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Ukraine - USA

Russia Out of Ukraine Solidarity with Ukraine's people! No to NATO, now or ever!

- Debate - Ukraine -
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WHILE THE PRESENT unfolding catastrophe is proceeding at breakneck speed, the Ukrainian resistance to Russia's criminal invasion has already defeated Vladimir Putin's expectations of a quick victory.

The power of Ukrainian resistance has surprised the world, especially the governments of the United States and Europe. Most important, it also helped create the space and time for the emergence of fantastically brave antiwar demonstrations in Russia, in the face of police-state suppression.

The importance of these facts can't be overstated at this moment that may be a turning point in 21st century history. Whatever may happen next, this invasion and Putin's intent to crush Ukraine must be absolutely condemned by all supporters of democratic rights, including of course anyone claiming to be part of the socialist left.

Ukraine's resistance to subjugation is already enough to disprove Putin's vicious claim that it "is not a real country," and that its government is "controlled by neo-Nazis" as if such a government would distribute weapons to the population to defend their cities against the invaders!

But this crisis is about more than Ukraine - it's a struggle about the future of Europe and possibly much more. That's one reason why it's equally important, especially for people in the United States, to realize that the roots of disaster were also laid in the triumphalist and provocative expansion of NATO following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the demise of the Warsaw Pact.

That was precisely the moment when NATO itself could have been dismantled, and peaceful possibilities for Europe might have opened. Instead NATO - which from its inception in 1949 has been a U.S.-organized Western imperialist bloc, never a "defensive alliance" as it claims - has been reinvigorated and may be poised to expand even further, a dangerous and reactionary development that must be resisted.

NATO's aggrandizement in the post-Cold War era greatly assisted the rise of the malignant, rightwing authoritarian and aggressive Russian chauvinism manifested in the rise of Putin - both feeding on each other. NATO is now the beneficiary of a crisis for which its own behavior bears considerable responsibility.

NATO's expansion into post-Soviet Eastern Europe, up to Russia's borders, was all the more dangerous because it was not only a power grab, but also ideologically driven by the U.S. establishment's assumption, after the Soviet Union's collapse and the crushing U.S. victory over Iraq in the 1990-91 Kuwait war, that its rule was uncontested. It violated assurances that U.S. diplomats at the highest level had made to Soviet leader Gorbachev, and was already called by George Kennan in the 1990s a "tragic mistake" that Russia ultimately would never accept.

Especially since 2008, the situation was made worse by provocative rhetoric from NATO's leadership that its "open door" would extend to membership for Ukraine (or to Georgia). There was never a practical possibility that Ukraine would join NATO, and the pretense that it might could only give Putin a pretext for his aggression.

None of this in any way excuses this annexationist invasion. Beginning under the pretext of Putin recognizing the "independence" of the fake Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics," it is an all-out assault with the intent either to subjugate, occupy or dismember Ukraine as an independent country. Putin's claims about "denazifying" Ukraine could signal a program to carry out political assassinations and purges of Ukraine's population.

To be sure, a viable democratic future for Ukraine must ensure the rights of its roughly 30% Russian-speaking people, including rights of language equality and of regional autonomy depending on the wishes of the people of those regions when they are able to freely express them. None of this, however, is possible or even conceivable under the threat of Russian tanks and bombs.

This invasion and Russia's pretext for it is an outrage on the same level as the worst violations of international law, like the U.S. invasion of Iraq, with equally horrific lasting consequences. Indeed George W. Bush's infamous claims of "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq, and Putin's lies of "stopping genocide" of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, are quite comparable.

Who Wins?

As we said at the outset, it can be assumed that Putin intended to achieve a quick victory. That has already failed a reality which poses the danger, as this statement is being written, that Russia's invasion tactics could turn to massive bombing of urban targets (as it has previously carried out in Chechnya and Syria), producing enormous carnage and an even more horrific refugee crisis than what's already occurring.

The immediate disaster, of course, faces Ukraine and its people. The people of Russia are also suffering from the effect of retaliatory U.S. and European economic sanctions, the full consequences of which remain to be seen.

The entire world economy may take a huge hit. And as war comes to dominate politics, the opportunities for the massive economic transitions needed to avert global climate catastrophe fade further away.

