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Wayne Price
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Ukrainian Self-Determination and Anti-Imperialism
March 1, 2022

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Contents

U.S. and Russian Imperialisms 5
Russian Aggression 8
The U.S. Left 11
References 13

depended on to keep the peace, provide ecologically balanced prosperity for everyone, and develop a self-governing radically democratic, cooperative society the world around. Working people and the oppressed of all lands must work together and replace these rulers with freedom, equality, and full democracy. This can begin by being in solidarity with the Ukrainians, against both Russian and U.S. imperialism.

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But there is a part of the radical left which opposes both U.S. and Russian imperialisms. Sometimes this minority has little to say about defending Ukrainians. But often it also calls for the self-determination of Ukraine, including its right to self-defense. It looks for splits in ruling classes and those behind them.

Popularly, in Russia there have been demonstrations against the war in over 50 cities so far—bravely done, since so many demonstrators were arrested. Also, the Confederation of Labor of Russia [KTR], with more than 20 unions and about 2 million members, denounced the war and called for a negotiated peace. These reflect discontent among Russia's working classes and oppressed people, a discontent which may lead anywhere.

The people of Ukraine have risen to the challenge of the invasion, and shown a remarkable degree of courage and determination. Both the official army and the volunteer forces have heroically fought back against better armed and larger military forces How this will play out, cannot be presently known, but the Russians will pay a far greater price than they expected to.

The world is in a dangerous place. The deadly pandemic is far from under control—and there will be more plagues. The international economy, while back from the brink of collapse, remains unstable and vulnerable, with a vast expansion of economic inequality. The global climate continues to come unstuck, devolving toward a climate catastrophe, along with cataclysms in every aspect of the ecology. Despite the end of the Cold War, the great powers have never been able to disarm their nuclear bombs. Political democracy (however limited under capitalist states) has been under attack wherever it exists.

It is in this context that a major imperial state has invaded another, relatively developed, country. This has put the invader, Russia, in confrontation with the U.S.—a confrontation of two nuclear-armed states.

The international capitalist class, with its states and world corporate market, is not capable of maintaining society. It cannot be

The Ukrainian crisis may be seen as two intersecting and overlapping conflicts. One is the underlying competition between the U.S. imperial state and the Russian imperial state (and the allies of each). The other is between the Russian imperial state and the weaker, oppressed, nation of Ukraine.

The traditions of revolutionary anarchism and left-Marxism have opposed all imperialist states in their inter-imperialist conflict, rejecting all sides. Also they have generally opposed the oppression and exploitation of weaker countries by stronger, imperial, states. The question of "who is the aggressor?" (or "who fired the first shot?") is not central, compared to the dynamics of oppression and domination.

U.S. and Russian Imperialisms

Both the U.S.A. and Russia are capitalist states which throw their weight around internationally. Together they have 90% of the world's nuclear bombs—which risks exterminating humanity and other species. They supply a large proportion of the world's oil and gas, setting the stage for global climate catastrophe. The U.S. is the biggest, wealthiest, state with the biggest armed forces and most foreign bases in the world, even if it is in decline. Russia is much weaker and less economically significant but still a large militarized state. The US state wants to counter its own international decay, especially in comparison to its allies in Europe and to its other main competitor, China. The Russian state, under its authoritarian ruler Vladimir Putin, wants to expand politically, economically, and militarily, to make up for the collapse of the empire of the Soviet Union.

The U.S. laid the basis for the current crisis. In 1991, the U.S. and the Soviet Union agreed to end the Cold War. Russia agreed to let Germany be reunited. The U.S. government promised to not expand NATO's military alliance further to the east, "*not one inch*." However, the U.S. did not keep its promise. It incorporated 14 more

countries into NATO, coming up to Russia's borders. It provided military supplies and bases for these countries, which included Poland. This went along with the eastward expansion of the European Union. (A few far-sighted politicians and military people warned of the dangers of U.S. policy but they were ignored.) The Russians were not directly or immediately threatened, but—by the logic of national states—this inevitably put pressure on them to push back. The expansion of NATO may have been a **reason** for Russia's invasion of Ukraine or it may only have served as an **excuse**—but either way it destabilized the region.

There are many on the left who see the U.S. as the only danger and therefore support any anti-U,S. force, no matter how oppressive or undemocratic (this is "campism"). But U.S. imperialism is not the only imperialism, just as imperialism is not the only capitalist evil (as is demonstrated by the repressive dictatorships among the poorer nations).

