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Ukraine

The imperialist carve-up of Ukraine: where does the left and anti-war movement stand?

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The imperialist carve-up of Ukraine is leading to a stand-off between Russia and Western imperialism on a scale not seen since the Cold War. But it has also exposed the deepest divisions within the left for a considerable period of time. Some of the lines of argument are reminiscent of those during the war following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

Most of the left does not describe Putin and his regime in Russia as being progressive. But there is reluctance to denounce, sometimes silence, and even support for Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. The recently launched Ukraine Anti-Fascist Solidarity campaign [2] only opposes UK, NATO and Western involvement but not Russian intervention in Eastern Ukraine.

This is in stark contrast to the Ukraine Socialist Solidarity campaign whose basic aims are "to support and build direct links with the independent socialists and the labour movement in Ukraine; (and) to support the right of the Ukrainian people to determine their own future free from external intervention from Russian or the Western imperialism". [3]

Left Unity and the Socialist Workers Party [4], have rightly opposed the attempt by Britain and the USA to seize the opportunity of the crisis in Ukraine to expand yet again NATO's reach and ratchet up the threat of war. But they have also condemned Russia's attempt to annex as much as possible of Ukraine.

Left Unity stated [5]

in March: "Whether under the flag of US, NATO, Russia or the European Union, military intervention only ever makes the situation many times worse. So it is in Ukraine. The West's hypocrisy in condemning Russia for breaking international law is breathtaking: nevertheless, Russian troops hold no solution to the crisis." And concluded with the call for: "No foreign intervention in Ukraine – whether political, economic or military; Democracy and equality for all the people of Ukraine".

Putin has been explicit in expressing his ambition to annex parts of Ukraine. Following the agreement on the 17 April 2014 between Russia, Ukraine, the USA and the EU after the flight of former president Yanukovich, Putin declared that "Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk and Odessa were not part of Ukraine under the Tsars. God only knows why they were transferred in 1920". Their transfer followed the defeat of the counter-revolutionary generals Denikin and Wrangel and the recognition of national rights for all Ukrainians by the new Soviet Union. Subsequently in 1954, Khrushchev also transferred the Crimea to Ukraine. The annexation in March 2014 by Russia of the Crimea with its naval base in Sebastopol is part of Russian imperialist consolidation of its regional geo-strategic interests, just as is its backing for the murderous Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria which allows it a naval base in Tartus.

Imperialism has repeatedly attempted to intervene in mass movements to try to subvert them for its own objectives, whether it be in Europe or elsewhere. The popular mass movements for democracy in Hungary in 1956 and that of Prague in 1968 were supported by Revolutionary Marxists from the New Left and Trotskyist tradition. Communist Parties opposed these movements claiming CIA manipulation but their real motivation was support for the ruling Communist parties in those countries and the USSR's "buffer zone" of states.

The Maidan of late 2013 was a mass movement at the base of society, mobilising at times hundreds of thousands. It combined revolutionary aspirations of democracy and against the corruption of oligarchs and Yanukovich, reactionary features of nationalism as well as illusions that joining the EU would bring prosperity and democratic rights. Yanukovich had originally been tempted in 2013 by the EU's financial bail-out of a bankrupt Ukraine, but was

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then brought back in-line by Putin with a better offer as the latter feared the loss Ukraine from Russia's strategic "buffer zone". His downfall was the result of the Maidan mass movement, not a Western organised "coup".

In the absence of a strong left, the far right – including the fascists of the Pravyi Sektor – was able to steer the Maidan movement away from a progressive outcome. The election of Poroshenko as president confirms the balance of forces in Ukraine. He leads an authoritarian, nationalist, neo-liberal government which includes supporters of the far-right. There has been no mass movement on the scale of Maidan in Crimea and eastern Ukraine where the events have been described as a "gangster-police putsch, presented in a "people's" wrapping". [6]

We have to take mass movements as they are, understand their contradictions and the forces involved, rather than dismiss them as being manipulated by imperialism if they do not fit into our schemas. Chris Nineham, a leading member of Counterfire and the Stop the War Coalition writes off the Maidan movement as having been "co-opted" and therefore that "denouncing all interventions equally and calling for support for the Ukrainian revolution, as some on the left are doing, is worse than meaningless". [7]