There looks to be only one immediate "winner" in this war: NATO. Long after losing its Cold War mission, it now has renewed purpose, energy and - no doubt - member states' enhanced military budgets. As always the military-industrial complex will reap a bonanza, not only now but going forward.

Where Putin had been demanding that NATO step back from eastern Europe, NATO will now place more weapons, more troops, more advanced strategic military assets right on Russia's borders. In this sense too, whatever tragedy this invasion brings to Ukraine, Putin has already lost.

It also appears that Russia's president-for-life Putin has done what U.S. presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump couldn't accomplish: he's restored American imperialism's leadership of the Western alliance. Biden lined up a pretty unified anti-Russian bloc by sharing U.S. intelligence, which unlike in Afghanistan turned out to be accurate, with key allies.

Putin may have assumed that divisions among Western powers - over issues like trade with Russia, Europe's purchases of Russian oil and natural gas, etc. - along with the shambles of U.S. politics and the chaos of Biden's Afghanistan withdrawal, meant that the response to his moves against Ukraine would be feeble. This was a massive overestimation of divisions within the West, and underestimation of U.S. strength.

Putin's February 21 speech gave a falsified and flattened rendering of centuries of Ukraine's history, and the emergence of Ukrainian national identity in often tragic circumstances. It's no wonder that he has bitterly denounced Vladimir Lenin for allowing, at the Soviet Union's founding, the right of its constituent nations to self-determination including secession. Lenin would have recognized in Putin exactly the kind of "Great-Russian chauvinism" that he despised.

It bears repeating that no Russian government - not just Putin's gangster-capitalist regime, but the most democratic and liberal conceivable one - could tolerate Ukraine's incorporation into NATO. Every Western government should have recognized that reality. They should never have offered promises they couldn't or wouldn't keep.

But Putin's speech and previous writing explicitly denies Ukraine's right to exist as an independent country. Ideologically driven actions, as we've seen here from both NATO and Russian leadership, are particularly dangerous in that they may not be restrained by sober risk-and-reward calculations. We have no way of knowing how far the Russian military and oligarch elites will follow Putin if his adventure becomes a debacle.

The United States of course has leaped forward to proclaim defense of "the rule-based international order," by which Washington has meant since the end of World War II, "we make the rules and we give the orders." This is the world superpower that imposes sadistic sanctions on Cuba for sordid domestic political reasons, while attempting to criminalize boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movements opposing Israel's violations of Palestinian rights. (U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and Iran right now ironically help drive up world oil prices, to Putin's benefit.)

This behavior fully discredits Washington's claim to moral righteousness. But while denouncing that imperialist hypocrisy and much more, it's also essential to understand Ukraine's right to exist as a matter of principle, as well as the hard-core practical reality that Western powers will not allow Russian aggression to turn it into a subjugated vassal state.

In that context, how do today's antiwar movements face up to the challenge?

Crisis of the Peace Movement

The moment cries out for a global peace movement and antiwar resistance, at a time when those forces are terribly weak. Here it is necessary to be brutally honest with ourselves: The left does not have the weight to make an appreciable impact, least of all here in the USA.

We know that there is no "war fever" in the Russian population, and there are incredibly brave antiwar and democratic activists in the Russian state. Although thousands have been brutally arrested, and deprived of all meaningful access to Russian media, they must certainly reflect widespread dismay in the Russian public opinion, bound to deepen especially as the truth begins to emerge.

Both for that reason and because the United States remains the number one (though not only) imperialist power, the peace movement here has an especially important responsibility. Unfortunately it is hobbled both by objective political difficulties and some tragic blind spots.

Politically, the Democratic Party establishment and most of the liberal wing is in lockstep with denunciations of Putin's moves - but with little recognition of the high-stakes dangers of bringing Ukraine toward NATO membership. As far as we know, among U.S. politicians only Bernie Sanders correctly pointed out that danger, while denouncing Putin's annexationism - and Sanders' important message has predictably gone almost completely unheard on the leading liberal media outlets CNN and MSNBC.