In this case, Ukraine has been oppressed by Russia for centuries. It was ruled by the Czarist empire and then by the Stalinist-Communist dictatorship. Now the present authoritarian Russian state wants to dominate it again. Unlike many U.S. leftists, every Ukrainian is aware of this history.

While opposing the imperialism of the various great powers, revolutionary socialists defend the **self-determination of oppressed nations**. That does not require endorsing the governments or leaderships of these nations. It means being in solidarity with the people (who are mostly workers, peasants, local merchants, and the poor). It means supporting these nations' independence, self-organization, choice of social, economic, and political system, etc. Anarchists may not agree with the political and economic opinions of the majority of the people (who usually want their own national state). But revolutionary libertarian socialists are in solidarity with the people and their right to make their own choices—including their right to learn from their own mistakes.

Rather they have to fight against the invaders. In the U.S. radicals should stay clear from endorsing the government's policies, and should call for the withdrawal and dismemberment of NATO.

However, it would be a mistake to oppose the U.S. sending arms to the Ukrainian army or people. The Ukrainian people are literally under the gun. It is up to them how to fight and from whom to get arms. They should not be criticized for taking weapons from the U..S. or elsewhere—although they should be warned not to trust the U.S. or NATO.

The same point applies to Ukrainian anarchists.Should they form guerrilla groups to resist the Russians? Join various volunteer organizations to aid the fight? Join the official army? These are issues best left to those on the ground, facing the enemy (or enemies). But wherever possible, they should try to promote political independence of the majority of people, the working class and oppressed, from the national state, the capitalist rulers, and U.S. imperialism—and promote a reliance on their own forces.

The U.S. Left

The U.S. Left has fractured over the Ukrainian-Russian war. By and large, most liberals have accepted the administration's views uncritically. They ignore what the U.S. and NATO have done to prepare the conflict and their hypocrisy in opposing Russian aggression.

Many radicals and far-leftists have been on the side of Russia, finding excuses for the invasion. They have learned so well to oppose U.S. imperialism that they can only see the world through anti-U.S. lenses, ignoring the complexity of reality.They care nothing at all about the self-determination of Ukraine, so long as there is peace between Russia and the U.S. We can expect a similar nonreaction if China were to attack Taiwan—looking at every aspect of the issue except what the people of Taiwan want.

bear arms, the election of officials, equality of races, genders, and nationalities, trial by jury, and so on. (The bourgeoisie has always failed to consistently carry out its democratic program.)

The revolutionary anarchist Michael Bakunin wrote,

> "*Nationality, like individuality, is a natural fact. It denotes the inalienable right of individuals, groups, associations, and regions to their own way of life. And this way of life is the product of a long historical development [a confluence of human beings with a common history, language, and a common cultural background]. And this is why I will always champion the cause of oppressed nationalities struggling to liberate themselves….*" (Dolgoff, 1980, p. 401)

By "nationality…is a natural fact," he meant, not that nationality is a biological fact, but that it is created mostly by unplanned, unpurposive, social history.

As Peter Kropotkin wrote,

> "*True internationalism will never be obtained except by the independence of each nationality, little or large, compact or disunited–just as [the essence of] anarchy is in the independence of each individual. If we say, no government of man over man, how can [we] permit the government of conquered nationalities by the conquering nationalities?*" (quoted in Miller, 1976, p. 231)

The basic principles of the situation should be clear: support for the Ukrainians against the Russian invaders. Oppose both Russian and U.S. imperialism. It is a tactical question to decide how to implement these principles. In Russia there has developed an antiwar movement, whose main demand is peace and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. In Ukraine, they certainly want Russian troops to withdraw, but a call for "peace" is probably mistaken.

The United States government makes a big show of supporting Ukraine's national self-determination. Before the Russian invasion, the U.S. insisted that Ukraine had the right to join NATO. The Russians had asked that the U.S. promise that Ukraine would never join the Western military alliance. In fact it was well-known that Ukraine was not going to be allowed into NATO in any foreseeable future. But the U.S. state insisted piously that it could not provide Russia with a guarantee on this, because every sovereign state had the right to chose whatever alliance it wanted to join. While abstractly true, this assertion by the U.S. deserved a horselaugh. Consider the reaction of the U.S. when Cuba allied with the Soviet Union: boycotts and quarantines, attempts to assassinate President Castro, organizing the Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles, etc Then when Castro and Russia's Khrushchev put nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba, the U.S. blockaded the island militarily and risked a nuclear world war. (I am not supporting the reckless decision of the Cuban and Russian states to install these nuclear missiles.)

