise that the anti-warmongers are rewriting international political relations. Typical is the pro-war/anti-war European Union which, on the back of the conflict, has declared a “watershed moment” in its history. The EU's treaties bar it from funding operations with military or defence implications so €5 million is being found ‘off-budget’ in the EU's first ever interference in a conflict to finance the purchase and delivery of weapons and other equipment to a country that is under attack. Similarly Germany is making its own historic shift to return to military intervention in Europe, sending 1,000 anti-tank weapons and 500 Stinger anti-aircraft defence systems to the Ukraine.

It would be nice if it was possible to make neat demarcations. It would be nice if it was possible to distinguish an individual's personal ideals and desires from the political and ideological context in which they are expressed. Yet, what seems inescapable is the fact that anti-war political interventions in our contemporary times are necessarily indistinguishable from pro-war ones. The ‘anti-war’ movement that has politically mobilized nearly the entirety of international society, from the UN, NATO and the EU down to UEFA and International Olympic Committee, not only is waging its own war ‘against war’ but is also retrospectively legitimating the Western-led military interventions of the recent past. In staging this ethical unity against Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, the lack of legitimacy of any comparison to US-led and NATO bombing campaigns against Belgrade, Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya is chilling. The possibility of a non-racializing or non-colonial anti-war discussion is premised upon the promise of another type of war, one that is even more morally pure.

To refuse the discourses of war and racialization it is necessary to do more than place them in critical relation to those of anti-war and anti-racialization. Instead, we should refuse to distinguish the two. It is only in the relation, in the contra-positioning, that war gains its moral grounding.[2] War needs the legitimacy of anti-war campaigning, racializing needs the legitimacy of anti-racialization, all this can be seen, if we wish to see it, in discussions of the war in the Ukraine. The outcome of this war is that the international order is secured rather than destabilized as pariah states are demoralized or demonized further and leading international institutions are militarized

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and relegitimized. This is a war that threatens us all.

[1] As Césaire states, what Hitler and the Nazis cannot be forgiven for ‘is not *the crime* in itself, *the crime against man*, it is not *the humiliation of man as such*, it is the crime against the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the “coolies” of India, and the “niggers” of Africa.’ (italics in original) *Discourse on Colonialism: A Poetics of Anticolonialism* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1972), p.36

[2] For further discussion of the importance of (non)relation for critical thought see, for example, Daniel Colucciello Barber, ‘World-Making and Grammatical Impasse’, *Qui Parle* (2016) Vol. 25, No. 1-2, pp. 179-206

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