The Republican Party is somewhat divided by its own opportunism and fixation on discrediting Biden - with some politicians and commentators calling his policies weak and "appeasement" while others on the far right express sympathy with Putin's "strong leadership." Emerging periodically from his Florida resort bunker, Donald Trump is

saying both things at once.

In this difficult climate, much of the U.S. peace movement (frankly, in its present weak state) makes broadly correct criticisms of NATO but has been disoriented regarding Ukraine and the struggles of its people. At a time when 190,000 Russian troops gathered on Ukraine's borders, we saw "antiwar" statements proclaiming that the imminent threat of war came from the U.S. and from Ukrainian "fascists."

This kind of rubbish has (fortunately) no appeal to the U.S. public, except perhaps to fringe elements on the far right.

It is painful to see how much of the U.S. peace movement swallowed the simplistic story that the events of 2014 in Ukraine, when a spectacularly corrupt pro-Russian government was deposed under pressure of a mass movement (over whether to join a European trade bloc or a Russian-led Eurasian one), were a "fascist coup" and a "genocide" of Russian-speaking regions.

In these claims, some kernels of reality are wrapped inside layers of twisted falsehoods that could (and do) come straight from the Kremlin - as if, for example, violent ultra-nationalist forces, which do exist in Ukraine, are more powerful there than they are in Russia!

Too many antiwar voices at the outset seemed confused on the most basic question of Ukraine's right to existence and national independence. Some of those who do such excellent work in other arenas (e.g. CodePink's great campaign against arms sales to Saudi Arabia for the horrific war in Yemen), were at least disoriented.

The sheer brutality of the invasion, and the obviously popular-rooted strength of Ukrainian resistance, have helped bring these folks back to the reality of the situation. Even now, however, there are undoubtedly well-meaning calls from the peace movement for "cease-fire," which means nothing if Putin were to succeed in crushing Ukraine.

On the other hand, the worst elements in the left either openly or implicitly endorsed the Russian invasion. This includes in particular groups organized around the "United National Antiwar Coalition" (UNAC), whose statements make it look as if Ukraine were attacking Russia! These reactionary and toxic politics are a big obstacle to rebuilding a meaningful antiwar movement.

We realize that if the circumstances were such that U.S. troops were heading into potential combat with Russia in Ukraine, it would be necessary to join with all these forces in an antiwar united front, while maintaining our own critical voice. That is not what's happening - nor do we think that the very real "danger of nuclear war" is particularly greater over this crisis than it is all the time, so long as nuclear weapons exist.

Whatever possibilities might open up for building a healthier peace movement as the crisis persists - and quite possibly escalates - need to be explored. That includes reaching out to discuss with Ukrainian community folks, demanding "No War in Ukraine." They represent the potential today for a meaningful new antiwar movement.

In any case we need to raise our own voice, work with those who share our general approach, and wherever possible amplify progressive voices that emerge from Russia, Ukraine or other countries and communities here in the USA. Solidarity with Ukraine and antiwar Russian forces, while resisting the rise of militarism at home, is a complex and urgent task.

In short:

- With regard to Ukraine, Russia is the aggressor power and Ukraine has the right to national sovereignty and self-defense.
- With regard to the larger confrontation, NATO and particularly U.S. imperialism are at least equally aggressive and as dangerous as Russian annexationism. NATO should not exist at all, and the U.S. should not be in it. There is no "progressive" or "anti-imperialist" side in this broader conflict.
- Ukraine's legitimate right of self-determination and national independence can't extend to joining NATO (which was never really on the table). That would inevitably make Ukraine a permanent battleground in a never-ending confrontation with no progressive outcome effectively negating its sovereignty in practice as well as endangering other countries in the region.
- NATO's continuation, let alone expansion, poses a permanent threat to world peace, as does the gangster regime of Putin. Indeed they feed on each other in what the brilliant English historian and activist E.P. Thompson, campaigning for nuclear disarmament during the 1980s, labeled an "exterminist complex."
- Because history cannot be wound backward, the facts on the ground that Eastern European states have joined NATO, and that Russia has annexed Crimea, will not be reversed in the absence of a comprehensive peaceful settlement that is nowhere on today's horizon. The immediate task today is to halt this catastrophic war, which means first and foremost defeating Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

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