Revolutionary Marxists cannot be neutral in the current civil war in Ukraine. In the first instance, we should oppose our own government's intervention and defend the sovereignty of Ukraine. But we also support the working class struggle for democracy, for social and economic justice against the Ukrainian oligarchs, and against Russian as well as Western imperialist intervention. Part of the crisis in Ukraine, is that of the unresolved national question left by Stalin and then the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the Fourth International recently put it: "In Ukraine, a left that leaves the national question to the nationalists will condemn itself to failure in advance. In the nationalist camp there are already currents emerging that are taking advantage of the marginality of the socialist left, and wish to appear in the eyes of workers as an alternative to capitalism". [8]

The approach of Counterfire, along with the Communist Party of Britain and Socialist Action, [9] is that today the major threat of war comes from Western imperialism, in particular the USA as it is the major military and imperialist power in the world. Furthermore, NATO's expansion eastwards in Europe and its military exercises are a dangerous escalation reminiscent of the eve of World War 1 in 1914. Some believe that a "uni-polar" world under US hegemony is more dangerous than a "multi-polar" world of rival states. [10]

The conclusion of this approach is that while Putin's regime is not nice, at least Russia and China are a counterweight to US hegemony. Therefore the only thing that matters today for socialists is to stop our own government's drive to war and NATO expansion.

Criticisms of Russia and China are seen as a distraction as these countries are possible progressive allies of the left as they are not such dangerous war-mongers as the US and for some, capitalism has not been restored. This is a resurrection of a form of "campism" which infected parts of the left, in particular the Communist Party and the Labour left, during the existence of the Soviet Union.

While socialists should obviously in the first instance oppose their own imperialist government they should also oppose imperialism in general against attacks on working people and smaller nations and states across the globe. This means not just opposing NATO expansion and interventions, but also the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the carve-up of Ukraine by both the EU and Russia.

Today, capitalism is a global intertwined and integrated system under US hegemony [11] in a way which it was not in 1914. The two world wars of the 20th century were mainly wars of inter-imperialist rivalry to gain or maintain control of areas of the world. The outcome of these wars was the establishment of the USA by far and away as the major power in the world, ruling the capitalist system through its massive economic and even greater military power, and through institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and NATO. This global capitalist system has further expanded with the restoration of capitalism in Russia and China, but this does not mean that inter-imperialist rivalries and the

threat of regional wars are no longer on the agenda.

The form of US hegemony in operation today means that weaker states are allowed to pursue their own imperialist ambitions and regional geo-strategic interests, including through military interventions conditional on them at least not challenging the main thrust of US interests; something which is delicate to achieve as the imperialist ambitions of Russia and China have to a certain extent be at the expense of US imperialism. If they step out of line, they become “rogue” states that have to be subdued militarily as in the case of Iraq, or sanctions imposed such as for Iran and now Russia. To maintain weaker states within the framework of US imperialism, the latter has to carry out a lot of sabre-rattling. This is a dangerous game, as any incident such as the accidental downing of MH17 in Ukraine, or of the Iran Air plane by the US navy in 1988 killing 269 people, can rapidly escalate into a full military confrontation, the dynamics of which may no longer be in the hands of US imperialism and its allies. But sabre-rattling should not be confused with a dynamic towards inter-imperialist war like that leading to the two world wars. This is not the nature of the period today.

As long as Russia remains within its regional geo-strategic sphere, Western imperialism (i.e. the USA and NATO) is not greatly concerned by Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The few sanctions against Russia announced are so far symbolic – mainly against individuals – and there are deep divisions on extending them because of arms and gas deals, and because of the globalisation of the capitalist system. Sanctions that hurt Russian capitalism also affect Western capitalism.

This explains why US imperialism is not worried about Russia backing Bashar al-Assad in Syria with a continuous supply of arms. There is a coincidence of interests between both countries as neither wants Bashar al-Assad to fall. The collapse of his regime would revive the stalled “Arab spring”, threatening not just Russia’s naval base in Tartus, but also the US attempt to rebuild its credibility in the region and possibly overturning Syria’s “peaceful co-existence” with Israel.

Co-operation between the USA and Russia goes back to the fall of the wall in 1989. Gorbachev then did not object to the re-unification of Germany and its integration within NATO in an implicit exchange for foreign investments and a lowering of the cost of the arms race. The co-operation goes back even further to the period of “peaceful co-existence” between the Soviet Union under Stalin and US imperialism. Then revolutionary movements were held back and subordinated to the needs of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy. The “building of socialism in one country” meant an accommodation with imperialism.

This view of a global integrated capitalist system under US imperialist hegemony, albeit with a hierarchy of imperialist states, is at odds with those socialists who see US imperialism as the main danger and other imperialist states as lesser evils and who therefore believe that we have entered a period “of global conflict that is leading the world towards the violent chaos we witnessed one hundred years ago”. [\[12\]](#)

Unfortunately, there are no mass socialist revolutionary upheavals such as those of Russia, China, Cuba or Vietnam which required massive military intervention to crush them. Neo-liberal austerity is being rolled out across the world with little resistance, destroying many of the gains of the working class and introducing new relations of production.