Imagine today the U.S. reaction if Mexico were to announce a military accord with China, with Chinese missile bases on the U.S. border!

Right now the U.S. is militarily supporting monarchist Saudi Arabia, in its war in Yemen, with horrible consequences for the Yemeni people. And the U.S. is continuing its large-scale support for Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people, denying them any sort of national self-determination.

The hypocrisy is so obvious that even an intelligent ("Never Trump") conservative, Bret Stephens, could write:

> "*Who are we, with our long history of invasions and interventions, to lecture Vladimir Putin about respecting national sovereignty and international law? Who are we, with our domestic record of slavery and discrimination, our foreign record of supporting friendly dictators, … after 198 years of the Monroe Doctrine, to try to stop Russia*

from delineating its own sphere of influence?" (Stephens 2022; A22)

Being a bourgeois pundit, he concludes that the U.S. should still intervene in the Ukraine vs. Russia conflict, asking, "*Who but us?*" (The working people of Ukraine and Russia?)

Russian Aggression

The Russian government is more ambiguous in its justification of its war on Ukraine. Vladimir Putin denies that Ukraine is a country or that Ukrainians are a people He has repeatedly asserted that they are merely a part of Russia and always have been. In a conversation with George Wl Bush, he said, "*Ukraine is not even a State*." Putin blamed Lenin and the Bolsheviks for regarding the Ukrainians as a people who needed their own republic when the USSR was established. Since, he claims, Ukraine is not a nation, it can have no national self-determination.

Instead, Putin's regime has worked up a bunch of other reasons to justify its war on the Ukrainians. He claims that their state is Nazi, for example, and promises to "de-nazify" Ukraine. It is true that neo-Nazi and ultra-nationalist far-right trends have grown in Ukraine, feeding off the reaction against Russian imperialism. Ukrainian anarchists and others have opposed them. But such groupings do not, by any means, control the government. They have almost no representatives in parliament and the president, Volodymyr Zelensky, is a Jew. In any case, the cruel dictatorship of Saddam Hussein did not justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq nor the mysogyny of the Taliban the U.S. war on the Afghanistani people.

Putin and his minions have a nerve denouncing supposedly fascist governments. Putin has allied himself with neo-Nazi and far-right forces in Russia and internationally. He has built up an undemocratic ultra-nationalist bourgeois regime, tied to the Russian Orthodox Church. He has whipped up rage against LGBT people

as "Western" threats to Russia. In the U.S., Putin and the far-right Donald Trump have long had a lovefest, recently demonstrated in Trump's praise of Putin's actions in Ukraine. Who is the fascist? (Further, speaking of mass-murdering totalitarians, any process of Russian "de-Stalinization," rooting out those who made the Soviet Union so oppressive, would surely include punishment for officers of the KGB police, such as Vladimir Putin!)

Putin also charges that the Ukrainian government has been committing "genocide" against the Russian-speaking minority in eastern Ukraine (the Donbas), which is a lie. For eight years Russian forces have supported two breakaway states in eastern Ukraine, in a secessionist war with the majority of the country. Most of the Russian-speakers there had voted for an independent whole Ukraine in 1991. What they want now, under the conditions of authoritarian pro-Russian rule and civil war is anyone's guess. The Ukrainian regime has not handled this well, removing Russian from being an official language and not providing autonomy for the eastern Russian-speakers. Whatever the failures of Ukraine in its treatment of its Russian-speakers, they hardly justify Russia invading and taking over the country,

The same point can be made in relation to Putin's other complaints. The Ukrainian government asked to join NATO (but was rejected). It might someday set up nuclear missiles (but in 1994 it got rid of the nuclear missiles it inherited from the Soviet Union, sending many to Russia). The government is corrupt and undemocratic (this from Putin!). And so on, none of which remotely justifies a Russian invasion.

Some on the libertarian left argue that anarchists do not support national liberation, and therefore should not take sides in the Russian war on the Ukrainians. Some ignorant anarchists think that "national self-determination" was invented by Lenin. Actually it has long been part of the program of bourgeois-democracy and classical liberalism, along with freedom of speech and association, freedom of religion, land to the farmers who use it, the right to