

INSURGENT NOTES

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ON THE WAR
IN UKRAINE

JOURNAL OF COMMUNIST
THEORY AND PRACTICE



MASTHEAD

25

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.

—Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels
The German Ideology (1845)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON UKRAINE

ON THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PROBLEMS POSED BY THE CONFLICT

BY ROSS WOLFE

As the horizon of mass revolutionary politics dimmed over the course of the twentieth century, and especially with the dissolution of the USSR, an historical chapter drew to a close. The Soviet Union had long since degenerated into an authoritarian regime, of course, serving the interests of entrenched bureaucratic elites—party apparatchiks and the state nomenklatura—rather than the international proletariat.¹ Nevertheless, its unraveling signaled the final collapse of a project initiated some seventy-five years prior, amidst a bloody interimperialist war. For communists, the overthrow of tsarism was supposed to serve as the spark that fanned the flames of world revolution. While the expected conflagration did not ultimately come to pass, as bourgeois governments put down the wave of proletarian uprisings that followed World War I and capitalism narrowly survived the economic crises of the interwar period, the geopolitical rivalry between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries defined the balance of power for many decades after World War II. In December 1991, this rivalry resolved itself in favor of the former. “Actually-existing socialism,” as it was sometimes called, suddenly no longer existed.

Salutary pronouncements about the “end of history” were made, though catastrophes did not cease to unfold. Even in the nineties, there was a genocide in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. Liberal democracy and the free market enjoyed a few years without major challenges arising to upset the new order, but since 9/11 a sequence of events has steadily eroded the belief that there would be smooth sailing ahead: the War on Terror, which saw the

invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; the 2008 financial crisis, leading to austerity in Europe around the issue of sovereign debt; the Arab Spring, which soon turned into an Islamist Winter; finally the Covid-19 pandemic, attended by intermittent lockdowns and supply-chain disruptions.² Various movements have sprouted up alongside these, seeking to oppose the status quo: from summit-hopping antiglobalization in late nineties and early aughts through the anti-war demonstrations under Bush, from the “movement of squares” in Europe and Occupy in North America through Black Lives Matter protests and annual Women’s Marches. Most of these energies have been harmlessly reabsorbed into business as usual, however, funneled into NGOs, online hashtags, and flag emojis. Rightwing and leftwing populism has likewise made a comeback at the ballot box, but in spite of tough rhetoric no one has thus far been able to offer a real alternative to neoliberal policymaking.

Beginning in 2013-2014—though possibly earlier, if one counts the wars in Chechnya back in the early 2000s or the standoff with Georgia in 2008—conflict returned to the states that once comprised the USSR. In the intervening years much had no doubt occurred. Capitalist “shock therapy” led to unemployment, hyperinflation, and dwindling pensions in many former Soviet and Eastern Bloc nations. Alcoholism was rampant, as life expectancies declined precipitously. Ukraine was hit particularly hard, and any gains it built up during the brief boom after 2001 were wiped out by the worldwide downturn after 2008. Political leaders mulled over whether to turn toward Europe in restructuring Ukraine’s economy, or remain within the Russian

¹ For an interpretation of the character of Soviet society, see Ross Wolfe, “The Crisis of State Socialism: The Fall of the Soviet Union and Its Urban Ruins,” *archithese* (№ 3: 2021), 50-56.

² On the lockdowns, see Angry Workers of the World, “A Plague on Both Your Houses—The Position of the Working Class in the Current Crisis,” *Insurgent Notes*, 4 April 2021.

sphere of regional influence. The Maidan uprising of 2013 ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, who initially vacillated but in the end chose the second option. Petro Poroshenko's nationalist administration succeeded Yanukovich's, signing onto a more EU-friendly deal, which resulted in conflict with Russia as Crimea was annexed in 2014 and separatists in Donbas and Luhansk received tactical support and training from paramilitaries across the border.³ The full-scale invasion launched in February by Russia, using its own army, was an escalation of a preexisting conflict. NATO has supplied the Ukrainian military throughout. Following the failure of the initial blitzkrieg and a stalled counteroffensive several months hence, things seem to have arrived at a tenuous stalemate.

The current war poses serious questions for Marxist theory. Questions that would have to be practically taken up by a mass revolutionary movement in order to find historical purchase, but which are nevertheless worth reflecting upon. In this spirit, we invited participants to write about four interrelated themes: imperialism and anti-imperialism, national self-determination, defeatism vs. defensism, and geopolitics and phases of capitalism. We've also translated a number of articles that touch on these themes in order to paint a fuller picture of the range of thought surrounding the war. Along with the assorted original pieces, they will hopefully enrich subsequent discussions. Of course the present collection of articles should not be regarded as the final word on the matter; and indeed *Insurgent Notes* welcomes further contributions in response. Readers will notice that this special issue does not push any particular "line," but instead encourages open debate without acrimony or denunciation. Such debate is all the more important when groups and individuals ostensibly share theoretical and practical premises, yet arrive at opposite conclusions.

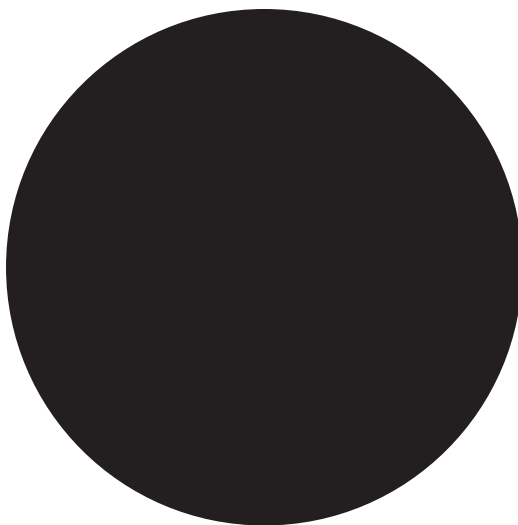
³Probably the most thorough account of the background to the conflict was provided by the Slovakian group Karmina, who have also contributed a piece to this issue. See their essay "The Tragedy of the Ukrainian Working Class," 29 June 2022.

For example, some feel that the old slogans ("no war but class war;" "the main enemy is at home") have either grown stale or lack contemporary application while others still uphold them. My own sympathies fall, perhaps dogmatically, with the orthodoxy of the latter. Despite this, it is useful to reexamine the historical foundations of the defeatist stance and ask whether it ever had the coherence ascribed to it by later revolutionaries. The experience of civil wars in recent decades, from Syria to former Yugoslavia, has for some undermined the validity of the classical position. Anyone seeking to defend its applicability to the war in Ukraine cannot rely on dubious precedents set over a century ago, but must confirm defeatism's continued salience in the present moment—a task I believe both possible and necessary. Meanwhile, those who prefer to draw their poetry from the future do well to eschew these past disputes and focus on what is novel in the situation.⁴ Confusion around what is to be done might stem from a very real sense of helplessness, however, the feeling that nothing can be done. But if humanity is to ever be more than a passenger on the runaway train of world history, it must learn how and when to pull the emergency break.⁵

20 December 2022
New York City, USA

⁴"The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition about the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead." Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1851], translated by Clemens-Dutt, *Collected Works, Volume 11* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1979), 106.

⁵"Marx says revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake." Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'" [1940], translated by Edmund Jephcott & Howard Eiland, *Selected Writings, Volume 4* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 402.



CAPITALIST CRISIS AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CURRENT CONFLICT AND A WINDOW ONTO A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE

BY SANDERR

We live in troubling times. The amount of pain humankind is inflicting upon itself grows by the day. The saddest thing is that much of that pain is avoidable. No law of history or nature forces humans to destroy Syria and Ukraine.

We live in a world awash in crisis. Is there a connection between this context and the war in Ukraine? We think there is. The system, the capitalist ground rules, makes it impossible to overcome the existential threats that humanity faces. It is this impossibility which fosters the possibility of inter-imperialist war.

Capitalism makes solving the climate crisis impossible. That this crisis is real and a mortal threat to our species and many other is becoming obvious in the year 2022. It's also obvious for many that green tech is not going to stop it.¹ Competition, the compulsion to grow, and the dependency of that growth on the consumption of ever larger quantities of energy, assure that in regard to the climate, we ain't seen nothing yet. Capitalism can only try to contain the results of this crisis—the catastrophes, the pandemics, the forced migration, the conflicts over resources—while making its cause worse day by day.

Capitalism cannot solve the social crisis. Worldwide, poverty, hunger, homelessness are spreading. The income gap has grown to absurd proportions. Between 2009 and 2018, the number of billionaires it took to equal the wealth of the world's poorest fifty percent fell from 380 to 26.²

In some countries, the population simply can't take it anymore and mass protests erupt. But they usually lead to a replacement of the upper management of the state, after

which things essentially stay the same. It doesn't matter whether the government is leaning left or right. Conditions vary, but the direction is the same everywhere. In South Africa, the gap between rich and poor is now much wider than under apartheid.³ Not because the government was better back then, but because defending the national interest can be nothing else than defending the interest of capital. In times of crisis even a leftwing government like Syriza in Greece must first and foremost restore the credibility of the national capital. In the present crisis the value of all existing capital, of all the hoarded assets and money-capital, came under threat. This strikes at the heart of the system: if money cannot be turned into more money, if it cannot be stored without losing value, why produce at all? Hence the policies of the state in defense of the national interest are aimed at saving the profitability of its capital, by lowering its costs (at the expense of the working class) by forking over massive amounts of new money to it. They make the income gap—the growing misery of the many and the concentration of purchasing power in the hands of the few—ever larger.

It's clear that capitalism cannot solve its economic crisis. Since the "Great Recession" of 2008, world profitability fell to near all-time lows. The collapse was only avoided by borrowing heavily from the future. At the turn of the century, global debt stood at \$84 trillion. It has since risen to \$296 trillion by 2021.⁴ That's 353% of the total annual income of all countries combined! Inflation is skyrocketing and there is no plan, no prospect of climbing out of

¹ Editors, "Repainting Capitalism Green?", *Internationalist Perspective* (№ 48: Fall/Winter 2007), 1-2.

² Larry Elliott, "World's 26 Richest People Own as Much as Poorest 50%, says Oxfam," *Guardian*, 20 January 2019.

³ See Judith Allen, "South Africa: Anti-Apartheid, a Mystification Against the Workers' Struggle," *Internationalist Perspective* (№ 2: Spring 1986), 5-8.

⁴ Maria Elena Vizcaino, "Global Debt Hits Record \$296 Trillion as World Lockdowns Ease," *Bloomberg*, 24 September 2021.

the hole by any “normal” means. Increase or reduce taxes, stimulate or rein in spending, reduce or expand the money supply—nothing works against the crisis of the system. This system is dependent upon growth, on the accumulation of value, yet increasingly incapable to accomplish it.⁵ The restoration of favorable conditions for value accumulation requires a devaluation of existing capital, an elimination of “dead wood” on a massive scale. Is it a coincidence that in the same period of growing economic insecurity and crisis, global military spending has increased year after year and the number of military conflicts has increased sharply?

Wars are raging and tensions are rising in almost every continent. The US and China accelerated their armament efforts with each other as justification. Global arms spending has increased by 9.3% (in constant dollars) over the past decade and is now topping \$2 trillion annually.⁶

Before the twentieth century, capitalist wars roughly fell into two categories. The first were wars between rival capitalist states, fought to consolidate the emerging nation-state or to expand its frontiers. These typically led to the redrawing of the borders, but not to the expulsion or extermination of populations; they were confined to hostilities between armies. Secondly, there were wars between capitalist states and precapitalist societies. Those were genocidal, and involved the construction of racism to justify the reduction to slavery or the extermination of native populations.

Since the twentieth century wars between capitalist states have taken characteristics of the second category, that is, they have become genocidal. The development of military technology made it possible to erase any distinction between combatant and noncombatant, soldier and civilian, and xenophobia and racism made the extermination of the foe—now primarily the civilian population—an integral part of the very structure and organization of war.⁷

In global conflicts, the initiator is more often than not the intrinsically weaker party. They are obsessed with the threat of encroachment, and seek the advantage of attacking first. The German demanded *Lebensraum* when they started World Wars I and II. Now it's the demand of Putin's Russia. They always expect a short war.

What does that mean, *Lebensraum*? Space to live, for whom? It means space for capital, control over resources and markets, it means access to profit.

Because I have dealt with them elsewhere, I will skip the specific reasons why Ukraine has become the locus of the belligerent escalation.⁸

⁵ For a thorough theoretical account of capitalism's crisis in value-creation, especially around 2008, see Sanderr, “Value-Creation and the Crisis Today,” *Internationalist Perspective* (№ 49: Spring/Summer 2008), 24-31.

⁶ Niclas Rolander, “Global Military Spending Tops \$2 Trillion for First Time as Europe Boosts Defenses,” *Bloomberg*, 24 April 2022.

⁷ Mac Intosh, “Theses on War,” *Internationalist Perspective* (№ 40: Fall 2002), 19-20.

⁸ “Ukraine is an attractive booty, with the world's largest iron ore reserves, gas, and other mineral resources, excellent farmland, industry, shipbuilding, ports. It also has a modern arms industry, a rival to Russia's, which is one reason why Moscow insists that Ukraine be ‘demilitarized.’ And then there are the pipelines that carry Russian gas and oil through Ukraine to Western Europe. So of course Russia wants to control them.” Sanderr, “Don't Fight for ‘Your’ Country!”, *Internationalist Perspective*, 26 March 2022.

I want to point out three factors that limit the war, for now:

1. First, the atomic threshold. This means Russia cannot be attacked directly, even though it is militarily much weaker than the West. That limits the confrontation for now, like in the Cold War, which did not really end. But there is no guarantee that a future, step-by-step escalation towards nuclear war is impossible.
2. Likewise, the globalization of the capitalist economy is a factor that weighed much less in global wars of the past. But again, that's no guarantee. Even though it's bad for profits, the war dynamic can lead to a restructuring of trade patterns, as we see already to some extent with the western sanctions and the redirection of Russian trade towards India and China.
3. The third, most important check on escalation is the lack of social submission. In a limited war, the mobilization of the population can seem unnecessary. Putin, who was counting on a short war, so far managed to limit the impact of the war on the living conditions of the average Russians. He has 150,000 soldiers in Ukraine, only a fraction of his army. Yet there is no draft. There are no conscripts at the front. Instead he uses prisoners and mercenaries, Chechens and the Wagner brigade.⁹ This shows he doesn't trust his own army. He does not have the population in his pocket the way that Hitler had the Germans. Nationalism is both the goal and the condition here. Putin hoped that the war would whip up nationalist fever and thus redirect the anger of the working class against a foreign enemy. But for that he needs to win the war, lest he tumbles from his pedestal like the Argentine junta after the Falklands war. But to win, he needs to escalate. And to escalate, he needs the nationalist fervor to be present. He needs a population mobilized for war, willing to endure the hardships of war from which he has zealously tried to protect it thus far. It's a dilemma.

Nationalism is the most essential weapon of capitalism. It is the window through which capital wants us to look at the world. What you see then is the national interest. From there all the rest follows, including the need for war. Whenever you wave an American, Ukrainian, or Russian flag you help to strengthen that view of the world. You make a little contribution to the preparation of future wars, for which nationalism is a requirement. If instead you denounce all nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, you help to open

⁹ *Editor's note, December 2022*: At the time of writing, in early September, this was largely the case. Later that same month, though, Putin instituted a “partial mobilization” of roughly 300,000 reservists. This came after major setbacks to the Russian cause, following a somewhat successful Ukrainian counteroffensive toward the end of August. Nevertheless, Sander's point remains; Russia also recently deployed 40,000 released convicts. See Francesca Ebel & Mary Ilyushina, “Using Conscripts and Prison Inmates, Russia Doubles Its Forces in Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, 23 December 2022.



another window on the world, a window that shows the common interest of all, of the global working class. Then a quite different set of needs arise, like the need to refuse to fight each other and to fight together against the common enemy: the capitalist system.

We reject fighting for national self-determination. We want self-determination for everyone. Everyone should be free to determine his or her own path. Everyone should be free from exploitation and oppression. All humans share the same basic needs. Meeting those needs must replace profit as the motivation of production. Only then can real self-determination flourish.

But we reject self-determination if it means that your interests are the same as those of the rulers of the piece of land where you happen to live, and different from those of people like you who live outside its borders, while the opposite is true. National self-determination means a defense of the state, of its military, of its faction of capital, when our common interest is to do away with them.¹⁰

¹⁰ "Anti-imperialism, solidarity with enslaved peoples, and the quest for national identity and dignity are all just empty slogans, lies to maintain the illusion that somewhere in the world, the class struggle has a common interest in bourgeois nationalism. The notion of 'the right of peoples' belongs only to bourgeois ideology. It is not a revolutionary concept, but is a concept to mobilize workers around the interests of the bourgeoisie. The slogan, 'self-determination of peoples,' gives the bourgeoisie complete freedom to exploit, pillage and dominate for its own interests. Against this principle—which suggests that people find self-determination by electing Stalinists, social democrats, and fascist populists—real communism opposes the political self-determination of the working class through workers' councils." RC & JA, "Nationalism: A Crime Against Humanity" *Internationalist Perspective* (№ 13: Summer 1989), 8.

Revolutionary defeatism is not a passive stance. It is not pacifism. It involves sabotage, strikes, and resistance to both the Russian and Ukrainian rulers, on an autonomous class basis. While we express the wish that soldiers on both sides refuse to obey, refuse to fight, and fraternize, we realize the obstacles to this in practice. But it happens to some extent. Thousands have deserted on both sides. If the war escalates, and its consequences are more felt, we may see class resistance rising, in Russia and elsewhere.

Yesterday the *New York Times* quoted Oxford professor Goldin who said, "we're living the biggest development disaster in history, with more people being pushed more quickly into dire poverty than has ever happened before."¹¹ The *Guardian* published a report of the risk intelligence company Verisk Maplecroft, which stated that in 101 countries there's now a heightened risk of social conflict and instability.¹² Already the UK is experiencing the biggest strike wave in decades. So fasten your seatbelts, we're in for serious social turmoil. Here the core issue will be nation or class: through which window are we going to see our world?¹³

10 September 2022
Staten Island, USA

¹¹ Patricia Cohen, "Shockwaves Hit the Global Economy, Posing Grave Risk to Europe," *New York Times*, 8 September 2022.

¹² Sarah Johnson, "'Powder-kegs Waiting for a Spark': Rising Costs Threaten Global Unrest, Say Risk Analysts," *Guardian*, 2 September 2022.

¹³ Editors, "Through which Window are We Looking at Our World?" *Internationalist Perspective* (№ 40: Spring 2004), 1-3.

DEFEATISM RECONSIDERED: REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR OF DEFENSE IN UKRAINE

AGAINST THE RUSSIAN INVASION, FOR THE SUCCESSFUL
RESISTANCE OF THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE

BY JOHN GARVEY

Preface

I have changed my mind more than once about important aspects of the Russian war against Ukraine over the last eight months. To some extent, this reflected the effects of quite persuasive, but profoundly opposed, arguments put forward by many different individuals, including arguments by some whom I have been hesitant to disagree with, given their extraordinary records of knowledgeable and principled politics.

Early on in the war, I privately circulated a draft flyer that attempted to straddle the divide between strong support for the Ukrainian resistance and strong opposition to NATO. In fact, it probably went so far as to define the internationalist position as one that could only be an anti-NATO expansion position.¹ It met with criticisms from a number of perspectives. I thanked those who had responded and said that I needed to think more about it. It took me a while. Hopefully, this article has fewer flaws.

The essay is primarily an essay about socialist history, specifically a history of the debates among socialists before and during the First World War and in the final days of that war. Those debates resulted in the crystallization of what became the “classical” revolutionary antiwar tradition during the twentieth Century. It is intended to clear up what I think is a great deal of mythology and mystification among far-left activists about that tradition. Beyond an accounting of the debates, I also hope to explore some of the profound differences in historical contexts between now and just over a hundred years ago. Those differences include matters such as the form and content of nationalism, imperialism, and internationalism.

¹ I have since been persuaded that a preoccupation with NATO's expansion in the context of the Ukrainian invasion is, in fact, a pro-Russian position.

Towards that end, I will address the significance of Rosa Luxemburg's surprising sympathy for and support of struggles against national oppression and the development of a regional grassroots internationalism in Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and other Eastern European countries as an encouraging sign of the potential of a new internationalism being born out of the vast suffering in Ukraine.²

One of my starting points is a conviction that the invocation of "tried and true" formulas from the past (such as the "No war but the class war!" slogan or the call for "revolutionary defeatism") has *little* to recommend itself when we are faced with a situation that is unlike any other situation we know about.³ More importantly, it has nothing to recommend itself when it comes to advising the Ukrainians about what they should do. They are faced with an existential crisis—perhaps comparable to what the Palestinians have dealt with since 1948. For the Ukrainians, the time to fight is now. The time will never be better if the Russians succeed.

None of that is intended to suggest that the war is not a catastrophe for the Ukrainians and awful for the Russians. Nor is it to underestimate the danger that the war might spiral even more out of control. The best way for the carnage to end and to forestall the dangers that may lie ahead is the fastest possible withdrawal of Russia from all of Ukraine and, by extension, the toppling of the Russian regime. There are roles to play for both Ukrainians and Russians in making that outcome a reality. Thus far, albeit in unequal measure, people in both countries seem willing and able to do what needs to be done. In a world without very much hope of anything good ever happening, that is no small accomplishment.

I suggest making a distinction between the defense of Ukraine and the defense of the Ukrainian state. Events on the ground in Ukraine have provided convincing evidence that the distinction is a valuable one. By every account, the Ukrainian people have rallied around the defense of their country. For the moment, the defense of the people cannot be accomplished without the use of the state. If the Ukrainians succeed, they will live to fight another day against that state. If Ukraine fails, there will be no fight left to have—there will only be tyranny and prolonged national subjugation. Many of them likely have illusions about the state that is conducting the war but not all do and not all have all illusions. And many more have had an extraordinary experience of self-activity in fighting a war they were never expected to win.

It is all but impossible to have a serious argument with those who have adopted a pro-Russian position. On the other hand, it is essential that arguments be joined with those who believe that each of the warring states is as bad as the other and that all nationalism is poisonous.

²All told, the topics I address were intended to respond to questions that had been posed to the panelists at the Woodbine discussion.

³Recently, I have had the good fortune of reading Rob Myers' article titled "The War in Ukraine through Some Memories of the Yugoslav Wars," also published in this issue. He provides valuable insights into how the politics of the war in 2022 echoes those wars.

We need an end to false equivalents—a bourgeois republic, distorted by excessive corruption, is not the same as a quasi-fascist autocracy. In the one, politics is possible; in the other, nothing other than mindless consumption and collaboration is typically the rule of the day.

But not always! The signs of resistance within Russia have been extraordinary—from public demonstrations to refusal of conscription to flight from the country to the burnings of state offices to the sabotage of war-related infrastructure. What is most striking about some aspects of the resistance in Russia, especially among anarchist groups, is their commitment to the success of the Ukrainians and not just their opposition to Russia.

Debates about war and peace among socialists before the First World War

In the middle of the nineteenth century, there was no universal Marxist policy of opposition to war. Instead, Marx and Engels argued that each outbreak of hostilities should be weighed in terms of the relative advantages for the cause of workers' emancipation. Their position was deeply influenced by the existing landscape of European nation states and empires which gave rise to their articulation of a "special position" on Russia. For them, Russia was the center of reaction and counterrevolution. "For the defeat of tsarism!" was the watchword of the revolutionary forces.

This approach was taken for granted for at least several decades. Thus, when war was waged between Russia and Japan in 1904-1905, the predominant socialist view, including within Russian social democracy and specifically including Lenin, was to give strong support to Japan. "This policy was not for international application. It was a policy on one side of a given war between a despotic, backward state and a 'progressive' capitalist state." This meant that social democrats wanted the defeat of Russia and the victory of Japan. That was defeatism!⁴

Things changed rapidly. The development of capitalist industries in the Russian Empire produced a dramatic growth in the size of the Russian working class, although the great majority of the population were still peasants working on the land. In turn, this had contributed to the development of Russian social democracy. The 1905 Revolution announced these developments to the world. Rather than lagging behind, the proletariat in the empire was leading the way.