Those who see US imperialism as the main danger consequently fail to oppose the Russian intervention in Ukraine, and some even allow themselves to be used by pro-Russian nationalists. They believe these nationalists when they proclaim their support for the working class against Western imperialism and their fight against the “Nazi” regime in Kiev imposed by a coup.

John Pilger, a respected investigative journalist, writes that “What is certain is that Barack Obama's rapacious,

reckless coup in Ukraine has ignited a civil war and Vladimir Putin is being lured into a trap” and that “Moscow's inevitable response (to Washington's putsch) in Russian Crimea (is) to protect its Black Sea fleet”. [13] Once you believe that there has been a coup and not a mass movement, albeit with a strong nationalist and neo-liberal character, then you can believe anything including Russia's right to annex Crimea.

Pilger writes in a later article [14] that “the leaders of these obstructive nations are usually violently shoved aside, such as the democrats Muhammad Mossedeq in Iran, Arbenz in Guatemala and Salvador Allende in Chile, or they are murdered like Patrice Lumumba in the Democratic Republic of Congo. All are subjected to a western media campaign of vilification – think Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, now Vladimir Putin”. Comparing Putin to Chavez and Castro stretches political credulity.

But Pilger goes further when he carries on in the same article that “having masterminded the coup in February against the democratically elected government in Kiev, Washington's planned seizure of Russia's historic, legitimate warm-water naval base in Crimea failed. The Russians defended themselves, as they have done against every threat and invasion from the west for almost a century”. To believe that Washington had planned to seize Russia's naval base in Crimea makes us wonder whether Pilger has lost all his senses.

But it gets even more incredible when he writes further in the same article that “for the Germans, it is a poignant irony that Putin is the only leader to condemn the rise of fascism in 21st-century Europe”. Evidence abounds that Putin works with the far right and fascists in Russia and across Europe. In January, Marine Le Pen of the Front National in France was welcomed in the Duma and met the Speaker of the Duma and Deputy Prime-Minister. [15] Pravda openly acknowledges Russia's support for the fascists in the European Parliament [16]. Nazis are allowed to march in Moscow alongside Stalinists on the 1st May. [17]

Such an article by Pilger flies in the face of facts, supports Russian imperialist annexation and paints Putin as an anti-fascist. Such rubbish should be condemned and it is extraordinary that it was posted on the Stop the War Coalition website without comment.

Unfortunately, Pilger is not the only socialist supporting Russia. Eamonn McCann wrote earlier in the year “if we have to pick a side over Crimea, let it be Russia” because “in this instance Russia has more right on its side than the West”. [18] Socialist Action views the events in Ukraine as a struggle between Russia and imperialism [Imperialist offensive causes tragedy in Ukraine, Paul Roberts, 22 July 2014, <http://www.socialistaction.net/Inte...>], obviously implying that Russia is not imperialist. John Pilger's nationalist references to “Germans” are echoed in the Communist Party's view that “German monopoly capital is clearly preparing for economic expansion into Ukraine”. [19] Socialist Appeal and Workers Power are also covering up Putin's imperialist land grab by cheering on the struggle against Kiev-based fascism.

What is worrying is that Russian nationalists and reactionaries are working with some on the left in Russia and elsewhere to cover-up what is the Russian imperialist grab of parts of Ukraine. The latest event was an “international conference” entitled “The World Crisis and the Confrontation in Ukraine” held in Yalta, Crimea (formerly part of Ukraine, now annexed by Russia) on July 6-7. The aim of the conference included the creation “an international network of support for the movement for the creation of Novorossiya”. [20]. The conference was organised by Boris Kargalistky, a Russian socialist, and with some Russian far right or fascist currents. Many of these are supporters of Strelkov, the “Minister of Defence of the Donetsk People's Republic” [21], a White Guard monarchist who fought in Chechnya and Serbia. Besides the Institute of Globalisation Studies and Social Movements, of which Kagarlitsky is the Director, the conference was organized by the far right New Rus' Coordination and Support Centre, and the Osnovanye Fund. This fund was established recently to support the separatist movement by such Russian personalities as Alexandr Prokhanov and Vladislav Shurygin (editors of the far right journal, *Zavtra*) or Nikolai Starikov (leader of the far right Party of Great Fatherland). It was attended from Britain by Richard Brenner of

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Workers Power and Alan Freeman of Socialist Action, both supporters of the Ukraine Anti-Fascist Solidarity campaign.