The establishment of the Second International (in 1889) had brought representatives of social democratic parties together in regular gatherings and contributed to the beginnings of a new internationalism—one that included Russia's social democrats.⁵ But the old tradition of a focus

⁴Hal Draper, "The Myth of Lenin's Revolutionary Defeatism," *New Internationalist* (Volume XIX № 5- Volume XX, № 1: September 1953-January 1954).

⁵It's beyond the scope of this essay to take a full measure of the Second International. Arthur Rosenberg seems to have gotten much of it right:

An organization can only be looked upon as revolutionary when it has for its avowed and sole object the accomplishment of the overthrow of the existing order within a measurable space of time. If judged by this—the only just—criterion, the groups composing the Second International were not revolutionary... They accepted the existence of the capitalist state and sought to improve

on tsarism as the primary enemy was strong and, whether by conviction or convenience, it continued to influence the opinions of social democratic parties. This was especially true of its echoes in the German SPD (“the Party”).

The extent of these activities was so extensive that in 1913, Lenin celebrated the Party’s choirs:

In 1892, after the repeal of the Anti-Socialist Law, there were 180 workers’ choral societies in Germany with 4,300 members. In 1901, the membership reached 39,717, in 1907, 93,000, and by 1912, 165,000. Berlin is said to have 5,352 members of workers’ choral societies; Hamburg, 1,628; Leipzig, 4,051; Dresden, 4,700, etc.

We recently reported how the workers of France and other Romance countries had marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Eugene Pottier (1816-1887), the author of the famous Internationale. In Germany, the propaganda of socialism by workers’ songs is much more recent, and the “Junker” (landowners’, Black-Hundred) government of Germany has been throwing up many more foul police obstacles to such propaganda.

But no amount of police harassment can prevent the singing of the hearty proletarian song about mankind’s coming emancipation from wage-slavery in all the great cities of the world, in all the factory neighborhoods, and more and more frequently in the huts of village laborers.⁶

The members of the Social Democratic Party were ill-prepared to deal with the challenges of the impending world war. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Party’s politics that resulted from the combination of a preoccupation with electoral victories and a comprehensive program of educational/cultural activities were not Marxist in any sense of the term. Indeed, the party was certainly not “Marxist” from the beginning.⁷ In 1875, Karl Marx had written

the condition of the working class within its limits. In consequence they were forced into a position incompatible with their own beliefs. For the theories of Marx, which they had made their own, called for revolution. There were, indeed, two ways in which they could attempt to evade this contradiction between their professed beliefs and their actions. The first way was an open and sincere confession that Marx’s theories must be altered to suit changed circumstances, and that Social-Democracy, even possibly in alliance with middle-class opinion and abandoning an ideology dominated by its final aim, must seek to accomplish definite reforms. Those who believed in this course became known as revisionists. The second way was that of continuing to accord the chief place in agitation and propaganda to the final aim, rejection of reforms, refusal to cooperate in the peaceful promotion of better conditions and to compromise with middle-class political parties and governments. At the same time there was to be no action of a revolutionary nature, and the small successes won for the working class by the “reformist” trade unions were to be regarded secretly as matters for rejoicing... There can be no question that up to 1914 the revisionists had a far better knowledge of actual political and economic conditions than had the so-called radicals.

See his *History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five-Year Plan* [1932], translated by Ian FD Morrow (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 65.

⁶ Vladimir Lenin, “The Development of Workers’ Choirs in Germany,” [3 January 1913], translated by Andrew Rothstein, *Collected Works, Volume 36* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 225-226. Until 1914, there was no question that Lenin thought the German Social-Democratic party was the exemplary socialist party. It’s often been reported that he, and Trotsky as well, believed that the first report of the SPD support of war credits was a forgery. If this is in fact the case, it appears evident that both of them took a great deal of what they knew at face value. Indeed, in the opinion of the aforementioned Rosenberg, Lenin’s subsequent virulent denunciation of SPD theorist Karl Kautsky, typically identified as “the renegade,” was more than a difference of opinion. “Such hatred can only be entertained by a person who has formerly loved greatly. After 1914 Lenin sought to revenge himself upon Kautsky for having mistakenly admired his ideas and organization for twenty years past.” Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, 68.

⁷ It might well be the case that a political party can never be “Marxist.” In a later essay, Karl Korsch enumerated four essential points of Marxism.

an unpublished critique of its founding program (*Critique of the Gotha Program*) where he emphasized the ways in which the program reflected the continuing influence of Ferdinand Lassalle.⁸ Karl Korsch summarized what Marx was attempting to do:

Karl Marx had devoted his whole life to transforming socialism from a theoretical ideology and practical utopia into a realistic and material science and practice. It is not surprising that a program like this deeply disappointed and dismayed him. This is why the whole letter on the program became one blazing indictment of what he explicitly stated to be a “thoroughly objectionable program, which would demoralize the Party” in everything it said. The theory and practice of scientific socialism is materialist. The draft program is Lassalleian—that is, ideological and utopian. Even if one were able and willing to ignore this, “the program is worthless” taken in and for itself. Marx therefore holds it to be his “duty” “not to accept” such a theoretically and practically unprincipled Program “by a diplomatic silence.”⁹

At the time, Marx’s *Critique* was shared with only a handful of people in Germany. Its existence did not become well known until Engels published it in 1891.

Opposition to war and betrayal of socialist principles

In spite of the German state’s imperial aspirations and actions, there were numerous examples of the patriotism of social democratic leaders. The patriotism consisted of repeated avowals that if Germany were the victim of aggression, the SPD would be found marching to her defense. In 1900, August Bebel told the Reichstag that “... if it came to a war with Russia... I would be ready, old boy that I am, to shoulder a gun against her.” In 1907, Gustav Noske told

The second and third seem relevant to an argument for why a political party cannot be Marxist:

2. Marxism is not *positive* but *critical*.
3. Its subject-matter is not *existing* capitalist society in its affirmative state, but *declining* capitalist society as revealed in the demonstrably operative tendencies of its breaking-up and decay.

Cf. “Why I Am a Marxist” [1934], *Three Essays on Marxism* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 61.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program* [1875], translated by Karl Luden-hoff and Kevin B. Anderson (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2022).

⁹ Karl Korsch, “Introduction to the *Critique of the Gotha Program*” [1922], translated by Fred Halliday, *Marxism and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 157. In another late essay, Korsch held that neither Luxemburg nor Lenin accurately understood what had become of social democracy by the time that Bernstein argued his revisionist theory and that they effectively had the same understanding of the matter as the centrist orthodox thinkers, like Bebel and Kautsky:

But it was not only the demagogues of the Social Democratic party executive and their “theoretical” advocates who, through the pseudo-struggle which they waged at that time against Bernstein’s revisionism, lent aid to the danger of an advancing reformist and bourgeois degeneration of the socialist movement. Rather in the same direction with them there worked for a considerable time, unconsciously and against their will, also such radical revolutionary theoreticians as Rosa Luxemburg in Germany and Lenin in Russia, who according to their subjective design conducted a serious and uncompromising struggle against the tendency expressed by Bernstein. When at the present time, on the basis of the new experiences of the last three decades, we look back on those earlier directional struggles within the German and all-European labor movement, it is somewhat tragic to see how deeply even Luxemburg and Lenin were stuck in the illusion that “Bernsteinism” represented only a deviation from the basically revolutionary character of the then Social Democratic movement, and with what objectively inadequate formulas they too sought to conduct the struggle against the bourgeois degeneration of the socialist party and trade union policy.

Korsch, “The Passing of Marxian Orthodoxy: Bernstein-Kautsky-Luxemburg-Lenin” [1937], translated by Douglas Kellner for *Revolutionary Theory* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1977), 178.

the Reichstag that if Germany were attacked, Social Democrats would fight with the same “loyalty and devotion” as the bourgeois parties. Later that year, Bebel told the Party Congress of Essen that: “If ever we should really be called upon to defend the fatherland, we will defend it because it is our fatherland, the soil on which we live, whose language we speak, whose customs we possess, because we want to make of our fatherland a country that is inferior to none in the world in perfection and beauty.”¹⁰

On the other hand, in the years before the outbreak of the First World War, the Party, along with its counterparts in other countries, consistently pronounced its opposition to imperialist war. At international conferences, the German SPD earned widespread respect for its parliamentary opposition to various militaristic proposals. But signs that pledges might not mean as much as thought emerged early enough. For years, the French socialists had actively promoted the adoption of an international general strike as a response to the declaration of war but their efforts had been blocked by the Germans.

Matters came to a head at the Stuttgart Conference in 1907 after the French party had passed a resolution that declared it would oppose war “by all means, from parliamentary intervention, public agitation, popular demonstrations, to the workers’ general strike and insurrection.” The Germans pushed back hard and a classic compromise was forged:

If a war threatens to break out, it is the duty of the working class and of its parliamentary representatives in the country concerned... to exert every effort to prevent the outbreak of the war by every means they consider most effective, which naturally vary according to the sharpness of the class struggle and the general political situation.¹¹

In 1912, at a Congress in Basel, Switzerland, the delegates reaffirmed previous antiwar resolutions:

In case war should break out anyway it is their duty to intervene in favor of its speedy termination and with all their powers to utilize the economic and political crisis created by the war to arouse the people and thereby to hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule.

More than ever, recent events have imposed upon the proletariat the duty of devoting the utmost force and energy to planned and concerted action. On the one hand, the universal craze for armaments has aggravated the high cost of living, thereby intensifying class antagonisms and creating in the working class an implacable spirit of revolt; the workers want to put a stop to this system of panic and waste. On the other hand, the incessantly recurring menace of war has a more and more inciting effect. The great European peoples are constantly on the point of being driven against one another, although these attempts are against humanity and reason cannot be justified by even the slightest pretext of being in the interest of the people...

¹⁰Richard Hostetter, “The SPD and the General Strike as an Antiwar Weapon, 1905-1914,” *The Historian* (Volume XIII, № 1: Fall 1950) 27-28.

¹¹“Resolution Adopted at the Seventh International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart” [24 August 1907], translated by Sam Marcy, *Bolsheviks and War: Lessons for Today’s Antiwar Movement* (New York, NY: World View Forum, 1985).

It is with satisfaction that the Congress records the complete unanimity of the Socialist parties and of the trade unions of all countries in the war against war.

The proletarians of all countries have risen simultaneously in a struggle against imperialism; each section of the International has opposed the resistance of the proletariat to the government of its own country, and has mobilized the public opinion of its nation against all bellicose desires. Thus there resulted the grandiose cooperation of the workers of all countries which has already contributed a great deal toward saving the threatened peace of the world. The fear of the ruling class of a proletarian revolution as a result of a world war has proved to be an essential guarantee of peace.¹²

In spite of the proclamations, there was no coherent internationalist antiwar position. Craig Nation summarized the predicament: “The Second International was fundamentally divided over the issues of war and militarism, but up to the First World War its differences were patched over by vague pronouncements that assumed a common ground of internationalism based upon the premises of classical Marxism. The resolutions accepted unanimously by its Stuttgart, Copenhagen, and Basel conferences were most notable for their failure to specify effective means of resistance to a danger that all acknowledged to be clear and present.”

As the war fever grew in 1914, it remained an open question if the German party would vote for its internationalist principles or its national practical interests. Rosa Luxemburg cited two hopeful examples from the socialist press in the week before the war began. On July 26th:

*We are not marionettes. We fight with all our might a system that makes men into the will-less tools of blind circumstance, this capitalism that seeks to transform a Europe thirsting for peace into a steaming slaughterhouse. If destruction has its way, if the united will to peace of the German, the international proletariat, which will make itself known in powerful demonstrations in the coming days, if the world war cannot be fended off, then at least this should be the last war; it should become the *Götterdämmerung* of capitalism.*¹³

On July 30th, the central organ of German Social Democracy stated:

The socialist proletariat rejects any responsibility for the events being brought about by a blinded, a maddened ruling class. Let it be known that *a new life will spring from the ruins. All responsibility falls upon the wielders of power today!* It is “to be or not to be!” “World history is the world court!” [*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht!*]¹⁴

Indeed, there were a number of antiwar demonstrations in Germany right up to the start of the war. On the other hand, however, there were also warning signs of the coming collapse:

¹²“Manifesto of the International Socialist Congress at Basel” [25 November 1912], translated by Sam Marcy in *ibid.* Rosa Luxemburg approvingly cited these statements in *The Junius Pamphlet*. When CLR James wrote his book on Comintern two decades later, however, he had nothing but scorn for them. He charged that while “internationalism remained on the lips,” the resolutions were “high-sounding but empty.” CLR James, *World Revolution: 1917-1936* [1937] (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2017), 93.

¹³From the *Frankfurter Volksstimme*. Junius [Rosa Luxemburg], “The Crisis in German Social Democracy” [February-April 1915], translated by Dave Hollis, *Selected Writings* (New York, NY: 2004), 320.

¹⁴*Ibid.*



At a conference on 1 and 2 August the chairmen of the major trade unions decided, on the basis of prior negotiations with the Ministry of the Interior, to call off all ongoing strikes and not to initiate any new labor actions for the duration of the war. With the unions close affiliation to the SPD, this decision effectively inaugurated the *Burgfrieden*, the political truce that subordinated the German labor movement to the interests of the Imperial State.¹⁵

On August 1st, Germany declared war on Russia; on the 2nd, it declared war on France and invaded Belgium, a neutral country. On August 4th, Great Britain declared war on Germany. On that fateful day, all the pronouncements of international working-class solidarity against war came to naught when the SPD's parliamentary group voted in favor of war credits in the Reichstag. At times, it tried to justify its endorsement of the war by proclaiming it as a war against tsarist barbarism in Russia or by insisting that the government was right in its definition of the war as a defensive one.¹⁶

Most of the other socialist parties in Europe followed suit and joined one or the other of the war alliances in their commitment to kill as many of their worker comrades as possible. Even the French party quickly reversed direction. It was "an imperialism on all sides."

Lenin

Lenin was in the forefront of those who opposed the war from the start. Before the month of August was over, he had sketched theses on the war that he submitted to a party conference of the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic and Labor Party), which adopted them. Lenin changed very little of substance in the August theses when he wrote a more polished document in November. One notable exception is that in August, he argued:

From the viewpoint of the working class and the toiling masses of all the peoples of Russia, the defeat of the tsarist monarchy and its army, which oppress Poland, the Ukraine, and many other peoples of Russia, and foment hatred among the peoples so as to increase Great-Russian oppression of the other nationalities, and consolidate the reactionary and barbarous government of the tsar's monarchy, would be the lesser evil by far (emphasis added).¹⁷

In September, Lenin published a formal summary of the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee position on the issues. The statement argued that social democrats had a unique

¹⁵ Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement* (Chicago, IL: Brill, 2015), 24.

¹⁶ According to Hal Draper, anti-tsarism was "not the cause of collapse of the SPD but effective ideological cover." He cites what Luxemburg wrote about this:

Long-forgotten chords that had been sounded by Marx in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* against the vassal state of Nicholas I, during the German March Revolution of 1848, were suddenly reawakened in the ears of the German Social-Democracy in the year of our lord 1914, and called them to arms, arm in arm with Prussian Junkerdom against the Russia of the Great Revolution of 1905.

See Draper, "The Myth of Lenin's Revolutionary Defeatism" (Volume XIX No 5: September-October 1953), 262-263.

¹⁷ Vladimir Lenin, "The Tasks of Revolutionary Social-Democracy in the European War" [6 September 1914], translated by Julius Katzer, *Collected Works, Volume XXI* (Moscow, Progress Publishers: 1974), 18. There was no mention of the "lesser evil" in November. Lenin must have realized that a defeat of Russia in those terms meant a victory for Germany.

responsibility to reveal the true meaning of the war—two groups of belligerent nations have embarked on "robber" wars of plunder. There is no national defense of any kind involved.¹⁸ He insists that only civil war against all of the bourgeois governments holds out the prospect of ending the war on favorable terms for the working class.¹⁹

He suggested that the immediate political slogan of Europe's Social Democrats must consist of the revolutionary overthrow of the German, Austrian, and Russian monarchies. In the particular backward circumstances of Russia, the Social Democrats should strive to achieve three fundamental conditions for democratic reforms—1) a democratic republic (with complete equality and self-determination for all nations); 2) confiscation of landed estates, and 3) an eight-hour working day. He ends by proclaiming that, although the Second International is no more, a new International will be created by the masses of workers.

His November argument deserves careful citation and summary. He wrote:

Advocacy of class collaboration; abandonment of the idea of socialist revolution and revolutionary methods of struggle; adaptation to bourgeois nationalism; losing sight of the fact that the borderlines of nationality and country are historically transient; making a fetish of bourgeois legality; renunciation of the class viewpoint and the class struggle—for fear of repelling the "broad masses of the population" (meaning the petty bourgeoisie)—such, doubtlessly, are the ideological foundations of opportunism. And it is from such soil that the present chauvinist and patriotic frame of mind of most Second International leaders has developed.

He also mapped out the broader landscape of social democratic attitudes towards the war. In one European country after another, the dividing lines had become clear—one group of social democrats had all but abandoned internationalist principles and embraced the cause of patriotic war; another group, usually much smaller, stood fast in defense of principle, and here and there, another group of opportunist "centrists" were reluctant to oppose the parties but wanted to be against the war. Lenin argued that the betrayal of the opportunists in their, more or less, active support of the war represented the logical consequence of opportunism.²⁰

He insisted that the epoch of imperialism had made the notion of national wars more or less obsolete:

The question of the fatherland—we shall reply to the opportunists—cannot be posed without due consideration of the concrete historical nature of the present war. This is an imperialist war, i.e., it is being waged at a time of the high-

¹⁸ It's worth noting that, in this instance, Lenin implies that if national defense was real, it would be justified.

¹⁹ Vladimir Lenin, "The War and Russian Social Democracy" [28 September 1914], translated by Julius Katzer, *Collected Works, Volume XXI* (Moscow, Progress Publishers: 1974). Lenin never ceased to insist that the masses of workers will demand or accomplish something when he knew perfectly well that those accomplishments (good or bad) were the results of the actions and decisions of quite small numbers of active party members. Or, even more precisely, of those who were party leaders.

²⁰ "Centrists" is a term that explains itself; "opportunists" is another matter. Perhaps, the most useful general definition of opportunists in the context of revolutionary working-class politics might be a political tendency that was prepared to sacrifice the long-term interests of the working class as a whole for the short-term interests of a section of that working class

est development of capitalism, a time of its approaching end. The working class must first “constitute itself within the nation,” the *Communist Manifesto* declares, emphasizing the limits and conditions of our recognition of nationality and fatherland as essential forms of the bourgeois system and, consequently, of the bourgeois fatherland. *The opportunists distort that truth by extending to the period at the end of capitalism that which was true of the period of its rise.* With reference to the former period and to the tasks of the proletariat in its struggle to destroy, not feudalism but capitalism, the *Communist Manifesto* gives a clear and precise formula: “The workingmen have no country.” One can well understand why the opportunists are so afraid to accept this socialist proposition, afraid even, in most cases, openly to reckon with it. The socialist movement cannot triumph within the old framework of the fatherland. It creates new and superior forms of human society in which the legitimate needs and progressive aspirations of the working masses of each nationality will, for the first time, be met through international unity, provided existing national partitions are removed (emphases added).²¹

He then argued that the proletariat has demanded that the imperialist war be turned into a civil war against the bourgeoisie. In this instance, what’s noteworthy is the claim that the proletariat has arrived at this demand. So far as I know, there is no evidence of any kind that confirms that claim. The compulsion that Lenin apparently felt to insist that the proletariat was behind the argument was revealing of something else. Lenin insisted on the need to establish a new International—grounded in recognition of the need for a “revolutionary onslaught” against capitalist governments and for a socialist movement purged of “turncoats and opportunism.”²²

The masses demanded it.

In early 1915, Clara Zetkin of the German SPD issued a call for an antiwar socialist women’s conference. She was joined in the conference planning by Angelica Balabanoff of the Italian Socialist Party. The group met clandestinely in Bern, Switzerland in March. The Bolshevik Central Committee actively supported the meeting and designated Lenin’s wife Krupskaya, Zinoviev’s wife, and Inessa Armand as its official representatives.²³ While Lenin did not participate, he monitored the proceedings from a nearby café. Balabanoff, in her book entitled *Impressions of Lenin*, recounted his involvement: “At times, their [the Bolsheviks’] interest in the women’s movement had an almost comic aspect; for a man like Lenin to sit for days on end in the corner of a coffeehouse where the women delegates of his faction came to report everything that happened at the convention and to ask for instructions was, no doubt, ludicrous.” When the delegates came up with a resolution that gained majority approval, an effort was made to secure unanimous consent. The Bolshevik delegates refused to go along until they secured Lenin’s agreement. Lenin was obdurate and

²¹Vladimir Lenin, “The Position and Tasks of the Socialist International” [1 November 1914], translated by translated by Julius Katzer, *Collected Works, Volume XXI* (Moscow, Progress Publishers: 1974), 38-39.

²²*Ibid.*, 40-41. More than a hundred years later, I assume that it’s self-evident that the period of the time was not the end of capitalism.

²³Inessa Armand was a French-born Bolshevik who had a close personal and political relationship with Lenin.

refused. Only when Zetkin went to him and pleaded for him to agree, did they come up with a compromise: “the Bolshevik delegates were authorized to sign the document drawn up by the majority of the congress members, provided the Bolshevik statement was included in the minutes of the meeting.”²⁴

A few weeks later, socialist youth from different countries met in the same place to draw up their own statement addressed to young people in the warring countries. Lenin was consulted by phone. Once again, the Bolsheviks raised demands that the majority could not accept. In response, the Bolshevik delegates left the meeting. Subsequently, direct negotiations with Lenin led to the same outcome as at the women’s conference. The Bolsheviks would vote in favor of the majority’s text so long as the Bolshevik minority’s statement was included in the minutes.²⁵

In the fall, an international conference of antiwar socialists was held in Zimmerwald, Switzerland. Important differences became evident. Some participants, led by Robert Grimm of Switzerland, wanted to rebuild the old International on an antiwar basis. This placed them on the “right.” Others, on the “left,” wanted to build a new international on the ruins of the old. Karl Radek presented a resolution summarizing the left’s views on the third day of the conference. His resolution described the social democratic center as “more dangerous than the bourgeois apostles of imperialism.”²⁶ It insisted that only revolution could lay the groundwork for a lasting peace. The left wing was led by the Bolsheviks but also attracted support from a number of other radicals. A letter from Liebknecht was read and interpreted as being aligned with the lefts because he called for “civil war, not civil peace.”

A major division emerged over the issue of condemning any support for war credits—with the “right wing” hesitant to do so because it might threaten the possibility of rebuilding ties with individuals and parties who had voted for them and the “left” insisting that any support for credits was a violation of fundamental principles. After much unproductive debate, Trotsky was charged with drafting a conference manifesto designed to accommodate the different views. Craig Nation concluded that: “Though Trotsky borrowed some phrases from Radek, his text was primar-

²⁴Angelica Balabanoff, *Impressions of Lenin* [1959], translated by Isotta Cesari, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 40-41. Lenin spent the years from 1914 to 1917 in Switzerland, first in Berne and then in Zurich. When not attempting to revolutionize the Swiss social democrats, he spent his time trying to control every aspect of Bolshevik policy and practice. A fascinating account of Lenin in the last year of his Swiss exile is provided in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s novel, *Lenin in Zurich* [1973], translated by HT Wilets (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, & Co., 1977). Solzhenitsyn devoted a great deal of time and effort to research in Zurich when he was writing the novel. It is subtly critical of Lenin but is no rightwing tract.

²⁵Balabanoff concluded Lenin’s intransigence about what seemed at times to be minor issues had a particular explanation: “He wanted it recorded in the annals of the workers’ movement that on specific occasions, the Bolsheviks had said this or that, opposed this or supported that particular motion. The aim of it was to show that the Bolsheviks, and they alone, were right and all the others had been counterrevolutionaries, saboteurs, and servants of the bourgeoisie.” *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁶An eerie anticipation of the later, and profoundly destructive, charge of “social fascism.”

ily an emotional appeal aimed at the masses, not the statement of principles that Lenin originally desired.”²⁷ Trotsky’s draft eventually received unanimous approval. But it did not completely satisfy the Bolsheviks who drafted a “Zimmerwald Left” statement, which Trotsky also endorsed.²⁸ Luxemburg was quite critical of the Zimmerwald meeting (in which she had played no part because of her continued imprisonment).²⁹ She formalized her position in a “Resolution on the Character of a New International” submitted to the International Group’s first conference in March of 1916:

The new international that must revive after the collapse of the former on 4 August 1914 can only be born as a result of the revolutionary class struggle of the proletarian masses in the most important capitalist countries. The existence and viability of the International is not an organizational issue, not a question of understandings within a small circle of individuals who come forward as representatives of the oppositionally-inclined strata of the working population, but rather a question of the mass movement of the proletariat of all lands... The first word of this struggle must be systematic mass action to force the achievement of peace.³⁰

War opposition within Germany

Three groups opposed the war from within Germany: the Spartacus Group, the revolutionary shop stewards [*Revolutionäre Obleute*], and the Bremen Left Radicals [*Linksradikalen*].

The Spartacus Group was established soon after August 1914, initially as Die Gruppe Internationale, by Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring and Clara Zetkin and a small number of others. Soon afterwards, they were joined by Karl Liebknecht and Otto Rühle.³¹ The League committed itself to the principles of consistent class struggle, international solidarity, opposition to war and nationalism. Its two most important members were Liebknecht and Luxemburg.

Liebknecht did not initially break with the discipline of the Social-Democratic Party and voted for war credits on August 4th.³² The Social Democrats claimed that support for the government had been unanimous. Liebknecht corrected the record in “The First Days”:

²⁷ Nation, *op. cit.*, 89. Unlike Lenin, Luxemburg never claimed proletarian activity as a source of a development that she endorsed unless it was real. In proverbial terms, she told no lies.

²⁸ All of the Zimmerwald documents are available online on John Riddell’s blog, accessible via: <https://johnriddell.com/2015/08/21/zimmerwald-1915-the-zimmerwald-manifesto/>

²⁹ See Dominique Villaeys-Poirré, «Rosa Luxemburg et la première Conférence de Zimmerwald», *Pour comprendre avec Rosa Luxemburg: Blog d’information et de réflexion*, 15 October 2015.

³⁰ Nation, *op. cit.*, 94-95.

³¹ The Spartacus Letters are available in German. It would be a very good deed if someone would translate these letters into English.

³² CLR James notes that Liebknecht fought against the war credits bill in the SPD faction for three days, and was then defeated by a vote of 78 to 14. He couldn’t convince the other 13 to actually vote against the bill in the full Reichstag, and so he reluctantly decided to follow them. See James, *World Revolution*, 135.

“Although only a tiny minority of the SPD opposed the war, Liebknecht was sharply criticized by some of his comrades. After meeting a group of party activists, mainly industrial workers, in Stuttgart in September 1914, Liebknecht showed the ability of a true socialist leader to learn from the class: “You are quite right in criticizing me. Even if alone, I should have called out my “No!” ... I have committed a serious error.” Ian Birchall, “Red Letter Days: Leipzig, 13 August 1871.” *Socialist Review* (№ 232: July/August 1999).

I understand that several members of the Socialist Party have written all manner of statements to the press with regard to the deliberations of the Socialist Party in the Reichstag on August 3rd and 4th.

According to these reports, there were no serious differences of opinion in our party in regard to the political situation and our own position, and decisions to assent to war credits are alleged to have been arrived at unanimously. In order to prevent the dissemination of an inadmissible fiction I feel it to be my duty to put on record the fact that the issues involved gave rise to diametrically opposite views within our party parliament, and these opposing views found expression with a violence hitherto unknown in our deliberations.

It is also entirely untrue to say that assent to the war credits was given unanimously.³³

By December that year, however, he cast a sole vote against war credits. After being drafted into the army, Liebknecht used his parliamentary protections to continue his anti-war activities. In a protest in the Reichstag, he challenged two of the most frequent arguments made by the socialist supporters of war:

The German word of command “against tsarism,” like the English or French word of command “against militarism,” has been the means of bringing forth the most noble instincts, the revolutionary traditions and hopes of the peoples, for the purpose of hatred among the peoples. Accomplice of “tsarism,” Germany, a model country of political reaction, possesses not the qualities necessary to play the part of a liberator of peoples...

This war is not a defensive war for Germany. Its historical character and the succeeding events make it impossible for us to trust a capitalist Government when it declares that it is for the defense of the country from which it asks for the credits.³⁴

The SPD formally censured him.

In May 1915, Liebknecht authored a leaflet titled “The Main Enemy Is At Home.” The centerpiece of his argument was the following:

The main enemy of the German people is in Germany: German imperialism, the German war party, German secret diplomacy. This enemy at home must be fought by the German people in a political struggle, cooperating with the proletariat of other countries whose struggle is against their own imperialists.

We think as one with the German people—we have nothing in common with with the German Tirpitzes and Falkenhayns [major generals], with the German government of political oppression and social enslavement. Nothing for them, everything for the German people. *Everything for the international proletariat, for the sake of the German proletariat and downtrodden humanity.*

The enemies of the working class are counting on the forgetfulness of the masses—provide that that be a grave miscalculation. They are betting on the forbearance of the masses—but we raise the vehement cry:

³³ Karl Liebknecht, *The Future Belongs to the People* [1914-1916], translated by Savel Zimand (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1918), 25-26.

³⁴ Karl Liebknecht, “Protest Against the War Credits,” *Justice* (17 December 1914), 1. It is noteworthy that Liebknecht felt he had to insist this was not a defensive war for Germany. That suggests he would not have been opposed to a war that was defensive in nature. This distinction may very not apply to any of the warring nations during the First World War but that does not mean it will never be relevant. Not every war is the same.

How long should the gamblers of imperialism abuse the patience of the people? Enough and more than enough slaughter! Down with the war instigators here and abroad! (emphases in original)³⁵

In January of 1916, Liebknecht was expelled from the Social Democratic Party for “having greatly embarrassed the government with his questions two days before in the Reichstag.”

At the end of 1915, eighteen Reichstag members, called the Haase-Ledebour Group, voted against war credits for the first time and did so again on March 24th of 1916. They were expelled from the Social Democratic Party and organized themselves as the Social Democratic Working Group—later to become the Independent Socialist Party (USPD). Liebknecht cautioned that they would not be reliable opponents of the war:

The formal combination of all kinds of indefinite oppositional feelings and motives is always a great danger, especially so in a time of world changes. This means confusion and dragging along on old lines, it sterilizes and kills the militant elements which get into this mixed company. What must be the conclusion from all this?

[...]

The masses were ripe for the test already at the beginning of the war. They would not have failed. The only result of the hesitation and doubt has been the strengthening of poisonous opportunism.

Clear cut principles, uncompromising fighting, whole-hearted decision!³⁶

In April 1916, Liebknecht issued a call to the Berlin proletariat to join a May Day demonstration.³⁷ Luxemburg joined him. One participant described the demonstration as it began:

Shortly after 2PM of the same May Day, I have taken a hasty lunch at the Central Hotel. As I near the door I hear the footsteps of the great multitudes. As far as I can see, all the streets and side streets are full of surging, silently moving human beings; all moving in the direction where the May Day demonstration is to take place. These are men and women, mostly women. The men among them are mostly over fifty. Suddenly it becomes apparent to me that there are more children in the crowds than men and women together. As they march I notice that I cannot see one in the crowd who has a smile on her or his face. Along the route no one is cheering them. I had never seen such immense crowds in the streets of Berlin. Not even during the Agadir crisis had the streets of Berlin held such multitudes. The crowds move as though they are part of a funeral procession. They are all sad, very sad. I recognize a group of comrades in the crowd. I rush in and join them. *Mund halten* [keep your mouth shut] is the unwritten rule, and everyone seems to observe it strictly.³⁸

³⁵ Karl Liebknecht, “The Main Enemy is at Home” [May 1915], translated by John Wagner (2002) for the *Marxists Internet Archive*.

³⁶ Karl Liebknecht, “Revolutionary Socialism in Germany” [1916], translated by Louis Fraina, *The Social Revolution in Germany* (Boston, MA: Revolutionary Age Publishers, 1918).

³⁷ Karl Liebknecht, “May Day Manifesto” [1 May 1916], translated by Savel Zimand, in *The Future Belongs to the People*, 126. Supposedly, the “Manifesto” had in fact been written by Rosa Luxemburg. Mathilde Jacob, *Rosa Luxemburg: An Intimate Portrait* [1943], translated by Hans Fernbach (London: Lawrence & Wishart, Ltd., 2000), 43.

³⁸ Karl Liebknecht, “May Day Speech” [1 May 1916], *ibid.*, 129.

In his speech, Liebknecht ridiculed the supposed “rights” of the German people. The same participant recorded his words:

The doctor begins: “Comrades and friends.” They start to cheer him. He holds up his hand forbiddingly, then he resumes: “Some years ago a witty socialist observed that in Prussia we Germans have three cardinal rights, which are: we can be soldiers, we can pay taxes and we can keep our tongues between our teeth. The socialist who made this observation made it with a grim humor, but today the humor of it must be disconnected from it—it is all too grim. Especially in these days, this observation is too true. Today we are sharing these three great Prussian state privileges in full.”³⁹

At the end of the speech, mounted police charged through the crowd to get at Liebknecht. Terrified people scattered in all directions to avoid being trampled by the horses. Liebknecht was forced off the speakers’ platform, arrested, tried in July, and sentenced to prison at hard labor for two and a half years. In August, after a failed appeal, the sentence was increased to four years.

In 1914, Luxemburg had been convicted of inciting soldiers to insubordination, a charge that she denied legally and accepted politically. Her imprisonment was delayed because of an appeal and an illness but she was abruptly taken into custody in March of 1915 to serve a one-year sentence. After her release, she had five months of freedom before she was detained and sentenced to indefinite military detention in July of 1916. I think it fair to say that the German government did not want Rosa Luxemburg out on the streets.⁴⁰

Luxemburg lacked the parliamentary protections that Liebknecht had and thus was unable to play the same public antiwar role until a brief period in the early part of 1916.⁴¹ Most of her efforts were devoted to writing. Her first antiwar text, “Rebuilding the International,” appeared in the first issue of *Die Internationale*:

On August 4th, 1914, German Social Democracy abdicated politically, and at the same time the Socialist International collapsed. All attempts at denying or concealing this fact, regardless of the motives on which they are based, tend objectively to perpetuate, and to justify, the disastrous self-deception of the socialist parties, the inner malady of the movement, that led to the collapse, and in the long run to make the Socialist International a fiction, a hypocrisy...

With the outbreak of the world war, word has become substance, the alternative has grown from a historical tendency into the political situation. Faced with this alternative, which it had been the first to recognize and bring to the masses’ consciousness, Social Democracy backed down without a struggle and conceded victory to imperialism. Never before in the history of class struggles, since there have been political parties, has there been a party that, in this way, after fifty years of uninterrupted growth, after achieving a first-rate position of power, after assembling millions around it, has so completely and ignominiously

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

⁴⁰ The difference between the imperial government’s treatment of Luxemburg and that of a nominally working-class government was that the former government only locked her up while the latter murdered her.

⁴¹ It should be remembered that, throughout the period at hand, women did not have the right to vote in Germany.

abdicated as a political force within twenty-four hours, as Social Democracy has done. Precisely because it was the best-organized and best-disciplined vanguard of the International, the present-day collapse of socialism can be demonstrated by Social Democracy's example...

On August 4th, German Social Democracy, far from being "silent," assumed an extremely important historical function: the shield-bearer of imperialism in the present war. Napoleon once said that two factors decide the outcome of a battle: the "earthly" factor, consisting of the terrain, quality of the weapons, weather, etc., and the "divine" factor; that is, the moral constitution of the army, its morale, its belief in its own cause. The "earthly" factor was taken care of on the German side largely by the Krupp firm of Essen; the "divine" factor can be charged above all to Social Democracy's account. The services since August 4th that it has rendered and it is rendering daily to the German war leaders are immeasurable: the trade unions that on the outbreak of war shelved their battle for higher wages and invested with the aura of "socialism" all the military authorities' security measures aimed at preventing popular uprisings; the Social-Democratic women who withdrew all their time and effort from Social-Democratic agitation and, arm in arm with bourgeois patriots, used these to assist the needy warriors' families; the Social-Democratic press which, with a few exceptions, uses its daily papers and weekly and monthly periodicals to propagate the war as a national cause and the cause of the proletariat; that press which, depending on the turns the war takes, depicts the Russian peril and the horror of the tsarist government, or abandons a perfidious Albion to the people's hatred, or rejoices at the uprisings and revolutions in foreign colonies; or which prophesies the re-strengthening of Turkey after this war, which promises freedom to the Poles, the Ruthenians, and all peoples, which imparts martial bravery and heroism to the proletarian youth—in short, completely manipulates public opinion and the masses for the ideology of war; the Social-Democratic parliamentarians and party leaders, finally, who not only consent to funds for the waging of war, but who attempt to suppress energetically any disquieting stirrings of doubt and criticism in the masses, calling these "intrigues," and who for their part support the government with personal services of a discreet nature, such as brochures, speeches and articles displaying the most genuine German-national patriotism—when in world history was there a war in which anything like this happened?⁴²

Soon after she was imprisoned, Luxemburg authored a longer and more detailed analysis under the pseudonym Junius. Originally it was titled "The Crisis of Social Democracy" and was smuggled out of the prison. When it was finally published in January of 1916, it became known as the Junius Pamphlet [*Juniusbroschüre*]. Its opening paragraphs provided a powerful denunciation of the war:

The scene has changed fundamentally. The six weeks' march to Paris has grown into a world drama.⁴³ Mass slaughter has become the tiresome and monotonous business of the day, and the end is no closer. Bourgeois statecraft is held fast in its own vise. The spirits it summoned up can no longer be exorcized.

⁴²Rosa Luxemburg, "Rebuilding the International" [1915], translated by Paul Le Blanc and included in *Rosa Luxemburg: Reflections and Writings* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 199-202.

⁴³The German military's high command had predicted that it would only take six weeks to defeat the French forces and occupy Paris.

Gone is the euphoria. Gone the patriotic noise in the streets, the chase after gold-colored automobiles, one false telegram after another, the wells poisoned by cholera, the Russian students heaving bombs over every railway bridge in Berlin, the French airplanes flying over Nürnberg, the spy-hunting public running amok in the streets, the swaying crowds in the coffee shops with ear-deafening patriotic songs surging ever higher, whole city neighborhoods transformed into mobs ready to denounce, to mistreat women, to shout hurrah and to induce delirium in themselves by means of wild rumors. Gone, too, is the atmosphere of ritual murder, the Kishinev air where the crossing guard is the only remaining representative of human dignity.

The spectacle is over. German scholars, those "stumbling lemurs," have been whistled off the stage long ago. The trains full of reservists are no longer accompanied by virgins fainting from pure jubilation. They no longer greet the people from the windows of the train with joyous smiles. Carrying their packs, they quietly trot along the streets where the public goes about its daily business with aggrieved visages.

In the prosaic atmosphere of pale day there sounds a different chorus—the hoarse cries of the vulture and the hyenas of the battlefield. Ten thousand tarpaulins guaranteed up to regulations! A hundred thousand kilos of bacon, cocoa powder, coffee-substitute—immediate delivery, cash only! Hand grenades, lathes, cartridge pouches, marriage bureaus for widows of the fallen, leather belts, jobbers for war orders—serious offers only! The cannon fodder loaded onto trains in August and September is moldering in the killing fields of Belgium, the Vosges, and Masurian Lakes where the profits are springing up like weeds. It's a question of getting the harvest into the barn quickly. Across the ocean stretch thousands of greedy hands to snatch it up.

Business thrives upon the ruins. Cities are reduced to piles of rubble, villages become cemeteries, whole countries turned into deserts, entire populations into beggars; churches into horse stalls. International law, treaties and alliances, the most sacred words and the highest authority have been torn in shreds. . . . There are food riots in Venice, in Lisbon, Moscow, Singapore. There is plague in Russia, and misery and despair everywhere.

Violated, dishonored, wading in blood, dripping filth—thus stands bourgeois society. And so it is. Not all spic and span and moral, with pretense to culture, philosophy, ethics, order, peace, and the rule of law—but the ravening beast, the witches' sabbath of anarchy, a plague to culture and humanity. Thus it reveals itself in its true, its naked form.⁴⁴

In February of 1916, Luxemburg was released from prison. In April, she joined Liebknecht in his criticism of the wavering opposition to war represented by the Haase-Ledebour group in the Reichstag in her text "Either/Or." Here is the closing argument:

Here too, comrades, it is either/or! Either we betray the International clearly and shamelessly, as Heine, David, and Scheidemann have done. Or we take it seriously and make it a solid fortress, a bulwark of the worldwide socialist proletariat and of world peace. There is no room today for middle ground, halfheartedness, or vacillation.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Junius [Rosa Luxemburg], "The Crisis of German Social Democracy" [January 1916], translated by Dick Howard and David Hollis, *Selected Political Writings* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 322-324.

⁴⁵Rosa Luxemburg, "Either/Or" [April 1916], translated by Peggy Fallen Wright, *Selected Political Writings* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 345.

In April of 1917, after having been expelled from the SPD (now the Majority SPD), the Social Democratic Working Group formed the Independent Socialist Party. This new party attracted the support of a substantial minority of the SPD's members and appeared to have become somewhat more consistently opposed to the war. In spite of the bitter criticisms that had been leveled by Liebknecht and Luxemburg against its founders, the Spartacus Group joined the USPD but retained its ability to function independently. Paul Mattick provided a convincing explanation, and possible justification, for the Spartacus Group's decision in his essay on "Otto Rühle and the German Labor Movement":

Within the Spartakusbund Otto Rühle shared Liebknecht's and Rosa Luxemburg's position which had been attacked by the Bolsheviks as inconsistent. And inconsistent it was but for pertinent reasons. At first glance, the main reason seemed to be based on the illusion that the Social Democratic Party could be reformed. With changing circumstances, it was hoped, the masses would cease to follow their conservative leaders and support the left wing of the party. And although such illusions did exist, first with regard to the old party and later with regard to the Independent Socialists, they do not altogether explain the hesitancy on the part of the Spartacus leaders to adopt the ways of Bolshevism. Actually, the Spartacus faced a dilemma no matter in what direction they looked. By not trying—at the right time—to break resolutely with social-democracy, they forfeited their chance to form a strong organization capable of playing a decisive role in the expected social upheavals. Yet, in view of the real situation in Germany, in view of the history of the German labor movement, it was quite difficult to believe in the possibility of quickly forming a counter-party to the dominant labor organizations. Of course, it might have been possible to form a party in the Leninist manner, a party of professional revolutionists, willing to usurp power, if necessary, against the will of the majority of the working class. But this was precisely what the people around Rosa Luxemburg did not aspire to. Throughout the years of their opposition to reformism and revisionism, they had never narrowed their distance from the Russian "left," from Lenin's concept of organization and revolution. In sharp controversies, Rosa Luxemburg had pointed out that Lenin's concepts were of a Jacobin nature and inapplicable in Western Europe where not a bourgeois but a proletarian revolution was the order of the day. Although she, too, spoke of the dictatorship of the proletariat, it meant for her, in distinction to Lenin, "the manner in which democracy is employed, not in its abolition—it was to be the work of the class, and not of a small minority in the name of the class."⁴⁶

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards were not organized like a traditional political group. It was led by Richard Müller, the head of the Berlin lathe operators' section in the German Metalworkers Union, the largest trade union in the world.⁴⁷

The stewards came together initially simply by seeking out other union members who had antiwar views. To escape police detection, they started "under the guise of a bunch of drinking buddies."⁴⁸ Patiently they built a secret

⁴⁶ Paul Mattick, "Otto Rühle and the German Labor Movement" [1945], *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (Merlin Press, 1978), 91-92.

⁴⁷ Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

network that included stewards from many different work places—consisting mostly of long-term union members. Interestingly, many of the plants represented were in the munitions industry. Their internal decision-making was apparently very democratic. While many members were in favor of "council socialism," the group did not have explicitly defined principles of agreement on political issues.

Ralf Hoffrogge has argued that while there was opposition to the so-called *Burgfrieden*⁴⁹ in Berlin already in 1914, the stewards were not radicals and did not actually become a political antiwar movement until June of 1916. Later still, they became a revolutionary organization.⁵⁰

On June 28th of that year, the stewards were responsible for organizing a strike and demonstration of more than 50,000 workers on less than twenty-four hours notice to protest the trial and likely imprisonment of Karl Liebknecht. Afterwards, dozens of strikers and strike leaders were drafted and sent to the front.

The Spartacists and Stewards worked on plans for a follow-up strike in August but the Stewards declined to participate—judging that too few workers would be prepared to strike in light of the repressive measures that the government had implemented. The Spartacists went ahead alone but secured little response. These dynamics gave rise to some sharply critical estimates of the Stewards by the Spartacists and of the Spartacists by the Stewards. Hoffrogge writes: "Liebknecht considered the Stewards to be (in Müller's words) 'a club of feral bourgeois philistines who met in secret and never informed the world of their existence.' Müller and the Stewards, on the other hand, dubbed the Spartacists' constant demands for actions—'hop[ing] that street fights would escalate the tension and bring about a revolutionary situation'—'revolutionary gymnastics'."⁵¹ In spite of the nasty words exchanged, Hoffrogge concluded that the two groups actually benefited from their contact—the Stewards could mobilize tens of thousands of workers and the Spartacists could provide literature that assisted in the Stewards' further development.⁵²

Like just about everyone else, the Bremen Left Radicals (*Linksradikalen*) were shocked by the vote on August 4th. But while even the most fervent of the other antiwar activists remained committed to the SPD, the Bremen Radicals quickly moved to embrace the idea that social democracy had to be split apart. As he was about to be shipped to the frontlines, Jonathan Knief, a leading member of the group, wrote: "It is not the labor movement that has suffered a defeat but its leaders. They have ensured that Social Democracy has ceased to exist... The masses will have to carve their own path; their leaders are finished. Until now the masses have not been taken into account.

⁴⁹ German version of the *Union sacrée*, a compact of class collaboration in the name of wartime national unity.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵¹ Ralf Hoffrogge, "From Unionism to Workers' Councils: The Revolutionary Shop Stewards in Germany, 1914-1918," in *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011), 90-91.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 92.



But they will make their demands. Long live the future!"⁵³ At the same time, they continued to see themselves as politically close to the Spartacists.

In October of 1915, Knief returned from the front and picked up where he had left off. He wrote about the war: "It is not that war emerged from humanity's 'faults and follies,' nor the question of whether it is 'rational' or not—whether it meets certain 'goals' that, from a scientific standpoint, can impress us. The only question is which social forces led us to its emergence and what new social forces it will unleash."⁵⁴

When the Spartacus Group joined the new Independent Social Democratic Party in May of 1917, the Bremen group refused to do so and, instead, insisted on immediately building a new revolutionary party. The effort to do so came up short when only a handful of delegates made it to the founding conference that summer.

Back to Lenin!

In the months following the Zimmerwald meetings, Lenin was tireless in promoting his view of the political situation among those who had been in the Second International. In his mind, there were three tendencies: 1) the social chauvinists who supported their governments and the war; 2) the Centrists who opposed the war but were reluctant to break either with the majorities of their respective parties that supported the war or to embark on an oppositional program of likely illegal activity, and 3) the left Zimmerwaldists, who opposed the war and advocated a complete break with the old social democracy. Interestingly, he almost always cited Karl Liebknecht as the outstanding representative of this last tendency.

What he effectively acknowledged in his various speeches and articles in the period but did not make explicit, however, was that there was a fourth tendency (a tendency that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht likely belonged to) of those who were opposed to the war and willing to break with the majority social democrats but who did not want to completely break with the Centrists. In addition to Liebknecht and Luxemburg, this tendency included individuals like Angelica Balabanoff, Boris Souvarine, Leon Trotsky, and Clara Zetkin.⁵⁵

In December of 1916, Souvarine, a French socialist, published "To Our Friends in Switzerland" and argued that a defensist position was not inconsistent with social democratic positions because it was hard to distinguish between revolutionary and reactionary wars. Lenin responded and insisted that, in the context of an imperialist war, no such position could be maintained. His response included a distinctive argument:

Do not tell me it is hard to distinguish between revolutionary and reactionary wars. You want me to indicate a purely practical criterion that would be understood by all, in addition to the scientific criterion indicated above?