Socialists should have stayed well clear of a conference organised in a territory just annexed by Russia and in which deeply reactionary forces participate. It is also an error to invite Boris Kargalitsky to address the NATO counter-summit in Cardiff at the end of the August.

The divisions over Ukraine, and over Syria, have grave implications for the anti-war movement. While rightly setting its priority against NATO expansion and intervention in Ukraine, the Stop the War Coalition has yet to publicly oppose the Russian intervention in Ukraine despite stating that it “oppose(s) all foreign military intervention”. [22] The Coalition also refused to agree to a call against all foreign intervention in Syria and for the people of Syria to freely determine their own future.

The Stop the War Coalition, launched in 2001 has played an unprecedented and historic role in mobilising against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. It was launched with three principles: opposition to imperialist intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, the defence of democracy, and against racism and islamophobia. While it is right for the anti-war movement to focus against the imperialist interventions of our own country, the wars in Syria and Ukraine show there is also in those countries a fight for democracy and against the racism fuelled by nationalism. By not calling for the withdrawal of all foreign forces so that the people of those countries can determine their own future democratically, the Stop the War Coalition is failing.

[1] Then, the left was divided between those who opposed any imperialist intervention, others who supported the western “humanitarian” intervention to help Bosnia, and some supported, or at best were uncritical of, Serb leader Milosevic as somehow incarnating progressive remnants of Yugoslavia.

[2] Ukraine Anti-Fascist Solidarity is backed by the Community Party of Britain, Counterfire, Socialist Appeal and Workers Power. <http://ukraineantifascistsolidarity.wordpress.com/2014/06/03/packed-meeting-in-london-to-launch-the-campaign-in-solidarity-with-the-antifascist-resistance-in-ukraine/>

[3] The Ukraine Socialist Solidarity campaign is backed by Socialist Resistance, John McDonnell MP, the Labour Representation Committee, RS21 and Workers Liberty. Further information at <http://www.ukrainsolidarity.co.uk/>.

[4] Imperial Delusions, Alex Callinicos, ISJ 142, 31 March, 2014, <http://isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=959&issue=142>

[5] Against nationalism, corruption, privatisation and war, Left Unity, 3 March 2014, <http://leftunity.org/against-nation...>

[6] <http://peopleandnature.wordpress.co...>

[7] Ukraine: why being neutral won't stop a war, Chris Nineham, 23 March 2014, <http://www.counterfire.org/articles...>

[8] Ukraine: Popular Movements and Imperialisms, Fourth International, 7 June 2014, <http://socialistresistance.org/6513...>

[9] Supporters of all three organisations also form the majority of the leadership of the Stop the War Coalition.

[10] Seumas Milne, ‘Georgia is the graveyard of America’s unipolar world’, The Guardian, 28 August 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/commenti...>

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[11] Read *The Making of Global Capitalism - The Political Economy of American Empire*, by Leo Panitch and Sam Ginden (Verso Books 2012).

For a review of the book, go to <http://socialistresistance.org/5602/why-the-state-matters-and-the-usa-still-dominates-capitalism-worldwide>

[12] MH17 and the threat of a world war, Matt Carr, 22 July 2014, Counterfire,

<http://www.counterfire.org/articles...>

[13] Obama's coup in Ukraine has ignited a civil war and lured Putin into a trap, John Pilger, 17 April 2014,

<http://stopwar.org.uk/news/john-pil...>

[14] In Ukraine the US is dragging us towards war with Russia, John Pilger, 14 May 2014, <http://stopwar.org.uk/news/john-pil...>

[15] <http://imrussia.org/en/russia-and-t...>

[16] <http://www.thenation.com/blog/17996...>

[17] Report and photos here: <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.d...>

[18] In the game of Great Power politics, if we have to pick a side over Crimea, let it be Russia, Eamonn McCann, 21 March 2014,

<http://www.counterfire.org/articles...>

[19] MH17 - Kiev regime stoking the fires of war, Communist Party of Britain, 23 July 2014, <http://www.comunist-party.org.uk/i...>

[20] For a fuller description of the conference, go to <http://www.workersliberty.org/story...>

[21] The prime minister of the Donetsk Peoples Republic, Alexander Borodai, is a Russian citizen from Moscow who describes himself as a professional consultant who got involved in east Ukraine as a volunteer.

[22] The Crisis in Ukraine: Statement by Stop the War Coalition, 3 March 2014, <http://stopwar.org.uk/statements/th...>