⁵³ Gerhard Engel, "The International Communists of Germany, 1916-1919," *Weimar Communism as Mass Movement: 1918-1933* (Chadwell Heath: Lawrence & Wishart, 2017), 29.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁵ The dividing lines between these tendencies were not always very clear.

Here it is: Every fair-sized war is prepared beforehand. When a revolutionary war is being prepared, democrats and socialists *are not afraid to state in advance* that they favor "defense of the fatherland" in this war. When however, in contrast, a reactionary war is being prepared, no socialist will *venture to state in advance*, before war is declared, that is, that he will favor "defense of the fatherland."

[...]

But what of the social-chauvinists? And the "Centrists"? Will they have the courage openly and officially to state that they favor, or will favor, "defense of the fatherland" in the event of war breaking out between, say, Japan and the United States, a clearly imperialist war prepared over the course of many years, and one which would imperil many hundreds of millions of people? I dare them! I am prepared to wager that they will not, for they know only too well that if they make such a statement, they will become a laughing stock in the eyes of the workers, they will be jeered at and driven out of the socialist parties. That is why the social-chauvinists and those in the "Center" will avoid any open statement and will continue to wriggle, lie, and confuse the issue, seeking refuge in all manner of sophisms, like this one in the resolution of the last, 1915 French party congress: "An attacked country has the right to defense."⁵⁶

Let's go back to Lenin hiding out in the Swiss café, waiting to give orders to the delegates to the women's anti-war conference. But let's not make fun of him. Let's instead try to understand him. We've already read what Balabanoff thought he was up to. Fast forward almost forty years and we encounter another wise person who widened the perspective on understanding Lenin. In 1953, Hal Draper, an American revolutionary and an admirer of Lenin, authored a devastating critique of aspects of Lenin's antiwar views.⁵⁷ We will get to that critique below, but for now I want to focus on what Draper had to say about the "madness" in Lenin's method:

Shocked and appalled by the collapse of the whole Second International all around him, he sees the line of blood which has been drawn between the leaders who are whipping the working class into capitulation to the imperialist chauvinism of their own ruling class, under the slogan of "civil peace" and "defense of the fatherland," and the socialists who maintain the class struggle against the war and for the overthrow of this murderous capitalism which is setting worker against worker to cut each other's throats.

He reacts in the fashion which is characteristic of Lenin the man, and not merely Lenin the Marxist.

For example, over a decade before, he had had to raise a great hue and cry in order to bring together the atomized Russian social-democratic groups and circles into a modern centralized party with a central organ; that at the time was the great next step which had to be taken, it was "what is to be done." It was the key; it had to be pounded home into the consciousness of every militant; everything had to be subordinated to emphasizing it. How do you emphasize it? By repeating it a thousand times, in every conceivable way? Yes. By explaining it patiently over and over? Yes.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Lenin, "An Open Letter to Boris Souvarine" [27 January 1918], translated by Joe Fineberg *Collected Works, Volume 23* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 197-198.

⁵⁷ Also worth mentioning that Lenin spent the war years in neutral Switzerland, far removed from the physical and political turmoil in the warring nations.

By piling up argument after argument, seizing every fact, every problem, and converting it into, turning it toward, a lesson on centralization? Yes. But that is not all. The problem is greater centralization, as compared with the present looseness. Then put “Centralization!” on a banner, on a pedestal, emphasize it by raising it to a principle. But the opponents of this elementary need cover their political objections demagogically by yelling “Bureaucratism!” “Lenin wants more bureaucratism, while we are for democracy!”—How does Lenin react? Yes, he replies: “*Bureaucratism versus democracy*”—that is what we need now. He makes perfectly clear what he means, but that is how he seeks to underline, with heavy, thick strokes, the task of the day, by exaggerating in every way *that* side of the problem which points in the direction it is necessary to move *now*. Tomorrow he will recapture the balance, but today that is the way he puts the weight on the side which needs it.

In 1914 the traitors to international socialism are yelling “Civil peace!” No, says Lenin, *civil war!*

In 1914, the traitors are yelling “Defense of the fatherland!” No, says Lenin, *defeat of your own fatherland!*⁵⁸

Exaggerated exaggeration may have its uses in debates but it's seldom valuable as the foundation for serious thinking about politics. Unfortunately, the advocates of “revolutionary defeatism” as an all-purpose solution to the problem of war seldom, if ever, seem to have much knowledge of its origins.

Let's try to make sense of Lenin's defeatism. Typically, Lenin would insist that his meaning was clear and unequivocal. It means that you must be in favor of defeat and nothing else. A refusal to support either side is not defeatism; it must be desiring defeat of one's own country. A defeatist does not wish the victory of the enemy. He made little headway in convincing those of his comrades in the International who had the sharpest analytical skills. Trotsky opposed the slogan. Luxemburg probably never even heard of it. Trotsky and Luxemburg both emphasized a socialist solution to the war rather than any particular military outcome. Specifically, defeatism as the inescapable and necessary expression of an antiwar line was a myth.

For Draper, Lenin's defeatism was “no principle at all.” Instead, it was a variety of shifting and inconsistent formulations that amounted to “a congeries of nonsense and confusion”:

By... March 1915, we have... four formulas of “defeatism” created out of the attempt to meet the insoluble contradictions without solving them.

1. The special Russian position: defeat of *Russia* by *Germany* is the “lesser evil.”
2. The objective statement that “defeat *facilitates* revolution.”
3. The slogan: *wish* defeat in every country.
4. Do not halt before the *risk* of defeat.

These are four *different* political ideas. Only three of them are meaningful for the international movement. Only two of them involve any wish for defeat (1 and 3). Only one of them can actually be put forward in the form of a “slogan” (3).

Which is *the* meaning of Lenin's position, even assuming that all of them have some self-consistent meaning of their

own? The truth is that from this point on, Lenin juggles all four depending on polemical aim and convenience... New aspects are introduced up to the very last gasp of Lenin's defeatism in November 1916.⁵⁹

In Draper's account, there was no consistent meaning to revolutionary defeatism.

Everything changed in February of 1917 when Russian workers and peasants erupted in a massive rebellion that overthrew the tsar. As had been the case in 1905, workers and soldiers across the country spontaneously formed soviets or councils.

The new Provisional Government, led by liberals, decided to stay in the war. The Bolsheviks in Russia mostly went along with that decision. In March, after some convoluted negotiations with the German High Command, Lenin secured approval for him and a number of his fellow Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries to travel from Switzerland through Germany in a sealed train, onto a ferry across the Baltic Sea to Sweden, then to Finland and on to Russia. When Lenin finally arrived in Russia, he all but horrified the Bolsheviks by urging an overthrow of the existing government and an immediate end to the war.

What then becomes most illuminating about the significance or insignificance of defeatism is Lenin's abandonment of it once he returned to Russia. Upon that return, he was confronted with the challenge of bridging the gap between intransigent war opposition and the thinking of masses of revolutionary workers.

Lenin turns in a surprising direction. He observes and insists upon the idea that the degree of freedom in post-tsarist Russia makes a new approach absolutely necessary. The Russian workers are not being repressed into a defensist position. They are embracing it voluntarily—unlike their counterparts in other warring nations. It might well be that the degree of freedom was unparalleled in comparison to what prevailed under tsarism, but it is a caricature of the situation in the rest of Europe. Freedom was a Russian novelty but it was no peculiarity.

In any case, for Lenin, the Russian workers' adoption of defensism was “the instinct of an oppressed man.”⁶⁰ It represented “conscientious sincere revolutionary defensism.”⁶¹ Lenin determined that it was impossible to wish for defeat and project the idea of transforming the war into a revolutionary war. The working class had a stake in the defense of the nation. The defense of the country required the greatest heroism. It was not possible without breaking with imperialism. It demanded a decisively consistent break with the capitalists. But none of that meant that the revolutionary workers had to be “defeatists.” In 1917, Lenin became a revolutionary patriot. Defeat disappeared “as thoroughly as an icicle in fire.”⁶²

Lest it be assumed that Lenin's new approach was developed only after the October Revolution, there is clear evidence that he was advocating defensism under Keren-

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 345-346.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 347.

⁵⁸ Draper, “The Myth of Lenin's Revolutionary Defeatism,” *New International* (Volume XIX № 6: November-December 1953), 313-314.

sky's government. In May of 1917, on behalf of the Party, he called upon the Russian peasants to "take over all the land without delay, and to do it in as organized a way as possible, under no circumstances allowing damage to property and exerting every effort to increase the production of grain and meat since the troops at the front are in dire straits."⁶³

In September Lenin railed against the treason of the landowners and bourgeoisie who,

headed by the Cadet Party, and the generals and officers who are on their side, have organized themselves; they are ready to commit, or are committing, the most outrageous crimes, such as surrendering Riga (followed by Petrograd) to the Germans, laying the war front open, putting the Bolshevik regiments under fire, starting a mutiny, leading troops against the capital with the "Savage Division" at their head, etc. The purpose of all this is to seize power completely and put it in the hands of the bourgeoisie, to consolidate the power of the landowners in the countryside, and to drench the country in the blood of workers and peasants.⁶⁴

Let's step back a bit and try to situate Lenin's almost manic pursuit of his defeatist slogan. At the time, he was convinced that capital had reached its highest and bloodiest stage of imperial conquest, domination, and competition. Because imperialism was the "highest stage of capitalism," it implied that the next great historical step would be the conquest of power by the international working class. That class had been organized in what, until the war erupted, Lenin had considered to be a perfectly satisfactory international. All signs suggested that the working class was ready to act. But then there was the great betrayal. What to do in the face of such a betrayal? Fight back the only way he knew—with words blazing like guns! Even if they did not make much political sense!

In his view, the war was "imperialism on all sides." But what if imperialism was not the right category for capturing the stage of capitalism and encapsulating the revolutionary potential? Perhaps there was no new stage, no last moment before socialism, no waiting room for a proletarian victory. Then, maybe, the revolutionary project needed to be less messianic.⁶⁵ Perhaps that is what Lenin realized in 1917. Unfortunately, the flash of wisdom did not endure. He thus went on to play his part in the events that resulted in the establishment of the prototype of the authoritarian state that is waging war against Ukraine in 2022, after a series of historical transformations.

The Bolsheviks quite quickly came to see Russia as the new center of revolutionary politics. Lenin wrote: "Things have turned out differently from what Marx and Engels expected and we, the Russian working and exploited classes, have the honor of being the vanguard of the international

⁶³Vladimir Lenin, "An Open Letter to the Delegates to the All-Russia Congress of Peasants' Deputies" [24 May 1917], translated by Isaacs Bernard, *Collected Works, Volume 24* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 370.

⁶⁴See Vladimir Lenin, "Draft Resolution on the Present Political Situation" [3 September 1917], translated by Jim Riordan, *Collected Works, Volume 25* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 317.

⁶⁵Before we move on, I would like to emphasize that the radical forms and contents of the German antiwar movement had developed without any reference to the defeatist slogan. Defeatism was not essential to revolutionary antiwar activity.

socialist revolution."⁶⁶ Lenin began assembling an apparatus to promote that view and to secure international support for all the steps the Bolsheviks would deem necessary to remain in power.⁶⁷

While the Bolsheviks quickly declared an end to the war with Germany, the matter of peace was a bit more complicated. Beginning in December, the Russians and Germans negotiated with each other on the terms of a peace treaty. Not surprisingly, the Germans insisted on harsh terms—primarily the handing over to Germany of much of western Russia, including the Ukraine, the Caucasus, Belarus, Finland, and the Baltic states.⁶⁸ Trotsky was the principal Russian negotiator and he used the negotiating sessions as opportunities to proclaim Russian solidarity with workers in other countries. He also delayed the negotiations as much as possible in the hope that revolts would occur elsewhere. When mass strikes erupted in Germany and Austria in January of 1918, it appeared that he was being successful. The Germans knew what he was up to and increased the pressure on Russia by threatening to resume hostilities. Trotsky withdrew from the talks, declared the war to be over and refused to sign the treaty. The Germans proceeded to invade Russia and made rapid progress—almost threatening Petrograd.

This led to a sharp disagreement with Lenin who wanted the treaty signed immediately and threatened to resign if it was not. He relied on the threat by the Germans to overrun Russia to argue that it was essential to do whatever needed to be done to save the country.⁶⁹ Most of the Bolshevik leadership and party members opposed Lenin and insisted that the treaty was a betrayal of principles, specifically, the commitment to transform the war into a class war. Some urged a revolutionary war against Germany, by which they meant something similar to what Luxemburg and Pannekoek had been advocating—an option which did not align well with the increasingly obvious emphasis Lenin was placing on the survival of Bolshevik power in Russia.⁷⁰

⁶⁶From a speech delivered on 10 January 1918. Vladimir Lenin, "Report on the Activities of the Council of People's Commissars" [27 January 1918], translated by Yuri Sdobnikov, *Collected Works, Volume 26* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 472.

⁶⁷"The Bolsheviks established a Foreign Ministry (the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs) which was *de facto* and *de jure* recognition of the existing system of international relations and the first legal but unnoticed step towards 'socialism in one country'." Mikhail Agursky, *The Third Rome: National Bolshevism in the USSR* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 161.

⁶⁸Russia thus recognized the independence of Ukraine, Georgia, and Finland; gave up Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to Germany and Austria-Hungary, and returned territories near the Black Sea that it had gotten from the Ottoman Empire at the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. The total concessions involved a third of Russia's population, and a majority of its coal, oil, and iron resources.

⁶⁹The German and Austrian threat appears to have been a bluff, because the last thing that they wanted was to become entangled in a lengthy war in the vast Russian territory and thus risk the continued spread of mass strikes at home. They wanted to close one front of their war so they could concentrate on the other.

⁷⁰"One ought to stress again that the arguments used here by the opposition against Lenin in 1918 were very close to those arguments used by Stalin's opposition some eight or nine years later. Therefore, the concept of socialism in one country was formulated, not in 1924, but in February-March 1918 during the debates on the Brest-Litovsk treaty." Agursky, *op. cit.*, 192. See an article Lenin published in *Izvestia* during that stretch for

In the end, Lenin prevailed and so the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was signed in March. Rudolf Hilferding, by now a member of the Independent Social-Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), perceptively analyzed the situation:

Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in order to prolong the war between Germany and Austria, on the one hand, and Great Britain and France on the other hand, and in order to secure peace for himself. He did it at the risk of bringing about a victory of the reactionary Hapsburgs and Hohenzollerns over the Western democracies, and against the opposition of Trotsky, who fully realized the possibility that a German victory might result from the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty. The intervention of the United States, of American "capitalism," as the foolish vulgar Marxists used to say, intervention which could hardly be foreseen at that time, saved him from this danger.⁷¹

Luxemburg wrote a devastating critique of the Bolsheviks in "The Russian Tragedy." It is unlikely that she had seen the article by Lenin cited above, but it appears that she got most things right:

The end result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is thus to encircle, starve out and strangle the Russian revolution from all sides.

And now the most terrible prospect looms ahead of the Bolsheviks, the final stage of their path and thorns—an alliance between the Bolsheviks and Germany! This, to be sure, would forge the final link in that disastrous chain which the world war has hung around the neck of the Russian Revolution: first retreat, then capitulation and finally an alliance with German imperialism. In this way the Russian Revolution would be dragged by the world war, from which it sought to withdraw at any price, over to the opposite camp—from the side of the Entente while under the Tsar to the German side under the Bolsheviks.

It is to the everlasting credit of the Russian revolutionary proletariat that its first gesture following the outbreak of the revolution was a refusal to continue to fight as levies of Franco-English imperialism. In view of the international situation, however, to render military service to German imperialism is even worse...

But then other considerations, quite different from these apparently realistic ones, must be taken into account.

evidence of his effective embrace of that position. Read here the closing paragraphs:

Since October 25, 1917, we have been defensists. We are for "defense of the fatherland"; but that patriotic war towards which we are moving is a war for a socialist fatherland, for socialism as a fatherland, for the Soviet Republic as a contingent of the world army of socialism.

"Hate the Germans, kill the Germans"—such was, and still is, the slogan of common, i.e., bourgeois, patriotism. But we will say "Hate the imperialist plunderers, hate capitalism, death to capitalism" and at the same time "Learn from the Germans! Remain true to the brotherly alliance with the German workers. They are late in coming to our aid. We shall gain time, we shall live to see them coming, and they will come to our aid."

Yes, learn from the Germans! History is now moving in zigzags and by roundabout ways. It so happens that it is the Germans who now personify, besides a brutal imperialism, the principle of discipline, organization, harmonious cooperation on the basis of modern machine industry, and strict accounting and control.

And that is just what we are lacking. That is just what we must learn. That is just what our great revolution needs in order to pass from a triumphant beginning, through a succession of severe trials, to its triumphant goal. *That is just what the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic requires in order to cease being wretched and impotent and become mighty and abundant for all time.* (emphasis added).

Vladimir Lenin, "The Chief Task of Our Day" [12 March 1918], translated by Clemens Dutt, *Collected Works, Volume 27* (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1974), 162-163.

⁷¹Rudolf Hilferding, quoted in Agursky, *op. cit.*, 188-189.

An alliance between the Bolsheviks and German imperialism would be the most terrible moral blow that could be delivered against international socialism. Russia was the one last corner where revolutionary socialism, purity of principle and ideals, still held away. It was a place to which all sincere socialist elements in Germany and Europe could look in order to find relief from the disgust they felt at the practice of the West European labor movement, in order to arm themselves with the courage to persevere and in faith in pure actions and sacred words. The grotesque "coupling" of Lenin with Hindenburg would extinguish the source of moral light in the East. It is obvious that the German rulers are holding a gun to the Soviet government's head and are exploiting its desperate situation in order to force this monstrous alliance upon it. But we hope that Lenin and his friends do not surrender at any price and that they answer this unreasonable demand with a categorical: "This far but no further!"

A socialist revolution supported by German bayonets, the dictatorship of the proletariat under the patronage of German imperialism—this would be the most monstrous event that we could hope to witness. And what is more, it would be pure utopianism. Quite apart from the fact that the moral prestige of the Bolsheviks would be destroyed in the country, they would lose all freedom of movement and independence even in domestic policy, and within a very short time would disappear from the scene altogether...

If this were to happen, all the sacrifices until now, including the great sacrifice of Brest-Litovsk, would have been totally in vain, for the price of the sacrifice would ultimately be moral bankruptcy. *Any political destruction of the Bolsheviks in an honest struggle against the overwhelming forces and hostile pressures of the historical situation would be preferable to the moral destruction* (emphasis added).⁷²

But whatever attention her criticisms attracted, the power of the Russian Revolution to inspire revolutionaries across the globe was undeniable. It caused just about everyone with revolutionary sympathies to join in an enduring embrace of the imagined first socialist revolution.

⁷²Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Tragedy" [1918], translated by William D. Graf, *Selected Political Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 235-243

The fact of the matter is that the situation was even worse than she imagined. In August of 1918, Adolph Joffe, who had been a negotiator at Brest-Litovsk but had opposed signing the treaty and was now the Soviet ambassador in Berlin, wrote to the German Foreign Minister to explain the Russian government's positions on a number of outstanding matters related to the implementation of supplementary treaties. The document was titled "Secret Protocol to the German-Soviet Treaties of 27 August 1918." Those August treaties were supplements to the principal document signed in March and contained terms related to the financial compensation of Germany for losses it had suffered during the war. (Joffe had signed them on behalf of the Soviet government). The Secret Protocol is mostly about military cooperation. The terms specify what the two nations will and will not do in various eventualities—such as the failure of the Soviets to immediately defeat the Entente troops in north Russia, the shared need to put down General Alexeev in Czechoslovakia, the possible conflict between Soviet troops and a "Third Power" in the Caucasus, and the employment of Russian warships by Germany for various purposes in the Baltic Sea, including "military purposes in case of military need." The note ends with an assurance that the Soviet government will keep its contents confidential. The full text of the note is included as Appendix I in this essay. For what it's worth, Joffe consistently identified himself as a member of the Trotskyist opposition.

One more thing before closing: it's also worth remembering that in 1916, when Liebknecht was enumerating the crimes of Imperial Germany, its use of secret diplomacy was prominent. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks themselves had renounced secret diplomacy in its first proclamations after the Revolution.



Straßenkämpfe in Berlin

Kämpfe um Mosse

Spartakiden hinter ihren Papierrollenbarrikaden

15

1918 in Germany

Four years of war had taken a terrible toll on the people of all the warring countries and signs of rebellion against its continuation, with no end in sight, were emerging across the European continent. Many German workers had been inspired by the events in Russia and began to act. In January of 1918, strikes against the war, once again initiated by the Shop Stewards, erupted in Berlin. Over a million workers went out and a new workers' council was formed.⁷³

Surprisingly or not, Richard Müller argued for the strike committee to include worker members of the SPD; the reason was likely his deep-seated conviction that the ultimate wisdom of ordinary workers was more important than their particular political views at any moment. But what was true most of the time was not necessarily true all of the time. Müller was subsequently again drafted into the army and, while he was gone, the Stewards moved steadily to the left. But many remained close to the SPD.

In subsequent months, German soldiers began their own withdrawal from war by taking advantages of opportunities to desert and return home. In part, this may have been an unintended result of the government's sending of arrested strikers and militants to the front lines where they continued their antiwar propaganda.⁷⁴

⁷³According to Hoffrogge, strike committees began calling themselves workers' councils in early 1917.

⁷⁴Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 65-66. See also Nick Goodell, "The Hated, Cursed War and the Hated, Cursed Postwar: Soldiers Returning from the Western Front," *Insurgent Notes*, 6 November 2020.

These developments were deeply troubling to the army's leaders and they forced Kaiser Wilhelm II to withdraw from the government at the end of September. A new government, led by Prince Max von Baden, was formed. For the first time, the government included members of the SPD. Negotiations for the terms of an armistice began with the Allied Powers.

Soon afterwards, Liebknecht was released and was greeted by the cheers of thousands when he arrived in Berlin. He threw himself into the antiwar and pro-revolution ferment. And there was plenty of ferment. On October 28th, massive strikes broke out in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Many more workers' and soldiers' councils were formed.

While the difficulties for the government kept mounting, the opposition forces were not ready. Franz Borkenau wrote:

In the last days before the end all Germany seemed to have become revolutionary, because all Germany sympathized with the pacifist and republican program of the USP. The majority socialists withstood the wave till the end; even on November 8th they still issued leaflets for the war and the dynasty. In the meantime, the USP leaders stood quietly by, making peaceful propaganda and nothing more. The small Spartakusbund could do nothing but issue leaflets, which were increasingly violent in tone, but had little effect.⁷⁵

⁷⁵Franz Borkenau, *World Communism: A History of the Third Communist International* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1939), 135. In June of 1918, Franz Mehring diagnosed the source of the USPD's ineffectiveness: "...the Independent Social Democracy lacks the revolutionary energy that will arouse and carry away the proletarian masses... They aspire to restore

On November 2nd, Liebknecht presented a proposal to the Shop Stewards' Delegates that a call be issued for a general strike and armed mass demonstrations to be held on November 5th—with the demand that the government be replaced by a government of workers' and soldiers' councils. He wasn't able to prevail and the proposal was not adopted.

But explosive events intervened. On November 3rd, sailors on ships in Kiel on the Baltic Sea coast mutinied and refused orders to set sail to face almost certain slaughter at the hands of the British Navy, which had been blockading German ports. Soldiers' and workers' councils quickly formed.⁷⁶ The Kiel councilists sent delegations to cities and towns across Germany. On the 4th, Liebknecht proposed to the Delegates' executive committee that an insurrection against the government be mounted on the 8th. Still, there was hesitation—which was finally overcome only when the government uncovered the plans for the insurrection.

On November 8th, the Spartacus Group issued a direct appeal to the workers in Berlin to join the rebels outside the capital city and warned that the SPD was now trying to take over the leadership of the antiwar rebellions. The next day, the heavens and the earth moved. Hundreds of thousands of workers joined the strike and headed for a mass demonstration in the center of the city. They were led by armed workers, but there was no violence—for many soldiers broke ranks and joined with the workers. When the demonstrators assembled outside the Kaiser's palace, Liebknecht addressed them and proclaimed "the free socialist republic of Germany."

There had been little effort on the part of conservative political groups or the armed forces to oppose the toppling of the government. Indeed, in a letter on November 11th, Leo Jogiches wrote: "The revolution... is above all, a soldiers' mutiny. It was executed by soldiers who were dissatisfied with their lot as soldiers. Certainly the masses contributed to the Revolution, but for the moment its social core remains shrouded in darkness."⁷⁷ The ambiguity regarding the motives and potentials of the rebel-

the German Social-Democracy that existed up to the 4th of August, 1914. They would return to the old 'proven tactics,' to the 'glorious victories,' to the successful fight against revisionism from convention to convention." Speaking about Kautsky, he added: "...it is characteristic of the party that its members should still continue to worship Kautsky as the holy prophet. Did not the 4th of August prove that the learned schoolmaster possesses not a spark of Marxian revolutionary spirit?" Franz Mehring, "Socialist Divisions in Germany," [16 June 1918], translated by Louis Fraina.

⁷⁶Borkenau was skeptical about the revolutionary potential of the sailors' revolt: "The sailors simply mutinied against the attempt of the officers to make the fleet perish—gloriously, as they saw it—in a last battle in the Channel. Unwillingly, the mutinous sailors found themselves in possession of the town. They elected a sailors' council, which did not issue a single political slogan and submitted without much difficulty to Gustav Noske, a very antirevolutionary social democrat." Borkenau, *op. cit.*, 135.

⁷⁷Oktokar Luban, "The Role of the Spartacist Group," in *Weimar Communism as Mass Movement*, 50. Jogiches was born in 1867 in Vilna, Lithuania. He emigrated to Switzerland and in 1890 he met Luxemburg. In 1894, they founded the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland (SDIKP). In 1890, he went with her to Berlin but did not become directly involved in German politics. For many years, they were lovers but their personal relationship became very troubled. Eventually, they were able to establish a new friendship and close political relationship.

lious troops would haunt events for the next two months.

Later that day, Richard Müller addressed a meeting of thousands of "Delegates." He proposed that workers' and soldiers' councils be organized in every factory and military unit and that the councils should meet on November 10th to elect a provisional government. Before that meeting was held, Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated and Prince Max von Baden handed over the government to Friedrich Ebert of the SPD. The SPD then proclaimed "the free republic of Germany" to distinguish its goal from Liebknecht's. There were effectively two potential governments.

On November 10th, the assembly of councils Müller had proposed was convened. In an ominous sign of what was to come, the SPD leadership had formed its own soldiers' and workers' councils, and its representatives were the majority at the assembly. Perhaps more significant was the fact that the soldiers' councils outnumbered the workers' councils. When an Executive Council was elected, it too was dominated by the SPD.

On November 11th, an Armistice was declared—after all, there was an end to the murderous warfare.⁷⁸ There is much to say about the course of the German Revolution over the course of the next seventy days, before the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg in January of 1919,⁷⁹ but that will have to wait for another time.

Some surprising ideas from Rosa Luxemburg on national oppression and resistance

Probably no individual in the revolutionary tradition has been more associated with opposition to nationalism and national self-determination than Rosa Luxemburg. She had nothing but scorn for the nationalist proponents of an independent Poland. Indeed, she was very critical of Marx and Engels for the support they had extended to the Polish national cause, embodied in the slogan "Let Poland Live!"⁸⁰

For her, the development of capitalism had buried the idea of an independent Poland serving as a buffer between Tsarist autocracy and "free" Europe. It had also led to the creation of a revolutionary class movement of a unified proletariat in Russia and Poland—a movement which made any traditional restoration of Poland all but reactionary because it would divide that proletariat.

But Luxemburg emphasized other aspects of her thinking on the national question in the same text. Essentially, she insisted on the need to differentiate between the nationalism of the *schlachta* (land-owning nobles and bourgeoisie) from the national instincts of the Polish workers.

⁷⁸The Armistice abrogated the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, thereby relieving Russia of many of the most onerous conditions that had been imposed on it. Nevertheless, for some time, Lenin chose to still honor the Brest-Litovsk terms—hinting at the significance that he attached to German-Russian cooperation. On the same day, the Spartacus Group became the Spartacus League—demonstrating its further distance from organized social democracy.

⁷⁹Luxemburg was released from prison and, upon her return to Berlin on the 12th, she assumed responsibility for editing *Rote Fahne*, the newspaper of the Spartacist League.

⁸⁰Rosa Luxemburg, "Foreword to the Anthology *The Polish Question and the Socialist Movement*" [1905], translated by Horace B. Davis, *The National Question: Selected Writings* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 17.

She condemned the “utter bankruptcy of social patriotism in the face of revolutionary crisis” (meaning the revolution of 1905). Its advocates had no program for democratic reforms for the Russian empire as a whole. While social democracy had called for a republic for all of Russia and national autonomy for Poland, the social patriots were content to call for an autonomous constitution for the Kingdom of Poland within the Russian absolutist state.”⁸¹

She argued that the proletariat had very different national interests. I’ve reconstructed the elements of her argument below:

- “To the credit of mankind, history has universally established that even the most inhumane material oppression is not able to provoke such wrathful, fanatical rebellion and rage as the suppression of intellectual life in general, or as religious or national oppression.”
- “To tolerate national oppression, and to toady to it servilely—that is the special talent of... the possessing classes whose interests today are reactionary to the core.”
- “The cause of nationalism in Poland is not alien to the working class—nor can it be. The working class cannot be indifferent to the most intolerably barbaric oppression, directed as it is against the intellectual and cultural heritage of society.”
- “The national interests of the Polish proletariat consisted of the free development of the national cultural heritage, bourgeois equality, and abolition of all national oppression.”⁸²
- “... only classes which are revolutionary by virtue of their material social situation are capable of heroic revolt and martyrdom in defense of these intellectual riches.”
- “As a class possessing no material stake in present society, our proletariat, whose historical mission is to overthrow the entire existing system in short, the revolutionary class must experience national oppression as an open wound, as a shame and disgrace, and indeed it does, although this does not alter the fact that this particular injustice is only a drop in the ocean of the entire social privation, political abuse, and intellectual disinheritance that the wage laborer suffers at the hands of present-day society.”
- “... our proletariat can and must fight for the defense of national identity as a cultural legacy, that has its own right to exist and flourish. And today our national identity cannot be defended by national separatism; it can only be secured through the struggle to overthrow despotism and solidly implant the advantages of culture and bourgeois life throughout the entire country, as has long since been done in Western Europe.”⁸³

In these very different times, the national struggle Luxemburg embraced seems to be the essence of the fight the Ukrainians have been conducting. The despotism that needs to be immediately overthrown is Russian despotism, not the despotism within Ukraine. This is no fight for national separatism. It is instead a “fight for the defense of national identity as a cultural legacy, that has its own right to exist and flourish.” Luxemburg concludes:

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 25.

From even a purely national perspective, everything that contributes to promoting, expanding, and expediting the working-class movement must be viewed as a contribution to *national patriotism* in the best and truest sense of the word. But anything that checks or impedes this development, anything that might delay it or cause it to depart from its principles, must be regarded as injurious and hostile to the national cause.⁸⁴

We should not be surprised that the response of those in the working-classes in Ukraine takes on national forms. Indeed, we should be encouraged. If their response did not result in resistance to the Russians, it would mean that they were willing, in Luxemburg’s words, “to tolerate national oppression, to toady to it servilely.” At this moment, there is nothing that “contributes to promoting, expanding, and expediting the working-class movement” in Ukraine more than the fight against Russia. If they are successful in that fight, they will face new challenges. But better by far that they will have challenges than that they will have been defeated.

Imperialism then, imperialism now

To a great extent, all of capitalist history has been imperialist. But the forms and contents have not been the same. According to Tomas Konicz, the current moment is the moment of “crisis imperialism.”⁸⁵ It is characterized by ceaseless strivings by the most powerful states for dominance. That dominance can be achieved and maintained by economic, political or military means. But its victories are often transient because the battles are being fought in the epoch of the “contraction of the valorization process” of capital. The battles are never-ending.

Those states are confronting a system crisis driven by permanent advances in productivity, which simultaneously produce “scorched earth” regions, economically and ecologically, in the periphery and make the emergence of “new accumulation regimes” based on mass wage labor in production impossible in advanced economies. The crisis is manifested in the staggering rise of debt that grows faster than economic output. This, in turn, leads to the rapid growth of an “economically superfluous part of humanity.” It manifests a fundamental difference from imperialism of the earlier epochs which took place in a historical phase of the expansion of capital.⁸⁶

The twentieth century featured practices of informal imperialism; in the twenty-first, forms of direct imperialist aggression once again prevail. The current military

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁵ *Editor’s note, December 2022:* For another application of Konicz’s concept of “crisis imperialism,” see the contribution by Pablo Jiménez to this issue, which is somewhat more ambivalent about support for either side of the conflict in Ukraine.

⁸⁶ See the numerous writings of the journalist and critic Tomasz Konicz on his blog *News and Analysis: Value Criticism, Crisis, Antifa*, available here: <https://www.konicz.info/>. I have a great deal of appreciation for the insights of the “value-critical” school established by the work of Robert Kurz, of which Konicz considers himself part. That being said, however, notions that capital has at last ended its end stages have probably outlived their usefulness. It is another matter entirely if we consider the end of habitable nature and something resembling civilization. Capital may survive, but none of us will be there to enjoy its advertising.

expansionist drive of the imperialist states directly linked to is capital's compulsion to exploit capital. But there is too much capital to be profitably invested. This all but impossible situation is reflected in internal political and social turmoil social tensions and drives the demand for raw materials and energy sources. Perhaps needless to say, the search for new energy makes most efforts at responding to the climate crisis all but futile.

In this dog-eat-dog, rat-eat-rat, competition, no state is innocent but not all states play the same part. The war against Ukraine is not an "imperialism on all sides." A serious analysis of that war should remind us of the wisdom of Marx and Engels' nineteenth century opinion that each war should be judged on the basis of its potential outcomes. Today, the stakes are enormous.

Konicz argues that without emancipatory system transformation, the risk of collapse into climate catastrophe and nuclear war becomes more real than ever. The current war certainly reflects those dangers. But a Russian triumph would do little to reduce the possibilities of cataclysmic outcomes. At the moment, the two legs of its standing as a serious power consist of its nuclear arsenal and its vast deposits of fossil fuels. If that turns out to be enough to "win" in Ukraine, it will all but certainly not be the last time it plays with fire.

What might an emancipatory vision look like?⁸⁷ What are the implications for politics, defined as genuine engagements with significant numbers of people in reasonably strategic locations? War is a very odd place to look for evidence of what might be done but it may well be that what the Ukrainians, some Russians and others are doing provides examples for how to concretize emancipatory system transformation.

Grassroots regional internationalism

Within Ukraine, there are encouraging signs of shared opposition to the Russian invaders among different linguistic groups (primarily Ukrainian and Russian). There is a widespread recognition of a common bilingualism. Any simple-minded understanding of the country as being divided into a pro-Russian east and a pro-European west is belied by the fact the leaders and many members of the Azov Battalion are from eastern, Russian-speaking, areas of Ukraine. Put simply, there is no automatic way of reading individuals' politics off of their imagined "identities."

At the same time, there are encouraging signs of mutual solidarity among Ukrainian, Russia, Belarussian, and Polish activists. A somewhat sensible division of labor has emerged between activists in the different countries.

In Ukraine, solidarity of course takes the forms of direct participation in the armed struggle, support of armed and unarmed resistance, opposition to linguistic discrimination against Russian speakers, and support for internal refugees.

⁸⁷In that context, it appears essential that the revolutionary left return the goal of the elimination of all nuclear weapons to the priority it once had and not limit its concerns with the danger to those occasions when the threat seems imminent.

In Russia, solidarity takes the forms of an explicit commitment to Ukrainian victory; the vandalism of public spaces, sabotage of war-related infrastructure, assistance to those in jeopardy of arrest, assistance to Ukrainians who have been forcibly removed to Russia and active antiwar propaganda. All told, these activities within Russia represent treason to the Russian state and manifest what we might consider real revolutionary defeatism.

In Belarus, solidarity takes the form of imaginative railroad sabotage (clearly undertaken by railroad workers with deep knowledge of how the trains run); the active enlistment of Belarussians in the Ukraine resistance and preparations for the coming overthrow of the dinosaur dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko.

In Poland, solidarity takes the forms of support for refugees from Ukraine; opposition to discriminatory treatment of refugees from other countries who have been living in Ukraine and support for women refugees facing the realities of Poland's barbaric anti-abortion law.⁸⁸

All told, these actions, undertaken under terribly difficult circumstances, suggest that internationalist solidarity remains possible. Instead of paying too much attention to what people elsewhere are saying (including me), we need to pay attention to what's happening on the ground.

What might we do?

I could end this essay as I have ended too many others in my life—with a resolute call to action. I'm going to resist the impulse although I can think of many things we could and should do. Instead, I'd simply suggest that we need to see solidarity with the Ukrainians, without abandoning the struggle against capital and its states, as the defining challenge of the moment. If we meet that challenge, maybe we'll figure out what to do.

1 November 2022
Brooklyn, USA

⁸⁸This last section is admittedly a sketch. For detailed accounts of recent developments, see, in no necessary order:

1. Militant Anarchist, "Position on Russia's Attack on Ukraine," *crimethinc*, 26 February 2022. Accessible here: <https://crimethinc.com/2022/02/26/russian-anarchists-on-resisting-the-invasion-of-ukraine-updates-and-analysis>
2. Clandestine Anarchist Group, "Russia: An Interview with the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization," *crimethinc*, 28 August 2022; Accessible here: <https://en.crimethinc.com/2022/08/22/russia-the-anarcho-communist-combat-organization-an-interview-with-a-clandestine-anarchist-group>
3. Resistance Committee, "Manifesto," *Medium*, 20 May 2022; Anonymous. Accessible here: <https://medium.com/@blackheadquarterinua/manifesto-of-resistance-committee-261e01769dac>
4. "In the Spirit of Sholem Schwarzbard"—Addressing Confusion about the War in Ukraine," *avtonom*, 29 April 2022. Accessible here: <https://avtonom.org/en/news/spirit-sholem-schwarzbard-addressing-confusion-about-war-ukraine>
5. Vladimir Potonenko, "War and Social Struggle," *avtonom*, 8 April 2022. Accessible here: https://avtonom.org/en/author_columns/war-and-social-struggle

UNTIMELY THOUGHTS: NOTES ON REVOLUTION AND UKRAINE

MEDITATIONS ON NATIONALIST AND WORKERIST MYTHOLOGIES BEFORE THE NOVELTY OF THE PRESENT

BY ANDREW

Wars and crises, in suspending normality and reminding both of the suffering sustaining capitalism and its fragility, have always inspired hope among the revolutionaries.

Ridding ourselves of the weight of dead generations, and being aware of the power of nationalist myths would be the first step towards realizing the revolutionary potential of our moment. From our present vantage point—down the curve of a long economic downturn, brought home with the spiraling energy crisis, in anticipation of an inevitable revolt of frustration—I try to see how this riddle of history might be solved.

To even attempt an analysis of the crisis, the framing of certain issues must be clarified: why answering some questions would be a waste of time and why other questions would prove much more productive. Instead of running circles around the old Marxist debates about war and nationalism, we'd do much better to contextualize them and locate our political landscape in the aftermath of the failure of communist movements past. Although struggles everywhere today confront the legacy of the old workers' movement, the post-Soviet space forces us to confront these issues head-on because it is a material embodiment of the defeat of the communist dream. In justifying the form of inquiry, we will inevitably touch upon the questions of historical content and communist strategy.

First and foremost, conversations that try to work out a unified "left" response start off on the wrong foot. Recognizing the weakness of conscious revolutionaries in our time, rather than choosing to operate on the plane of geopolitics, would allow us to interrogate the prospects for today's revolution. By understanding the importance of spontaneous action, we leave vanguardist fantasies behind. A glance at historical uprisings proves the unpredictability of events that produce ruptures, and the difficulties that

existing organizations face in their effort to “catch up.” This unpredictability should not be mistaken for total pessimism, however. If we were to adopt nihilism as our political method, we would see that although there is no way to predict the revolutionary potential of violence, there is still a simple way to recognize violence that will only lead us back to the circularity of the domination of myth. Such is the violence directed towards tried and failed goals of nationalist war mobilization, intended to only maneuver the rivers of geopolitical fate. Opposing the naturalizing force of myth embodied in law and state is not only a communist attempt to historicize them, but also the communist intention to do away with them.

Discussions around the war in Ukraine too often see their political task as “convincing,” imagining an audience that would solve all of our problems as soon as we are able to think up a reasonable argument. This points to a misrecognition of revolutionary processes. Revolutionary education happens not through convincing, but through siding with the forces of anarchy. A revolutionary rupture does not only involve rapidly changing conditions and a forging of new connections, it also entails a production of new solutions that were impossible to predict beforehand. It is the openness towards this invention of new revolutionary forms of organization that makes us communist, not flags or slogans: and an action is only revolutionary if in expanding and joining up with other measures, it points towards liberation.

By recognizing the importance of spontaneity and novelty of the revolution, we would be able to leave the mythology of the workers’ movement, which too many conversations these days are sadly bogged down in. Recognizing the historical “lesson” of its disintegration would then mean recognizing the failure of national self-determination. This historical recognition is not to be achieved in the estranged environment of a political or academic vanguard, but to be felt as limits of our sleepy mass movement coming up against the heap of endless reified junk covering our planet. Hopefully, this contribution can serve to echolocate possible paths of liberation in the darkness of the everyday.

In formulating our position on the war, we’d have to understand the origins for most thinking on nations in the wide communist tradition. With Lenin and the social democratic tradition of the time, the national form of politics was justifiable only because it allowed to bring up its content—an industrial economy—from “backward” to “fully developed.” I think it does not bear repeating that industrial modernization is no longer a revolutionary horizon, and the economy and politics do not seem to be so clearly divided. With millions of people plunged into poverty and unemployment, and the remaining industrial base shattered first by deindustrialization and now war, the capitalist recovery in Ukraine would entail exploitation rising to cosmic scales. The Ukrainian government has been happily showing the way ahead, providing absolutely minimal help to refugees, with no housing programs undertaken whatso-

ever, cutting “non-essential” budgetary expenses and warning of the winter ahead: everyone is on their own. There is simply no leftist politics to be articulated within the state, all the more so now. Beyond Ukraine, there are millions of broken families due to closed borders, accepted with kindness not extended to the victims of European colonialisms. With the kindness of liberalized systems of refugee settlement, too, they are thrown into gendered and casualized work.

Justifying a surrender to the Ukrainian state and the NATO bloc on the grounds of national self-determination does not only mean that you’re greatly overestimating the influence of the contemporary left and the potential for liberatory politics within the bounds of a nation-state. It also means that you are dreaming about a better management of this world of ontological nationalities, trying to out-patriot the patriots. Defensist arguments reach complete delusion when proletarians revolting against the rising cost of living all over the Global South are told to weather the storm for Ukraine. Class collaboration is expected to extend beyond Ukraine, “the long march through the institutions” has reached NATO.

Having cleared up the issues of framing, any reasonable analysis would require us to cut through the assorted “softeners” that surround the issue—the various excuses many leftist publications employ in order to avoid being confronted with the reality of the situation.

To begin with, dropping all the international legalistic nuances, only to once and for all set down the scale of the catastrophe, Russia is conducting genocide in Ukraine. Indiscriminate shelling, often simply directed against civilian infrastructure, deportations, tortures and executions, an association of an entire ethnic group with Nazis deemed for reeducation if not destruction. Realizing the scale of the atrocities and destructiveness of modern warfare means we won’t harbor any illusions about more weapons solving the problem. I can only hope that the aims and the means of the Russian nationalist expansion are clear to all. With the Russian and Belarussian partisan actions hardly requiring any justification amid their popularity, I would prefer to focus on the “Western” antiwar strategy.

The second “softener” that waters down leftist positions so that they don’t have to confront difficult choices, the pretensions towards only an “indirect” involvement of the United States, European Union and United Kingdom in the war have to be dropped too. Today, Ukraine is dependent on the West for its basic budgetary and industrial needs and the weapons shipments are following an almost “just-in-time” schedule, reminding of the fragility of the “support.” The Ukrainian government has shown multiple times its inability to negotiate independently and almost every week now proudly reports how the strikes, the targets, and the tactics are chosen by one of the US agencies. The strength of the influence of pro-war Western factions is only rivalled by a growing nationalist movement within Ukraine living off of illusions of national autarky supplying an endless war.

We should pay far closer attention to the mythology of this nationalist movement. Besides the far right minority, completely suffocating any left organization in Ukraine and making public events that might threaten the present order impossible, there also is just mainstream patriotism. Over the last ten years, Ukrainian nation-building has been undergoing a certain intensification. This intensification is not attributable to the top-down strategy of the government. (Indeed, most of the presidents, ministers, and deputies would prefer a different environment.) A careful investigation would yield a picture of a diffuse network of relations of power, not always attached to institutions and constituting and being constituted by local deployments in schools and universities, city squares and street marches, journal debates and youth subcultures. Undertaking such an investigation would mean that we would take seriously the massive popularity of nationalism and look for ways of undermining it, not of acting within it.

Instead of accepting the liberal pretensions of the Euromaidan movement as wholly created by the growing NGO sector, or simply denying its legitimacy on the grounds of popular polling, we need to understand truly popular mobilizations behind nationalist movements. Without disregarding local factors and relative unimportance of these events taken independently, we'd see a network of processes intensifying each other in building nationalist subjectivities. This process of subjectivation happens alongside complete depoliticization: being a fascist or an anarchist in Ukraine is now nothing but being a hooligan, a football ultra. Masked behind this seemingly "postpolitical" landscape is a massive shift to the right.

One of the expressions of this shift is the construction of nationalist historical memory, which always entails a construction of a certain kind of nationalist future. Praise for Ukrainian fascism in the creation of a heroic symbol of Bandera, romanticization of the noble Cossack as the ur-Ukrainian, a shift in describing the 1917 revolution as a coup and an occupation of eternally defined Ukraine, popular imagination of the Holodomor as a genocide of Ukrainians by Russians instead of as one of contradictory expressions of the industrializing popular post-revolutionary state all make sense when seen as part of a strategy of creation of ontologically innocent and honorable Ukrainians. Ukrainians that are not only always threatened by Russians and internal traitors but usually dangerously close to being betrayed by the West. More importantly for us, it is a counter-insurgent vision that posits the nation-state as a finishing point of history and undermines any revolt as treacherous—as genetically Russian. It is this myth which has driven the anti-looting crackdown in the regions next to the frontlines in the spring and which continues to fuel the hunt for traitors in all the spheres of public life.

The task of revolutionary defeatism is to undermine nationalist myths in practice and to transcend the war-peace binary: only a communist movement would be able to constitute an ever-expanding enemy of imperial warfare, resisting it not through another nationalist mobilization

but by undermining the very conditions of its existence. Instead of calling any resistance untimely and unpatriotic, we must expect outbursts of frustration within the state of emergency. But we shouldn't be too quick to claim the party of anarchy as communist: war is the greatest motivator of mythical violence, and we must be able to distinguish between a modern pogrom and a universalizing commune.

Revolutionary defeatism is the opposite of a passive project: only by starting from a refusal to defend the state can we start to elaborate the only force capable of halting the war as such. When we claim that wars are unwinnable, we are not claiming the impossibility of a counter-offensive, but the impossibility of liberation through the means of conventional warfare. Leftists joining an army not only dissolve in a sea of conscripts and fascists, but, with their proud proclamations, lend support to the army and geopolitical diplomacy as legitimate tools of solving the problems at hand. And in trying to look for the "reasons" of war, there are no excuses to still operate with assumptions about "natural" nationalities, for we are perfectly aware that colonialisms and fascisms are not prevented by removing their leaders or occupying a country, but by burning the ground they grow from: a world of work, gender, and race.

Hopefully, after these clarifications, it is clear why we should be looking for signs of the smallest revolt against the state and nationalism and trying to understand the possibility of its contagion and spread, beyond the national borders too, as the economic fallout of the war spreads further and further. As exciting as it might be to discuss the possibilities of a (necessary) diplomatic settlement, I have no sides to pick between various factions of the American imperial war machine, a Russian genocidal nationalist movement and Ukrainian government or fascist battalions. The extent of the power of the financialized military complex and the riled up patriotic population involved means that we have to look for possibilities in a different dimension. Instead of hoping for a better "left" party, we should seek to facilitate and exploit the cases of individual and mass looting, draft evasion and desertion, strikes cutting against all the patriotic bullshit in the atmosphere, both in Ukraine and beyond. By recognizing that the continuation of the status quo is a continuation of the catastrophe, that a better nation state cannot possibly serve as a transitory point on the way to revolution, we have to embark on a search for immediate redemption. We should be ready for this investigation to prove difficult and disappointing, but it is necessary.¹

*10 September 2022
United Kingdom*

¹ For additional elaboration on some of the points made in this article, see Kosmoprolet's October 2022 interview with Andrew, "Behind the Frontlines," later in this issue.

THE DECOMPOSITION WAR OF RUSSIA'S CAPITALISM

NEO-IMPERIALISM, EXACERBATED VIOLENCE,
AND GLOBAL CIVIL STRIFE

BY PABLO JIMÉNEZ CEA
TRANSLATED BY RUBEN SANCHEZ

The war in Ukraine is a neoimperialist conflict that serves as a prelude to the process of the implosion of world capitalism, disintegrating amidst socioecological crisis and a civil war of global latitude. In other words, capital—the dominant form of social production—falls back into the rhythm of the same soundtrack that witnessed its world-historical birth in the economic and military revolution of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: war, blood, and violence.¹

The decomposition of capitalism manifests itself in the unleashing of uninhibited violence, a nihilistic “thirst for annihilation.”² As stated previously, this takes the form of a global civil war. Or in other words, a conflict that is waged at every scale: from the most intimate dimensions of capitalist social life to the level of a geopolitical conflict between contemporary neoimperialist powers. In order to understand the manifold phenomena that make up the process of this nihilistic aggravation of violence, though, we ought to take a closer look at its connection with the movement of expanded social reproduction of capital. We must analyze this particular historical evolution from the perspective of a critique of political economy. Such a critique apprehends both the global and molecular aspects of violent phenomena as integral parts of the capitalist accumulation process,³ occurring alongside the dynamics of the

¹This article was originally published in Spanish, and then translated into German. Read the Spanish version here: “La guerra de descomposición del capitalismo ruso,” *Nec Plus Ultra*, 11 May 2022. Read the German version here: “Der Krieg der Zersetzung des russischen Kapitalismus”, *Krise und Kritik der Warengesellschaft*, 25 May 2022. The present English translation is from the Spanish.

²Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

³Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, “Modernización compulsiva y metamorfosis de la violencia,” *Heterografías de la violencia: historia, nihilismo, destrucción* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones La cebra, 2016), 153-166.

socioecological crisis of the mercantile mode of production. To fully grasp the development of the conflict and neoimperialist economic competition in Ukraine would be to summarize the totality of the current global crisis. For this reason, however, it implies that one has to analyze the problem from a broad-scale historical perspective. Indeed, the military invasion by Russia (the last stronghold of the lagging capitalist modernization regime that was the USSR) of Ukraine (one of the former Soviet republics that was integrated into that state with the Bolshevik counterrevolutionary process in that region, at the time of the Russian Revolution) has different economic, political, cultural, social, and historical dimensions. These comprise a complex and diverse totality, which has its axis of unity in global capitalism’s movement of production and expanded reproduction.

In this sense, it is by no means a coincidence that we find the epicenter of this global conflict in the post-Soviet sphere. This is of course a geographical space where a state capitalist dictatorship of modernization was established during the first few decades of the twentieth century, which capitulated a decade before the end of the last millennium.⁴ Considering the process on a grand scale, the current moment of post-Soviet capitalism accordingly draws to a close the cycle that opened between 1923 and 1927 with the rise of Stalin to the head of the Soviet state. His ascent heralded a violent process of accelerated primitive accumulation that would lead the USSR to become a world capitalist superpower between 1945 (with the victory over Germany in the modern industrialized war) and 1949 (with the detonation of its first atomic bomb, six months after the foundation of NATO). From 1947 until its official

⁴Andrew makes a similar point in his article “Untimely Thoughts: Notes on Ukraine and Revolution,” also included in this issue.

dissolution in 1991, the USSR established itself as a pole of capital accumulation fully integrated into the world market competing against the Western powers for planetary hegemony within the capitalist mode of production. However, its lagging character with respect to the Western capitalist powers was the determining factor in its dissolution. When capitalist restructuring finally arrived in the 1970s, it was increasingly unable to compete in the productive sphere. Its industries were left behind in the face of the relocation of production processes, the intervention of Asian countries like Singapore and Hong Kong in the world market. This, along with the microelectronic revolution and the massification of consumption, completely undermined the industrial exports of East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Contrary to most of his contemporaries, Robert Kurz understood that the implosion of barracks socialism—a capitalist formation of lagging modernization carried out under the banner of Marxism—constituted the prelude to the collapse of the global modernization process.⁵ However, this process should not be understood as the imminent and immediate collapse of the capitalist system. Rather it is the crumbling, still in progress, of an historical mode of production that increasingly collides with its internal and external limits. The implosion of the Soviet state did not therefore immediately imply the collapse of capitalism as such in the geopolitical space of the former socialist bloc, but instead its reorganization and adaptation to the new historical circumstances created by the capitalist globalization process. Putin's arrival at the helm of the Russian state on the last day of the past millennium at once signifies the reorganization of Russian capitalism and its entry into a process of decomposition. This occurs amidst a permanent state of exception which is held over society. In fact, its true historical "merit"—if we think of it according to the ideology of death typical of the enlightened subject—would be precisely the stabilization of Russian capitalism. It represents the formation of an independent and arch-authoritarian imperialist state capable of competing with the West, a state which could halt the sustained Western efforts to turn the Russian Federation into a periphery subjugated to Western neoimperialism.

Indeed, the currently dominant political and economic elite within the Russian state are former members of the Soviet nomenklatura who secured dispositional power over economic units and the means of production in the framework of an accelerated privatization process. They thereby mutated from being state capitalist functionaries to members of a bourgeoisie. Or, more precisely, capitalist oligarchy.⁶ In this regard, Tomasz Konicz points out the following structural features of the state and the post-Soviet capitalist economy in Russia:

The state... [is] the country's central power factor, [which] acted to assume direct control of strategic sectors of the Russian economy. Particularly the raw materials sector. In Russia... a renationalization was carried out of large parts of the Russian energy sector. This was part of the political strategy of the "energy empire," decisively shaped by Putin, striving for the Kremlin's complete control possible of all energy production and distribution. Apart from the arms industry, the raw materials sector is the only internationally competitive branch of its industry. Meanwhile, the rest of commodity production, suffering from huge investment deficits, has never recovered from the collapse of state socialism.⁷

Mutatis mutandis, this also applies with equal force to the formation of the post-Soviet Ukrainian capitalist oligarchy, the warlords who presently finance the neofascist military squads fighting as elite units on the frontlines.⁸ In fact, the position of Ukraine within the post-Soviet sphere—as well as its insertion in the world capitalist market and the neoimperialist conflicts plaguing the region—meant that it was trapped between East and West in a political and economic impasse. No way out was offered besides military and economic adherence to one of the competing sides: "Kyiv had to choose between the IMF austerity regime and cheap fossil fuels from Moscow. Both options were accompanied by losses of sovereignty."⁹ Like almost all the other post-Soviet states, Ukraine is indeed an economically unviable state. Its main industries besides agriculture are generally obsolete, and not competitive internationally. This also led to the tug-of-war between East and West over the country prior to the civil war.

In this fashion, both post-Soviet misery and the Russo-Ukrainian war constitute complementary spheres of the world crisis of late capitalism. Here neoimperialist competition in Eurasia is carried out to try to overcome the social and economic decline caused by the crisis. It also expresses the will of the central powers of global capitalism to maintain their hegemonic position at the cost of the collapse of the peripheries.¹⁰ It was, in fact, the promotion of the political and economic bloc known as the "Eurasian Union" by the Kremlin—which held the integration of Ukraine to be one of its fundamental components¹¹—that determined the outbreak of the civil war in the region, and the subsequent confrontation between countries. It was through such an initiative that Russia sought to establish a counterweight to the growing Western influence in the post-Soviet space while consolidating its position as an economic and military power in Eurasia:

The "Eurasian Union" would be the Russian economic bloc between the "West" and China. And more powerful than the EU, because Russia's military would likely spearhead a common security policy. The European Union completely

⁵ Robert Kurz, *Der Kollaps der Modernisierung: Vom Zusammenbruch des Kampfsocialismus zur Krise der Weltökonomie* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 1991). For a review of Kurz's book in English, see Roberto Schwarz, "An Audacious Book," translated by Emilio Sauri, *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* (Volume XXVII, № 1-2: Autumn/Spring 2013-2014)

⁶ Herbert Böttcher, "Eskalation des Weltordnungskrieges um die Ukraine", *Exit! Krise und Kritik der Warengesellschaft*, 2022.

⁷ Tomasz Konicz, "Zerrissen zwischen Ost und West: kurzer historischer Überblick über den Weg in den Ukraine-Krieg vor dem Hintergrund der Weltkrise des Kapitals", *Untergrund Blätter*, 2022.

⁸ On the relationship between oligarchs and neofascists, see Aris Roussinos, "The Truth about Ukraine's Far-Right Militias," *Unherd*, 1 June 2022.

⁹ Konicz, "Zerrissen zwischen Ost und West..."

¹⁰ Böttcher, "Eskalation des Weltordnungskrieges um die Ukraine".

¹¹ Konicz, "Zerrissen zwischen Ost und West..."

lacks this arm. With a fully developed Eurasian Union, the EU would be dependent on Moscow, given the current flow of goods. This would hold for both its raw materials as well as its energy sectors.¹²

The West today sheds crocodile tears over the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty by a Western-oriented government and the bombing of its civilian population. But it had no regard for that sovereignty when, as part of a broader strategy, it cooperated to remove the pro-Russian government of Yanukovich and thus separate the country from the geopolitical orbit of Russian capitalism. Indeed, the fundamental objective and point of convergence for the Western intervention in Ukraine in 2014 (despite the different interests of the United States and the EU in general, as well as an increasingly independent Germany in particular) was to prevent the establishment of a power bloc capable in the long term of competing with the Atlantic powers. This represented a latent threat that could have curbed the West's ambitions in the post-Soviet space and, something which was of particular concern to leadership in Washington, might have opened the possibility of an alternative economic and political alliance in the eastern portion of the EU. Thus the Russian imperialist plans for the construction of said bloc in the post-Soviet space were sabotaged through the collapse of the Ukrainian government, the outbreak of a civil war, and the formation of openly neo-Nazi battalions which have terrorized the Donbass region in recent years with the tacit support of the European elite and the silence of Western media.

For Russia, the ongoing war is among its last chances to maintain its status as a power in the global market. Losing it would amount to a geopolitical collapse that would destroy the ambitions of Putin and the post-Soviet oligarchy that sustains him.¹³ For this reason, the conflict in Ukraine can also be understood as part of a broader struggle for world hegemony between the United States and China. These two first-rank powers tend to consolidate their alliances from Eurasia to the Pacific Ocean, and increasingly face each other more openly due to the worsening social, economic, and ecological crisis that affects the entire global structure of contemporary capitalism. Yet this belligerent global standoff, which is for now being waged in Ukraine and in the peripheries of the world system, has a different material basis than the imperialist conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century. Effectively, that was an imperialism which corresponded to an expanding capitalism—a process in which the peripheral zones of the capitalist world-system were integrated by force of the belligerent operations of primitive accumulation. By contrast, the current conflict is objectively based on the contraction of the process of the valorization of capital. This proceeds in lockstep with the accelerated destruction of nature and the economic, social, and political collapse of different regions of the planet.¹⁴ In other words, the current neoimperialist

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Robert Kurz, „Krisen-Imperialismus: 6 Thesen zum Charakter der neuen Weltordnungskriege“, *Exit! Krise und Kritik der Warengesellschaft*, 2003.

war has as its objective material foundation not the expansion of capitalism but its decomposition, not the conquest of new territories but the conservation of accumulation zones which can be defended from the disintegration of the global economic order. It is a true “crisis imperialism.”¹⁵

On the other hand, in a different facet of this process, the current neoimperialist conflict expresses the exhaustion of the United States as a hegemonic planetary power within world capitalism. This correlates to an increase in tensions with other rising neoimperialist powers, such as China.¹⁶ Despite the current process of decomposition of the Western capitalist powers' hegemony at the global level, however, this does not imply their necessary replacement by China or by some other bloc of powers. This is because it is a neoimperialist conflict within the framework of the global capital's process of reproduction, a process which is objectively dissolving with the decrease in the overall mass of surplus value.¹⁷ Hence the paradoxical situation of China: it has managed to do in decades what other powers achieved in centuries, but like the United States it is a giant with feet of clay. It has reached the vanguard of world capitalism at the precise moment when that system is collapsing amidst a socioecological crisis.

While China is positioning itself as a rising power within the historical framework of crisis imperialism, however, Washington is struggling to maintain its eroded global hegemony, particularly since its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Hence its efforts to keep the US dollar as the main currency of the world, a condition that allowed it to issue money from the Federal Reserve without falling into inflation (at least until this year). Since this mechanism no longer works, and since inflation has increased in the US over the past year at a pace unseen in four decades, its government is forced to take risky actions at the geopolitical level.¹⁸ Risky actions like escalating its indirect confrontation with Russia through the conflict in Ukraine, which threatens to reach the point of using tactical nuclear weapons. Supposedly these are less “devastating” and more “ecologically friendly” than their more destructive cousins.¹⁹ Thus has Ukraine become the battlefield of a global neoimperialist war, which for the first time since the end of World War II has European territory as the direct theater of military operations.

This offensive by the West—i.e., its geopolitical expansion towards the East—has gone hand-in-hand with the erosion of Russian capitalism, as well as that of its satellites. All this stems from the valorization crisis of world capitalism. The Kremlin elite found itself increasingly on the defensive on the international stage. In the Caucasus region, in Belarus and, this year, in Kazakhstan, the power bloc articulated after the fall of the Soviet Union around the

¹⁵ Tomasz Koniecz, „Was ist Krisenimperialismus? Und wodurch unterscheidet er sich vom klassischen Imperialismus früherer Epochen?“ *Analyse & Kritik: Zeitung für linke Debatte & Praxis*, 2022.

¹⁶ Rodrigo Karmy, „Tesis sobre el fuego,” *Revista Disenso*, 2022.

¹⁷ Böttcher, „Eskalation des Weltordnungskrieges um die Ukraine“.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Gordon Corera, „Qué son las armas nucleares ‘tácticas’ (y cuántas tiene Rusia),” *BBC mundo*, 2022, last checked 7 July 2022.





renewed Russian imperialism has begun to show increasingly evident signs of wear and tear. Thus, the neoimperial ambitions of the Muscovite elite found themselves trapped in a process of wear and tear accelerated by the socioecological crisis, which began by affecting its satellites first. In 2020, Belarus—ruled by the authoritarian [Aleksandr] Lukashenko since 1994—showed signs of economic stagnation. Trapped in an apparently insurmountable political and economic situation, massive protests broke out in the country. These protests were of a similar nature to the ones that shook international capitalism in 2019. Lukashenko responded to this crisis with unceremonious repression, pursuing a broader rapprochement with Moscow in the hopes of clinging to power. Thus did the Russian neoimperial dream of becoming an independent economic bloc between the European Union and China (via the “New Silk Road”) begin to crash head-on with the economic and geopolitical reality imposed by the current socioecological crisis. On the contrary, Russian capitalism should fight with the force of arms and goods to maintain its status as a central power while trying to stop the process of disintegration of its sphere of influence.

The Russian elite led by Putin in reality found itself with its back to the wall well before the invasion of Ukraine. And this situation only worsened with the outbreak of a major social conflagration in Kazakhstan earlier in the year. In fact, we could say that the Kazakhstani social revolt was a direct prelude to the process of war we are witnessing today. A former Soviet republic, and today a satellite of the Kremlin regime, Kazakhstan contains in its territory all the characteristics that will soon reach the population of the central powers of world capitalism. Especially as regards the degradation of living conditions. The sustained rise in the cost of living and the impoverishment of the population, combined with a rise in the price of gas, set off a revolt that had features similar to the one that shook Chile in 2019. Unlike the democratic spectacle offered to the population by Chilean capitalism to contain the subversive dimension of the latter revolt, however, the former rebellion was drowned in blood through the joint terrorist policy of the Kazakh government and Russian armed forces. Although today forgotten by public opinion, the revolt in Kazakhstan—and above all by the hysterical antifascists who praise the military policy of Russian imperialism—reinforced the permanent state of exception in which its population has lived since the disintegration of the USSR. From now on, the country’s ruling class is aware that it will have to reinforce the already harsh daily repression of the population in order to maintain its place within world capitalism: a lesson that its superiors in Moscow are already actively applying.

In this sense, the revolt in Kazakhstan is indicative of both the impoverishment of living conditions on a worldwide scale (particularly strongly felt in the countries on the periphery of global commodity chains) and the traits this process will adopt in those regions where modernization lagged in the twentieth century. On this last point,

it is necessary to note that the authoritarian structure of these regimes seems to be typical of such regions. Their place is determined both by the world capitalist market and the network of competitive rivalries between the neoimperialist powers. A democratic regime in any of the countries that remain in Russia’s sphere of influence, and in the Russian Federation itself, would indeed make room for Western intervention. This is a risk that the political and business elite at the head of Russia, and the various rackets linked to it, cannot allow.

In this way, the revolts in Kazakhstan (2022) and in Belarus (2020-2021) allow us to glimpse the Russian regime’s reinforcement of constant repression of the population in an historical context where material living conditions will only worsen. Amidst the socioecological crisis of late capitalism, we could thus invert the famous phrase from *Capital* to say that backwards countries do nothing but show the most advanced the image of their own future.²⁰ The worsening of this crisis in Kazakhstan at the beginning of the year was not only a local manifestation of the world crisis, but also a preview of the future for its imperial metropolis based in Moscow. For the last decade this city has moved in its competition for a hegemonic place within global capitalism during the contemporary socioecological crisis. In this regard it should be noted that, according to a statement by Putin himself, climate change is advancing in the region 2.5 times faster than the average for the planet. This does not mean that it has served to change the productive configuration of Russian capitalism, but on the contrary that the production of gas and fuel for export has accelerated.

This seems to be a logical consequence of the historical development of capitalist modernization: to die in misery amidst wealth. Russia is indeed one of the weakest chains of global capitalism, due to its lagging position vis-à-vis the West. At the same time, however, it is a military superpower that has inherited a huge weapons arsenal and a massive infrastructure for scientific and technological development. Putin’s maintenance of power in perpetuity constitutes both an inheritance of the “concentrated” capitalist legacy of the Soviet regime as well as a necessity imposed by the specific character of its historical modernization process. It is only by virtue of this open state of emergency, of a permanent nature, that Russian capitalism has been able to perpetuate itself to this day. And this is one of the immediate reasons why, at a decisive moment in its competition with the Western powers and the eastward advance of NATO, the military invasion of Ukraine has been imposed as a mortal necessity for a Russian capitalism which sees its economic, political, and social foundations decomposing within its own borders. Not to mention those of its allies within the post-Soviet sphere.

²⁰“If the German reader pharisaically shrugs his shoulders at the condition of English industrial and agricultural workers, or optimistically comforts himself with the thought that in Germany things are not nearly so bad, I must plainly tell him: *De te fabula narratur!*” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* [1867], translated by Ben Fowkes (New York, NY: Penguin, 1976), 90.

The anti-Russian propaganda broadcast on a massive scale throughout Western media, which presents Putin as the new archenemy of democracy, conveniently forgets that Russia is fighting for its survival in the context of the worsening systemic crisis of world capitalism. It hopes to not be reduced to a peripheral country by Western neoimperialism, which has consistently torpedoed and hemmed in the rise of the Russian Federation as a great power. Additionally, this process marks the end of the policy of Germany—the country that has established itself as the hegemonic nucleus of Western Europe—of the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of Russian capitalism in the economic structure of the European Union. From now on they will have to deal with the contradiction posed by the economic development of the last couple decades, where Russia occupied a peripheral position of supplier of raw materials and energy while at the same time every effort was made to minimize its influence in Eastern Europe and in the post-Soviet space.

The various European powers will henceforth have to navigate between the latent threat of a military confrontation with a nuclear superpower surpassing them by decades in the scientific and technological development of hypersonic weapons, weapons that have broken the de facto balance of power between the nuclear powers, and the needs of its energy supply, mainly oil and gas. The neo-tsar Vladimir Putin and his gang of henchmen have fully understood this situation. In their false consciousness, they will exploit it to the end. Using persecution, jail, dictatorial laws, and political police, they will be forced to suppress rising social unrest due to the war and Western sanctions. Economic pressures will cause the working class and the declining middle class to suffer. At the same time they must continue their military advance until they achieve their strategic objectives, knowing that they have hypersonic weapons pointed at the neck of Germany and the rest of Europe. They know how to deal with the hunger of the Russian people, silencing their complaints with the blow of an electric baton. But they will not stop with their advance, considering they can always cut off the gas. In fact, in this regard Putin has been genuinely candid. Namely, when he blasts Western genocides for their commonplace nature, pointing out that Russia is part of the global commercial system and would never do anything on its own that would damage that of which it is a part. So it will press on with its course of action to force demands on Ukraine, and to do so will accept the weight of the sanctions imposed on it. After all, what Russia risks in the long run—and what it is fighting for today, despite the sad illusions of left anti-imperialists—is its place at the table in partitioning the mass of global surplus value.

When the crisis reached the centers of world capitalism, on the other hand, it was marked by an increase in the cost of living. A New Right and various postfascisms²¹ arose

²¹When I speak of postfascism, I refer specifically to the neofascist movements that have spread in different parts of the world, as in the case of Ukraine or the United States. Although they maintain a formal and symbolic link with the “original” fascism of the twentieth century, these have

out of the economic turmoil, from the broken promise of a universal middle class. The powers clustered in NATO have increasingly abandoned their liberal rhetoric, giving way to an exaltation of war in response to the crisis. Official media outlets are already beginning to insinuate that a war with Russia will not only improve the economy, but could also help reduce global warming.²²

Additionally, the US capitalist elite has achieved a strategic short-term objective by managing to drive a wedge between Germany and Russia. For the moment it has banished the specter of a Eurasian alliance which, along with that of the Chinese “New Silk Road,” might further corrode its already weakened global hegemony. This current process will therefore allow the United States to consolidate an oceanic alliance stretching from the Atlantic (NATO) to the Pacific (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), openly directed against China’s rise to the top of world capitalism.

In this way, we can say that the invasion of Ukraine marks the beginning of a new era for the major power centers of world capitalism. Grouped into clearly-defined imperialist camps, but with independent and contradictory interests among the powers that make up said blocs, they will be increasingly pushed towards armed conflict. Especially towards hybrid forms, as a way of concealing the consequences of a generalized crisis that cannot be resolved except through conflict. Already this allows us to observe that the historical decline of capitalism will occur amidst worsening socioecological crisis and the war between superpowers.

Indeed, war as a strategic tool for political support will henceforth become increasingly attractive to states navigating the crisis of late capitalism. Without hesitation, they will begin to mobilize troops, produce propaganda, and whip up the masses towards the achievement of their political and economic goals. As a result of this process, a global scenario is played out in the present where the structural socioecological crisis of capitalism entails an unleashing of violence throughout every sphere of capitalist society.²³ Just as it did in the process of its initial historic formation, this opens up the material condition for capitalism’s expanded reproduction. It is, as already anticipated, a civil war on a global scale in which different conflicts and forms of violence are superimposed, a war that is lived within the current subjects of the crisis. This war is fought from Third World neighborhoods controlled by post-state mafias, through capital accumulation circuits linked to the drug trade, human trafficking, and suicidal massacres, all the way up to the neoimperialist war fought between Ukrainian soil, world finance, and cyberspace.

specifically postmodern characteristics which respond to the unleashing of the death drive of competition and the current crisis conditions of capitalist modernization. That’s why I assign a different name to fascism as such, since it is an historically differentiated phenomenon. Gáspár Miklós Tamás, “On Postfascism,” *Boston Review*, 1 June 2000.

²²Dean Praetorius, “Could a Small Nuclear War Reverse Global Warming?” *Huffington Post*, 26 February 2022.

²³Franco Berardi, “Guerra civil psicótica global,” *ctxt: Contexto y Acción*, No 285: 22 June 2022.

It is also worth noting the rise of the global extreme right in the midst of this process. Trump and Bolsonaro were only the tip of the spear of a phenomenon that is here to stay. This is the same phenomenon that has thousands of militants armed to the teeth fighting in the Ukrainian army, to which the West prodigiously provides state-of-the-art weapons. Just as it did in the Middle East during the Cold War, blindly pursuing its geopolitical interests, the West will end up weakening another pillar of its social stability by arming and training the vanguard units of rightwing terrorism of the near future. Sooner rather than later the war will end in a power vacuum, allowing these NATO-financed rackets and the Ukrainian oligarchy to further consolidate themselves within the state. Once there, they can begin carrying out their delusional and fearsome ideological dreams. In this sense, as Konicz points out, “the war in Ukraine could outlast the formal end of the imperialist proxy war.” The death drive takes over countries in conflict, this fascination with war and death among different sectors of the population, especially ultranationalists and neoreactionaries of different tendencies (even those who fly the antifascist banner) must be understood as an ideology of death. It expresses the universal cry of despair of a humanity self-destructing within its form of global capitalist socialization. Those who feared the collapse of civilization should no longer have any doubts, because barbarism is already here. From here on out, emancipatory forces must unite around the radical criticism of these new conditions and the promotion of a new paradigm of social emancipation. This can only take place through the very catastrophe we are experiencing, through the latent possibilities in the science and technology of twenty-first century capitalism. In short, in a worse way than [Antonio] Gramsci could have foreseen when he delivered his famous maxim that “now is the time of monsters.”²⁴

Conclusion

In one of the climaxes of Roberto Bolaño’s posthumous novel *2666* it is stated, regarding the disappearance and subsequent murder of women in Mexico, that “no one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them.”²⁵ In the same way, no one pays much attention to the murders in Ukraine anymore, which initially sparked so much hysteria and crocodile tears from the Western democratic press. As with the femicides, the school shootings, the terror of the drug traffickers, and the innocents stabbed in the streets, people have learned to live with war as part of everyday life. It should be noted, however, that these facts are only acceptable to the subjectivity of late capitalism because it is structurally nihilistic.²⁶ But as Bolaño profoundly and clairvoyantly pointed out, it is in

²⁴A loose translation from the original Italian: “La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi più svariati.” In French, the last part is at times rendered as «dans ce clair-obscur surgissent les monstres».

²⁵ Roberto Bolaño, *2666* [2004], translated by Natasha Wimmer (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2009), 348.

²⁶ Anselm Jappe, *La sociedad autófaga: capitalismo, desmesura, autodestrucción* (Logroño: Pepitas de calabaza; 2019), 279-290.

these violent murders—which today occur daily in every metropolis of capitalist civilization—that the secret internal logic of the global system containing our historical moment is revealed.

The internal logic of capital is a logic of sacrifice and (self-)extermination, of uninhibited violence established as the order of things. The Marxian critique of political economy, as a rational understanding of the real movement of capital, allows one to apprehend the material root behind the deployment of the most abject forms of violence in this time of catastrophes. Of course this analysis can also be extended towards a detailed understanding of the structural link between the process of capitalist modernization on a world scale on the one hand, and the violence unleashed as a condition of possibility for the establishment and upkeep of the capitalist mode of production on the other. In the current process of socioecological crisis, neoimperialist war, and military rearmament, a critique of the political economy of violence becomes a necessary instrument for both collective theoretical reflection and the practical implementation of emancipatory sociopolitical alternatives to the plunge into barbarism.

Regarding this last point, the slogan “barbarism or emancipation” can function here as the conclusion of the analysis. Empirical data will only confirm this thesis, revealing the real core of the present and its future development. Barbarism isn’t just about the school shooter, the robbers who murder for tiny sums of money, or the extremists of the New Right who go on killing sprees before offing themselves. It’s also about the states and multinational capitals that seek to maintain capitalist accumulation at the cost of annihilating the biophysical foundations of planetary life. It’s about the potential for the major power centers of capitalism to escalate conflict to the point of threatening catastrophic nuclear war. Only the critical theory of society can reveal that those who could press the button for nuclear armageddon are guided by the same suicidal and annihilatory logic that guides the terrorist or the school shooter.²⁷

It is only by acknowledging this empirical fact, this objectivity of subjectivity, that critical theory can contribute today to the proposal of a new paradigm of emancipation. In this sense, this brief intervention does not consider itself the last word against the multiplicity of theories seeking to address the problem of contemporary violence, but rather an exercise in critical thinking that aims to offer some fundamental lines for a broader study. A deeper understanding of this problem can then serve as theoretical support for a practical, emancipatory solution to the historical challenge posed by the global civil war and the new quality of the capitalist crisis which is already throwing the entire world into barbarism, violence, and uninhibited destruction.

10 November 2022
Puebla, Mexico

²⁷ Robert Kurz, “The Fatal Pressure of Competition: Gunmen and Suicides as Subjects” [May 2002], *Libcom*, 14 July 2011.

CONTRA THE LENINIST POSITION ON ANTI- IMPERIALISM

ALONG WITH A SUPPLEMENTARY ARTICLE,
“CAPITALIST WAR MEANS SOCIAL PEACE”

ANTITHESI & FRIENDS

The concept of imperialism was used in the twentieth century to describe two main phenomena: on the one hand, the military aggression of capitalist states (imperialist wars, military occupation and territorial conquest) and, on the other hand, the global expansion of the capitalist mode of production in all its economic, political, social and cultural aspects.

Given that Marx considered as inherent aspects of capitalism its global character and expansion, he did not need a specific concept to refer to these phenomena. Moreover, although he vehemently attacked the violence, oppression and exploitation of colonialism, he also thought that the process of capitalist modernization creates the conditions for a historical situation in which humanity can create an emancipated form of society (although he did not consider that it was necessary for every precapitalist social form to go through the process of capitalist “primitive accumulation” on the path towards emancipation).

For this reason, when we encounter the concept of imperialism (or alternatively the concept of empire) in Marx, it has a completely different meaning from the one it took on in the twentieth century: it is used as a synonym for Bonapartism or Caesarism, i.e. for an authoritarian political regime acting in favor of the interests of the bourgeoisie *in general*. The term imperialism is therefore used in Marx because of its direct reference to the regime of the Roman Empire (*imperium*), where power is concentrated in the person of the Emperor, who prevails over the warring factions of the patricians.¹ In the Marxian concept of imperialism or Bonapartism, the power of

the parliament and more generally of the liberal institutions of democratic representation is superseded by the executive, the administration of the state is made independent of the dictates of the individual factions of the bourgeoisie, while the leader, in whose person the state power is concentrated, attempts to win over the “lower classes” through benefits and demagogic slogans which, of course, do not in the least affect the capitalist exploitation of labor (a phenomenon which in modern terminology is called “populism”). In this way the state appears as a neutral institution that is lifted above society. As Marx writes in one of his writings on the Paris Commune, imperialism is the supreme form of bourgeois state power: if the state was originally used by the bourgeoisie for its emancipation from feudalism, in fully developed bourgeois society the state takes on the character of *the national power of total social capital over labor* through imperialism/Bonapartism, as it is lifted above the interests of one or the other section of the bourgeoisie.

However, the concept of “imperialism” takes on a very different meaning in the twentieth century. The key feature of this new concept was first formulated by the English liberal socialist economist John A. Hobson in his magnum opus *Imperialism*, published in 1902. Although not a Marxist, he strongly criticized Say’s law that “supply creates its own demand.”² He became known for his underconsumption theory for the explanation of the 1870s depression in the late nineteenth century. Underconsumption according to his theory was due to the great inequality of income distribution. The limited income of the many is accompanied by the excessive savings of the wealthy few, which

¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1851], translated by Clemens Dutt, *Collected Works*, Volume 11 (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1979), 113..

² John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (New York, NY: James Pott & Company, 1902),

are stagnating as it becomes difficult to invest domestically with sufficient profitability. According to Hobson, this is the driving force of imperialism, defined in this case as the search for new markets and for investment outlets through colonial expansion to export surplus capital, which is aimed at solving the crisis created by underconsumption within the country concerned. Hobson saw imperialism as an unnecessary and immoral element of capitalism from which capitalism could be rid of. In particular, he proposed the elimination of surplus capital through the redistribution of income and the nationalization of monopolies, i.e. through the reform of capitalism without the need for its revolutionary overthrow.³

Apart from the liberal socialist Hobson, a number of Marxists—such as Parvus, [Karl] Kautsky, [Rudolf] Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg, and [Vladimir] Lenin—gave a similar meaning to the concept of imperialism without necessarily all of them being directly influenced by Hobson (e.g., Parvus and Luxemburg). The common content they all attributed to imperialism had been the attempt to find a way out of the crisis of reproduction of capital by expanding to new markets for the export of commodities and capital, regardless of the interpretation each of them gave to the crisis (crisis of underconsumption in the case of Luxemburg, crisis of overproduction in the case of Parvus, disproportionality between sectors of capitalist production in the case of Hilferding and Lenin, and so on).

The most important and influential theoretical work on which more or less all the above Marxists were based was Rudolf Hilferding's book *Finance Capital*, first published in 1910. In this work, Hilferding, influenced by Parvus and Hobson, introduces the concept of financial capital as the latest "stage" or "phase," as he calls it, of capitalism. As he wrote:

Finance capital signifies the unification of capital. The previously separate spheres of industrial, commercial and bank capital are now brought under the common direction of high finance, in which the masters of industry and of the banks are united in a close personal association. The basis of this association is the elimination of free competition among individual capitalists by the large monopolistic combines. This naturally involves at the same time a change in the relation of the capitalist class to state power... The policy of finance capital has three objectives: (1) to establish the largest possible economic territory; (2) to close this territory to foreign competition by a wall of protective tariffs, and consequently (3) to reserve it as an area of exploitation for the national monopolistic combinations.⁴

Finance capital is the *ultimate stage of capitalism*. And at this ultimate stage, according to Hilferding, capitalism has the following characteristics:

³Hobson was also openly racist and an advocate of eugenics for the gradual elimination of "degenerate or unproductive races." He proposed restrictions on the emigration of a large number of Jews from the Russian Empire to Western Europe at that time as detrimental to the interests of local workers and was openly antisemitic, portraying Jewish bankers as parasites manipulating the British government.

⁴Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development* [1910], translated by Morris Wainick and Sam Gordon (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 301 & 326.

- the formation of trusts, cartels and generally monopolistic enterprises (which abolish capitalist competition),
- the fusion of banking and industrial capital into finance capital,
- the abandonment of free trade and its replacement by protectionism in favor of domestic monopolies,
- the subordination of the state to monopolies and finance capital,
- and the formation of expansionist policies of colonial annexation and war whereby states support the movement of "their" capital. Competition between individual capitals is transformed into geopolitical rivalry between the nation states in accordance with the power of each.⁵

Hilferding would later describe this capitalist phase as "organized capitalism." There is some affinity with Marx's notion of imperialism/Bonapartism here in the sense that, as Hilferding points out:

Economic power also means political power. Domination of the economy gives control of the instruments of state power. The greater the degree of concentration in the economic sphere, the more unbounded is the control of the state. The rigorous concentration of all the instruments of state power takes the form of an extreme deployment of the power of the state, which becomes the invincible instrument for maintaining economic domination.⁶

But this is clearly a colossal mistake: the fact that the state assumes the character of the national power of total social capital over labor and rises above the interests of the separate sections of the bourgeoisie is by no means necessarily identical with the abolition of competition and with the complete fusion of State and monopolies, nor with the concentration of power in the hands of the so-called "capitalist oligarchs" (whose dictatorship can thus be replaced by the dictatorship of the party leaders over the proletariat).

In essence, Lenin adopts this position of Hilferding in its entirety in his work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* and develops it further. Briefly, the definition he gives is the following:

Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed.⁷

According to Lenin, imperialism is *decaying* capitalism, as any monopoly in the conditions of the private ownership of the means of production tends to decline. Moreover, imperialism is already *dying* capitalism because monopolization

⁵Rudolf Hilferding, „Der Funktionswechsel des Schutzzolles“, *Die Neue Zeit, Wochenschrift der deutschen Sozialdemokratie*, (2 Bd, № 35: 1902-1903), 280. Cited in John Milios & Dimitris Sotiropoulos, *Ιμπεριαλισμός, χρηματοπιστωτικές αγορές, κρίση* (Athens: Nissos Academic Publishing, 2011), 30..

⁶Hilferding, *Finance Capital*, 370.

⁷Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* [January-June 1916], translated by Yuri Sdobnikov, *Collected Works, Volume 22* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 266-267.



signifies a necrosis of competition due to centralization, and therefore no further development of the productive forces. Production is socialized to such an extent that it contradicts the private ownership of the means of production. Thus, according to Lenin, the road to revolution is opened. However, revolution does not appear automatically but requires the conscious, organized revolutionary action of the working class under the guidance, of course, of the party.

Lenin argued that imperialism is necessarily the ultimate stage of capitalism and that this stage had already been underway since the beginning of the twentieth century. But apparently he has been proved woefully wrong since a century later there may well still exist global monopolies but this has not prevented the reproduction of an infinite number of smaller capitals that exploit millions of proletarians every day. Apart from the fact that the Leninist theory of imperialism enshrined a conception of revolution as the transfer of control of monopolistic production from the hands of the capitalists to the hands of the party leaders, it has also formed the ideological basis for the legitimation of the support of leftist parties towards small and medium-sized capitals against monopolies and banks, a long-standing position of both the Communist Party of Greece and of the broader Greek and international left, which is of course in no way against capital as a social relation and against wage labor.

Moreover, Lenin argued that at the stage of imperialism capitalism becomes parasitic as the exploitation of oppressed nations—which is inseparably connected with annexations—and especially the exploitation of colonies by a handful of “Great” Powers, increasingly transforms the “civilized” world into a parasite on the body of hundreds of millions in the uncivilized nations. The Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society. Modern society lives at the expense of the modern proletariat.⁸

So the immediate aim at the imperialist stage is the exploitation of weak countries. This is realized through imperialist conquests that establish an unequal international economic reality in which the imperialist states have a dominant position and the states and peoples subordinated to the imperialists have a subordinate position.

Therefore, the main assumption of the Leninist theory of imperialism is that the underdevelopment and suffering of the peoples of the periphery is caused by the dependence of the countries of the periphery on the countries of the metropolis. This is achieved by the “plunder” of the periphery and by the “operation” of foreign capital dominating domestic capital.

Apart from the fact that the “parasitism” thesis is clearly counterrevolutionary, since it presents the proletarians of the developed capitalist countries as exploiters of the proletarians of the less developed capitalist countries, it is also wrong. Because of the high productivity of labor in the developed capitalist countries, the degree of

exploitation of worker in these countries is much higher than that of workers in the less developed capitalist countries. Such a position on parasitism also leads to the support of national liberation movements. Or in other words, to the strengthening of nationalism and ultimately to the support of the establishment and development of capitalist relations in the “undeveloped” countries.

An event of decisive importance for the spread of anti-imperialist politics and the course of national liberation and anticolonial movements was the Sixth Congress of Comintern in 1928, which adopted the position that imperialism was an obstacle to the industrial development of the colonies. Before that time, many communists had adhered to the older Marxist position, which assumed that colonialism in the long run would lead to industrialization. This in turn was seen as a necessary condition for general human emancipation. Here the Comintern’s position reflects a contradiction central to Marxist theory and dialectics: namely, the dialectic between capitalism (and its main contemporary political form, the nation-state) and emancipation. On the one hand, it strongly affirmed the Marxist conception of the progressiveness of capitalism insofar as the intense and rapid development of the capitalist mode of production was promoted under the pseudonym of “socialism.” But on the other hand, and simultaneously, the global expansion of capitalism under the name of “imperialism” was blamed for delaying and blocking the modernization process in the colonies, which would eventually lead to general human emancipation. Through a move which ruptures this dialectic, the good side of capitalism that brings development and thus brings the possibility of emancipation—and which is carried out by a socialist (i.e., state-capitalist) regime, which at some point in the process will become communist—is separated from its evil destructive and exploitative side, which must be fought and which is given the name “imperialism.” The latter (the unequally developing capitalism) must be fought by the national liberation movements, which in the process will establish modern nation-states, and which are the natural environment for the development of capitalism in its progressive form. This conception both reflects and misinterprets the Marxian dialectic between capitalism and progress, depriving it of its dialectical character: Marx’s position that the workers’ movement must exploit the currently evolving contradictory historical process of capitalist development is a far cry from the Bolshevik position that this process of capitalist development must be organized and promoted by the proletarian movement, through political revolution and the dictatorship of the party.⁹

According to the so-called “Marxist-Leninist” theories of imperialism and of state-monopoly capitalism, large monopoly enterprises merge with the state, resulting in the formation of a “single, nationwide capitalist economy.” As the monopolistic form of production abolishes the

⁸ Vladimir Lenin, “Imperialism and the Split in Socialism” [October 1916], translated by Joe Fineberg, *Collected Works, Volume 23* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 105.

⁹ Marcel Stoetzler, “Critical Theory and the Critique of Anti-imperialism,” *Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Volume II* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 1471.

compulsion on individual capitalists to increase their profit by developing the productive forces of labor; the only thing that can concern the state monopolies in the world market is the struggle for politically secured spheres of production and for the realization of monopolistic surplus profits. The stagnation of the monopolistic phase of capitalism imposes a kind of antagonism on the world market, which takes the form of war and its content is the “division of the world among the great powers.”¹⁰

However, the state, every state, however small or large, has as its structural characteristic the tendency to expand spatially and/or economically. This is the basic component of nationalism, it can be found since the beginning of the era of the nation-states and it is not a particular characteristic of the state at the stage of imperialism, as it is implied. Moreover, capitalism did not have to reach some “special,” “advanced” or “ultimate” stage in order to start “dividing the world”—and here we are referring to inter-state rivalries and not to some alleged conspiracy to cancel out capitalist competition. On the contrary, the struggle for “the division of the world” has nothing specifically capitalist about it; it was the content of the conflict of kingdoms and empires before the rise of capitalism and did continue during its rise, even during the so-called “free trade” period that preceded the so-called “imperialist stage,” when the British Empire was reigning supreme.

The acceptance in whole or in part of Leninist positions on imperialism necessarily leads to problematic and misleading conceptions:

1. One of the driving forces of the capitalist mode of production is the competition between capitals in their quest for maximum profit (the other one being class struggle). Monopolies exist, and for Marx they arise both “naturally” within the capitalist mode of production, insofar as the process of the expanded reproduction of capital is a process of concentration and centralization of capital, and “artificially,” e.g. in the case of the ownership of resources which are thereby monopolized (and which can range from technological patents to the ownership of high-yield land parcels). For Marx, however, this by no means abolishes competition and by implication the “law of value.” The equalization of the rate of profit between firms should not be understood as establishing a stable equilibrium where firms all achieve the same rate of profit, but as a situation of constant movement of capital achieving different rates of profit both within the same industry and between different industries, in which the average rate of profit is merely a “center of gravity” around which the various rates move. By showing, in the third volume of *Capital*, that price-setting practices (as well as

variable levels of excess capacity) are consistent with the law of value, Marx points out that in the capitalist system labor productivity and the rate of exploitation are the ultimate regulators of the process of capital accumulation. Monopoly can only be understood as a particular form of appearance of competition. It cannot escape competition because the objectives of each capital—to achieve the highest possible profit—are in conflict with the objectives of every other capital, due to the fact that the mass of surplus value of total capital is quantitatively limited, just as the bases of surplus value production in terms of use-value (mass of labor power, duration of the working day, intensity of labor, productive force of labor) are limited. Monopoly profits cannot be absolute. Nor can they be permanent, as this would imply that the competition of capital for higher return on investment (movements of capital between different sectors due to differences in profit rates) would be eliminated.

On the contrary, Hilferding and Lenin, who regarded monopolies as the annulment of competition, actually adopt the vulgar economic concept of “perfect competition” against which the “monopoly market” is opposed.

2. Since capital is a social relation, the notion of its “export” from the strong to the weak countries is a huge distortion, which leads to ideologies about “empire,” “transnational centers of power,” etc., which obscure and mystify the class opponent and ultimately act as a deterrent to the unfolding of the proletariat’s class struggle against the, first of all domestic, capitalist bosses. Indeed, it is implied that as individual capitals crossing borders retain their nationality, their competition with domestic capitals replaces or even is equated with class struggle, which is thus paradoxically transformed into a struggle between nations, conducted by inter-class national subjects. A misconception develops that the working class and the bourgeoisie of one country are exploiting together their counterparts in other countries. Michael Heinrich writes the following on the issue: “...the characterization of imperialism as “parasitic” is problematic not only due to the moralistic undertone, but also because it is not readily apparent why the exploitation of a foreign working class should be any worse than the exploitation of the domestic working class. What Lenin intended as a continuation of Marx’s analysis ultimately has almost nothing to do with Marx’s critique of political economy.”¹¹

¹⁰ Christel Neusüss, *Imperialismus und Weltmarktbewegung des Kapitals: Kritik der Leninschen Imperialismustheorie und Grundzüge einer Theorie des Verhältnisses zwischen den kapitalistischen Metropolen* (Erlangen: Politladen, 1972).

¹¹ Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital* [2004], translated by Alexander Locascio (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 215.

Dependency theory

A development of Hilferding's and Lenin's theory of imperialism was the so-called "dependency theory" formulated in the 1960s and 1970s by a number of theorists, such as Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank.¹² This theory introduced the notion of dividing the world economy into three zones according to the level of capitalist development: core, semi-periphery, periphery.

According to dependency theory, surplus value is transferred from the peripheral countries to the countries of the core. The countries of the periphery are kept in a permanent state of underdevelopment in order to serve the interests of monopoly capital originating from the countries of the core. This allows foreign monopoly capital to exploit the periphery without competition from local capital.

In this way the (non-Marxist) concept of the exploitation of the countries of the periphery by the countries of the core is introduced. The theory of dependency leads not only to a new categorization of states but also to a new categorization of social classes in each country.

Thus both the working class and the bourgeoisie of the core are distinguished from the working class and the bourgeoisie of the periphery. Indeed, according to dependency theory, the working class of the periphery can ally itself with the corresponding bourgeoisie within a common anti-imperialist front, just as the working class of the core can ally itself with the corresponding bourgeoisie in favor of the imperialist politics of the state to which it belongs.

The error of dependency theory is that it implies an instrumentalist theory of the state. The state is presented as a political entity independent of capitalist social relations that can either be used by monopoly capital to serve its particular interests, or by a class alliance of workers-capitalists in the peripheral countries that will promote development policies and thus bring socialism closer. Consequently, apart from an instrumentalist theory of the state, the theory of dependency implies the acceptance of the theory of stages towards communism. In our view, the state is the political form of capitalist social relations: a capitalist state. In this sense, every state serves the reproduction of capitalist social relations as a totality. This does not mean, of course, that every nation-state serves the reproduction of global capital in general. States are in competition (but also cooperation) with each other in order to attract global capital within their national borders and thereby maintain and expand their share of global surplus value. This involves both the creation of the conditions for the expanded reproduction of capital within state borders and the strengthening of accumulation based on the exploitation of labor within the borders of other nation-states. Obviously, not all states have the same possibilities of choice as regards the strategies of accumulation they can adopt.

¹²E.g., Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* [1973], translated by Brian Pearce (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1976); Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

Historical reasons and the success or failure of each state's strategy of accumulation are reflected in the uneven development and the formation of a constantly evolving hierarchy of capitalist states: the formation of a capitalist "core" and a capitalist "periphery."¹³ In this sense, every state is imperialist since the essence of imperialism is not monopoly capitalism but rather the competitive process of the reproduction of total capital. Apart from being wrong, dependency theory leads politically to class reconciliation within each state and the deepening of national divisions within the global proletariat.

If we accept the concepts of "dependency theory" we end up having trouble understanding reality. We would have to accept that the breakup of Yugoslavia, for example, was entirely due to the influence of foreign powers and not to the conflict dynamics between competing nationalisms and capitals in the constituent federal states. We would have to accept that all wars that break out are between puppet states which always have great powers and their interests behind them. That the revolts in developing countries are instigated, without the workers, the inhabitants, the ruling classes of the respective countries playing any role. Class struggle disappears.

Also, the contradictory character of this theory can be detected if the efforts of weak countries to join transnational economic organizations such as the EU, the World Trade Organization, etc. are examined. The obvious conclusion is that these organizations do not exist solely to serve the interests of the capital of powerful states. Their purpose is the interest of capital in general (i.e., of each ruling class, whether Albanian or German) in its struggle to exploit the working class. The wealth and accumulation of capital comes from the exploitation of labor, and not primarily from the plunder of weak countries.¹⁴

Anti-imperialism

Theories of imperialism have taken a central place in the analyses of a large part of the class movement. Since imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism, the anti-capitalist struggle also had to be transformed into an anti-imperialist one, which gradually became a central ideology (in the sense of false consciousness).

Instead of revealing the class antagonisms within societies, what prevails is the rallying of the nation against the evil imperialists. Usually, anti-imperialist politics is limited to opposing big capital or the multinationals of the big capitalist countries, giving an alibi to the domestic small or big bosses which it classifies as the underdogs:

¹³ We do not use the terms core/periphery in the sense given to them by dependency theory but solely to denote different levels of development.

¹⁴ "The export of capital supposedly necessitated by imperialist policies did in fact occur. However, the greater portion of this capital export went not to colonies and dependent territories but to other developed capitalist countries that also pursued imperialist policies. That means that the cause of the capital export could not just lie in the absence of profitability in the capitalist centers, since that would mean there couldn't have been any capital exported to other centers. Besides, such capital export was not secured by the imperialist policies of the home country." Heinrich, *op. cit.*, 216.

The problem, then, is no longer that capitalism has reached every remote corner of the planet and has suffocated every field of human activity, turning everything it touches into a commodity. The problem for anti-imperialists is that capitalist expansion is being implemented unevenly and asymmetrically, that in some powerful states capitalism is established while in others—the dependent ones—it is strangled and unable to develop sufficiently. We can only exclaim in surprise: so what? In the “dependent” countries are there not still commodities and wage labor; is it not true there as well as in the ‘imperialist powers’ that some have the means of production and some have only their own labor power to sell, some give orders and some are obliged to obey? Do not the same relations of exploitation prevail, and possibly in an even harsher form? Does not the same commodity fetishism prevail as it also prevails in the developed countries? Or have people there gained control over their lives and no one has bothered to inform us?¹⁵

Opposition to anti-imperialism goes in parallel with opposition to nationalism, because anti-imperialist politics function as a means of inscribing nationalist ideology within the radical movements that claim human emancipation from all kinds of oppression. The anti-imperialist and national liberation movements are the main mechanisms for subordinating the demands and aspirations for social change, freedom, emancipation and communism to capital and its state and, consequently, for neutralizing and effectively eliminating them through their alienation and their transformation into movements claiming rights from the capitalist state and all sorts of identity politics.¹⁶

¹⁵ Υφανet, “Αντιιμπεριαλισμός: Το κατώτερο στάδιο του αντικαπιταλισμού”. Ένας είναι ο εχθρός: Έθνος, αντιιμπεριαλισμός και ανταγωνιστικό κίνημα (Thessaloniki, 2007), 45.

¹⁶ As Marcus Stoeztler notes: “Lenin stated in his 1920 ‘Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions,’ written for the second congress of the Communist International, that in ‘the more backward states and nations, in which feudal or patriarchal and patriarchal-peasant relations predominate,’ all Communist parties must assist the bourgeois-democratic liberation movement;’ but also ‘struggle against the clergy and other influential reactionary and medieval elements’ including ‘Pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc.’ Apart from the mechanical conception of historical evolution that undergirds this position, it wrongly presupposes that bourgeois nationalists in such countries are genuinely happy to forfeit alliances with clergy, pan-Islamists, and other reactionary elements in order to enjoy socialist support. The shift towards support for ‘bourgeois-democratic liberation movements’ coincided with the Soviet government’s ‘rapprochement with bourgeois regimes (above all, Turkey and Persia), while communist militants in those countries were shot and imprisoned’ (Loren Goldner, “Socialism in One Country’ Before Stalin, and the Origins of Reactionary ‘Anti-Imperialism’: The Case of Turkey, 1917-1925.” *Critique* [Volume XXXVIII, № 4], 631-661.” Another important observation of Marcus Stoeztler is that anti-imperialism was also part of the ideological agenda of the far right. The idea of a struggle between ‘pro-people’ and ‘plutocratic nations’ appeared in the protofascist milieus in Germany, France and Italy during the First World War and became a feature of the rhetoric of Mussolini and Gregor Strasser among others. As he notes: “Their fight against a decadent ‘West’ was evoked by ‘conservative revolutionaries’ like Arthur Möller van den Bruck and Ernst Niekisch in the 1920s; their fascist anti-imperialism was ‘nothing but the ‘foreign-policy version’ of fascist anticapitalism’ (Fringeli, 2016: 42). On the opposite shores of the Mediterranean, beginning in Egypt as a response to the abolition of the last Ottoman caliphate by the modernizing Turkish state in 1924, modern Islamism including its jihadist offshoots developed in parallel with, and drew inspiration from the same ‘conservative revolution’ impulses, including the ultra-conservative version of resistance

Capitalist war means social peace

We are now facing the irrevocable fact of war. We are threatened by the horrors of invasion. The decision, today, is not for or against war; for us there can be but one question: by what means is this war to be conducted? Much, aye everything, is at stake for our people and its future, if Russian despotism, stained with the blood of its own people, should be the victor. This danger must be averted, the civilization and the independence of our people must be safeguarded. Therefore we will carry out what we have always promised: in the hour of danger we will not desert our fatherland. In this we feel that we stand in harmony with the International, which has always recognized the right of every people to its national independence, as we stand in agreement with the International in emphatically denouncing every war of conquest. Actuated by these motives, we vote in favor of the war credits demanded by the government.¹⁷

And this is how the Social-Democratic Party of Germany sent the German proletariat in 1914 to the massacre of the First World War.

A few days earlier, a French nationalist assassinates Jean Jaurès, a pacifist, anti-militarist leader of the French Socialist Party, who was trying to organize a general Franco-German strike against the coming war and a general French strike in case France declared war. In the funeral oration delivered by the leader of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), Léon Jouhaux, who was against the declaration of a strike and in favor of participation in the war, said, among other things: “in front of this coffin I cry out our hatred for the imperialism and coarse militarism that have provoked this horrendous crime... All working men... we take the field with the determination to drive back the aggressor.” With Jaurès and whatever influence he might have exerted in the midst of a nationalistic upsurge gone, the socialists in parliament decided to suspend any activity that would sabotage the national war machine, sending with their blessings the French proletariat into the slaughter of the First World War.

What is interesting is that in both Germany and France, the leaders of the organized working class evoked the “invasion” in order to capitulate to the bourgeoisie of their country. But the same appeal is also made by the bourgeoisie whenever it wants to impose national unity in the context of a military conflict. National war is always presented as a defensive action against the invaders, whatever form they may assume. And for a victorious war social peace must prevail.

to ‘cultural imperialism,’ i.e. liberal modernity. When after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the bourgeois-nationalist regimes of the Near East that had—with Soviet support—combined anti-imperialist ideology with a pretense to some form of socialism disintegrated, the pan-Islamism that Lenin had warned against finally became a prominent phenomenon. German ‘conservative revolution’ and fascist ideas influenced the development of anti-imperialist thought also in Bolivia in the 1930s and 1940s and spread from there to other Latin American countries (Goldner, 2016: chapter 4). By circa 1935 the leaders of the Soviet Union had realized that support for the ‘right of nations to self-determination’ more often than not helped fascists rather than themselves, so they abandoned the notion for almost two decades. It returned in the 1950s to dominate Soviet foreign policy.” *Op. cit.*, 1472.

¹⁷ Quoted in chapter two of Junius [Rosa Luxemburg], “The Crisis of German Social Democracy” [January 1916], translated by David Hollis,

Ich kenne keine Parteien mehr, ich kenne nur Deutsche!
1. August 1914
Wilhelm II.



Das deutsche Volk.

In Germany during the First World War this pact of class cooperation was entitled *Burgfrieden* (loosely translated as: “peace reigns in the castle”), while in France it was called *Union Sacrée*. In both cases, the trade unions and the social democratic parties declared an armistice in defense of the fatherland, pledging that no industrial action would be waged and no demands would be raised by the working class until the end of the war. This was of course accompanied by martial law and harsh censorship, since any criticism of the government, the war or the pact of class collaboration itself was strictly forbidden at the point of a gun. In this context, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were imprisoned from 1916 until the end of the war.

The same path of class collaboration was followed by most of the Social-Democratic parties and trade unions of the countries involved in the war. Exceptions were the Bolsheviks, the Italian Socialist Party, the Serbian Socialist Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the Socialist Party of Bulgaria, the Socialist Party of the USA, the International Group founded by Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Clara Zetkin and Franz Mering, and the multiethnic workers’ organization *Federación de Thessaloniki*. At that time there was no socialist party in Greece. The Socialist Workers’ Party of Greece was founded in 1918 and in 1924 it was renamed as the Communist Party of Greece. The *Federación* had been the Ottoman part of the Second International since 1911 and at the outbreak of the Great War it maintained an internationalist, antiwar position.

In any case, the Second International collapsed. This meant that millions of proletarians were urged by their own organizations, which were supposed to represent their class interests, to become the prey for the cannons of capitalists: ten million dead soldiers and twenty million wounded, half of them crippled for life; ten million civilians dead from bombing, starvation, and disease. A massive slaughterhouse of human beings...

Obviously, the Second International was not a unified whole. There was a right wing with representatives like Ebert (later to become president of Germany when Luxemburg and Liebknecht were assassinated), the center with reformists like Kautsky and the revolutionary left wing with leading figures such as Luxemburg and Lenin. Only this left tendency preserved the proletarian internationalism that was supposed to inspire the whole of the Second International. All the rest joined the battle alongside the bosses to break any proletarian bond that could endanger the imperialist plans of the bourgeoisie (camouflaged as “defensive stand”). Of course, one could say that this was not something unexpected on their part. Class collaboration was probably part of their reformist program in any case.

But apart from this, there was in the Second International itself a position which would sooner or later torpedo any claims to proletarian internationalism. As we have seen above, in the quote from the German Social Democrats, the part of the International that had enlisted in the capitalist war argued that it did not violate any of the principles of the International since it defended the right of

peoples to national independence and self-defense. Hence this persistent talk of “invasion,” even by the Germans, although it was Germany that had formally invaded France.

Already from the end of the nineteenth century, the organized labor movement supported the national liberation movements, on the one hand because they were considered to be a modernizing force, in the sense of promoting the development of capitalism as a necessary stage for socialism, and on the other hand because, although they had bourgeois characteristics, they involved large sections of the proletariat who could potentially create a socialist perspective by accelerating the collapse of capitalism. Such an example was the national liberation movement of Poland (Poland was divided between the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires), which led to the split of the Polish Socialist Party (1894) between the patriotic right wing and the left internationalist wing. Similarly to 1914, the leader of the proletarian internationalist tendency was Rosa Luxemburg, who together with her comrades promoted class solidarity between Polish and Russian workers, the socialist perspective and the universal struggle against capitalism, warning that the class question should not be buried under the national one since, after all, Poland’s national independence was not in the interest of anyone apart from its bourgeoisie. On account of this consistent proletarian position, they were vilified within the Second International by the right-wing patriotic wing of the Polish party as “police agents” and as a “nefarious gang”!

Over one century after these events and after the First World War, there is no doubt that national liberation movements and national wars not only do not serve proletarian interests, but actually annihilate them, since the proletariat is de facto aligned with the bourgeoisie either with the aim of establishing a new “independent” nation-state or with the aim of defending an existing “independent” nation-state. The term “independent” is put within quotation marks, because in the context of capitalist inter-imperialist antagonisms, every nation-state is bound to the chariot wheels of the one or the other stronger imperialist power. Thus, the USA, for example, can give its fervent support to a national liberation movement in line with its own interests and fiercely fight another one which is backed by Russia, and vice versa.

The formation of nation-states is a rather recent historic episode in the course of the rise of capitalism.¹⁸ We could say that the nexus of nation-states of the modern world and the antagonisms between them is a form of the existence of total social capital. Any active participation of the proletariat in these nationalist antagonisms merely reproduces its position as the exploited class under the domination of capital. No proletarians have ever been emancipated through a national liberation war; on the contrary, every national liberation war has paved the way for the

¹⁸ According to one argument, nationalism in itself was established near the end of the eighteenth century, with two events that signaled the arrival of the nation-state: the independence of the United States in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. See here Fredy Perlman, *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, Black and Red Books, 1985.

consolidation of a new bourgeois elite with national characteristics and a capitalist program (even if there were “revolutionaries” and “heroes” of the national liberation movement in its ranks). Therefore, the self-emancipation of the proletariat would require the elimination of every nationalist element, everything that seems to bind it to a “homeland”: i.e., it would have to turn against its exploiters, present and aspiring, and transform immediately the national liberation war into class war. It should smash to smithereens social peace, which is an indispensable complement to capitalist war.

The militarist circle-A's

After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it was not long before some texts of Ukrainian anarchists appeared, declaring that they had taken up arms to defend Ukraine and the Ukrainian people against Russia which “has a long-term plan to destroy democracy in Europe.” They even called people to support them financially, to send them weapons (!), but also to join the “International Legion of Territorial Defense,” created by Zelensky himself, against Russian imperialism. In fact, what they have formed is a regular military unit, like all the rest, fully integrated into the national army of Ukraine within the framework of the country's Territorial Defense. These propaganda texts, accompanied by the necessary heroic photos of some heavily armed men waving anarchist flags, spread like wildfire across all Western media networks, both mainstream and related to the antagonistic movement. This is of course something to be expected: anything that promotes nationalism, even if it originates from anarchists, anything that encourages joining one of the two sides in a national war, is not only legitimate for capital and its state, but the only acceptable position from that perspective.

But what has happened in Ukraine while these anarchists have been fighting alongside the national armed forces of Ukraine “defending the freedom of us all”? First of all, martial law has been declared: this means that the laws protecting the workers and their representation by their trade unions have been largely suspended, allowing mass dismissals and work suspensions, the extension of the working day from forty to sixty hours, the unilateral cancellation of collective agreements by the bosses, the non-payment of wages, the compulsory change of the object of work according to the military needs of the state, the reduction of holidays, etc. In this context, hundreds of enterprises in Ukraine have unilaterally suspended, either in whole or in part, the collective agreements that had been in effect until the outbreak of the war, especially the clauses concerning trade union activities, social benefits, safety conditions and working hours. Among these enterprises are ArcelorMittal, the country's largest steelworks, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, the National Railway Company of Ukraine, the port of Odessa and the Kiev metro. Under martial law, strikes and demonstrations are also banned, and all men between 18 and 60 years of age are banned from leaving the country.

The destruction of constant and variable capital due to the war is therefore accompanied by favorable arrangements for the bosses in the workplaces. It is no coincidence that the Zelensky government proposed, amidst the war, a law for approval to the parliament imposing the complete deregulation of labor relations, which he was trying to pass since April 2021. Initially the law did not pass due to the reactions of the trade unions and the opposition. But now the Ukrainian state has gotten rid of the various obstacles, from the bargaining power of the workers to the mere existence of the opposition, and has succeeded in imposing social peace through war. The aforementioned law, which is embedded in the general ideological framework of “desovietization,” was approved in the summer of 2022 through a rapid parliamentary process. The central core of this attack on the Ukrainian proletariat is that workers in small- and medium-sized enterprises of up to 250 employees will no longer be covered by collective labor agreements. Instead, they will enter into individual contracts with the corresponding capitalists, without enjoying any protection from labor legislation. This means over seventy percent of the Ukrainian workforce will have individual contracts, a development which will ultimately lead to the total devaluation of the labor power of the largest part of the country's proletariat. The only thing that could stop this process would be a mass rebellion against martial law, the disruption of social peace. But this would likely be opposed by the nationalist anarchists since. For if they wanted to do such a thing, they would never have willingly joined the Ukrainian army. No matter how much they may appeal to Kropotkin¹⁹ or Bakunin (or even Makhno!), their active participation in the capitalist war is aimed directly against proletarian interests.

On the other camp, we are confronted with the Western leftist supporters of Putin who argue in favor of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Using the reactionary ideology of anti-Americanism and the anti-NATO narrative as a vehicle, they defend the military operations and nationalism of Russia, a capitalist national formation which, like any other such formation, bases its existence and reproduction on the exploitation of the largest part of its population: the proletariat. They are such odious enemies of the proletarian movement that they have even turned against the recent uprising in Iran after the murder of Mahsa Amini by the police, claiming that it was instigated by the Americans. They actively support any butcher, as long as he/she qualifies as anti-America, turning against proletarian interests, exactly like the Ukrainian anarchists mentioned above. Their supposed concern, as leftists, for the working class is simply a lie since they openly support the obliteration of its power and of its very own existence—as one of the two antagonistic poles within capitalism and as variable capital—through its active engagement in the inter-imperialist wars.

¹⁹In World War I, Kropotkin supported the Entente (Great Britain, France, Russia) against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy), in stark contrast to the antiwar and antimilitarist positions of the greater part of the anarchist movement at that time.

In the slaughterhouse of capitalist war, we are always on the side of the deserters

“We don’t want to run away,” say the Ukrainian anarchists who have joined the country’s Territorial Defense. At the same time, according to official sources, about seven million people have fled the country since the beginning of the war. Mostly women and children, since it is prohibited for men to leave the country. The fact that the state has imposed martial law imposing a ban on leaving the country, compulsory conscription and constant border controls shows, if anything, that a significant proportion of men aged between 18 and 60 have no desire to be minced in the nationalist war machine. Many have tried to cross the border hidden in suitcases, boxes, trunks and even dressed as women. Some have succeeded, others have been caught by the border guards and have been forced into compulsory conscription. Transwomen have not managed to escape the clutches of the war machine either, since for the state and the army they are men and therefore forbidden to leave the country.

From a proletarian internationalist point of view, we ought to promote and support the decision and action of those people who, either for reasons of self-preservation or for political reasons, refuse to sacrifice themselves for the “fatherland” and escape the national war effort. We ought to promote their example as a true proletarian practice against the dominant ideology of militarism and nationalism that has even hidden behind the images of the red and black flag.

As long as the war and its horrors are prolonged, the ideology of sacrifice for the “fatherland” may crumble and collapse and desertion practices may emerge within both armies, as it has actually happened in the previous months. In the Ukrainian army, which despite Western support is still weaker than the Russian army, desertion phenomena are quite frequent. In many of the cases it may not be desertions with a purely internationalist content, but rather a flight from an army that sends them untrained and unarmed on suicide missions like sheep to the slaughter. Even so, they are certainly a crack in the war frenzy and an example of resistance against state-military power.

In the Russian army, there are also thousands of soldiers who refuse to return to the Ukrainian front, claiming that they are being led to their death sentence. In September 2022, Putin announced the imposition of a partial mobilization, involving some 300,000 reservists. This announcement triggered a huge wave of people fleeing Russia (it is estimated that over 300,000 people have left the country up to the time of writing this text) fearing that the conscription would be generalized or that the borders would be closed. Demonstrations against the mobilization have broken out in many regions of Russia and were met with a brutal crackdown by the cops. Also, several attacks on recruitment offices have taken place (recruitment offices in Russia have been burned down regularly since the beginning of the war). Three days after the declaration of mobilization, Putin signed a legislative amendment stipulating a ten-year prison sentence for deserters.

Acts of desertion in wartime constitute some of the most radical acts of opposition to the nationalist ideology. This is the reason why historically deserters in wartime have been subjected to extreme violence and repression by the state and military authorities.

Revolutionary defeatism

Revolutionary defeatism was the position of revolutionary internationalists in the First World War, in contrast to that part of the Second International which decided to participate actively in the slaughterhouse. Since then, revolutionary defeatism has been the standard position of every communist or anarchist internationalist confronting the capitalist war.²⁰

Revolutionary defeatism does not mean pacifism. It means the transformation of the national war into a class war, i.e. the subversion of the social peace that the bourgeoisie attempts to impose by force in order to successfully wage its war. It means class struggle against our own bourgeoisie and solidarity with the proletarians of other countries who are also developing their own struggle against their own bourgeoisies. We fight against our own bourgeoisie not in order for it to be defeated by the most powerful state, i.e. the state that will be able to discipline its own proletariat more effectively, but in order to defeat the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole, as these are also expressed in the national war. Revolutionary defeatism is the active mobilization against forced conscription, the support of deserters, the support of the struggles in the workplaces against wage reductions, against the increase of working hours or the imposition of forced labor on account of the war. Revolutionary defeatism is the sabotage of the war industry, the spreading of internationalist propaganda to the soldiers of all opposing camps, the cooperation and practical solidarity with the proletarians of all the countries involved and the circulation of struggles, the expropriation of goods for the satisfaction of proletarian needs and any other action that could contribute to our goal, which is none other than the development of the revolutionary movement against capitalist social relations that involve wartime inter-proletarian mutual slaughter.

Revolutionary defeatism means for us here today, with the ongoing war in Ukraine, that we have to intensify the class struggles where we are, especially when the states we reside are actively involved in the military conflict and the effects of the war on our class are already devastating. Not, of course, to support one side or the other—that is the job of all kinds of nationalists, be those anarchists, leftists, or rightists. But on the contrary, to disrupt precisely the prevalent nationalist monologue and to impose what has always defined the interests of our class: the struggle of life against death.

3 November 2022
Athens, Greece

²⁰For an alternate view, see John Garvey’s article in this issue, “Revolutionary Defeatism Reconsidered.”

RESPONSE TO JOHN GARVEY

SOME THOUGHTS OCCASIONED BY HIS ARTICLE ON REVOLUTIONARY DEFEATISM AND THE WAR

BY KARMÍNA

Thank you for the text. We think your review of early twentieth century debates is very pertinent and will hopefully lead to some reflection and debate. Incidentally, some of us read or reread the debates on the national question, including texts by Luxemburg, Lenin, some of the Austro-Marxists, and the Bundists. We were looking to tackle the debates on war next (of course, there was significant overlap between these areas, especially around 1914), but your contribution will save a lot of effort.

Below are some brief thoughts provoked, in part, by your piece.

To anyone who subscribes to Lenin, the present invasion should pose no great theoretical difficulty. Ukraine is fighting a defensive “national war” and is to be supported, as suggested by Lenin’s polemic against the future left communist and later Left Oppositionist Kievsky (Pyatakov).¹ To those who fear becoming entangled in interimperialist rivalries, Trotsky gave an answer in 1938:

Let us assume that rebellion breaks out tomorrow in the French colony of Algeria under the banner of national independence and that the Italian government, motivated by its own imperialist interests, prepares to send weapons to the rebels. What should the attitude of the Italian workers be in this case? I have purposely taken an example of rebellion against a *democratic* imperialism with intervention on the side of the rebels from a *fascist* imperialism. Should the Italian workers prevent the shipping of arms to the Algerians? Let any ultraleftist dare answer this question in the affirmative. Every revolutionist, together with the Italian workers and the rebellious Algerians, would spurn such an answer with indignation.²

¹Vladimir Lenin, “A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism” [August-October 1916], translated by Joe Fineberg, *Collected Works, Volume 23* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 28-76.

²Leon Trotsky, “Learn to Think!” [July 1938], *Writings, 1937-1938* (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1976), 331.

We are neither Leninists nor Trotskyists (though we try to keep an open mind, especially with respect to the original material as opposed to latter-day tribute acts), so quoting the classics is not enough to persuade us. However, anyone with such allegiances who takes a different position on the present war should take care to justify their “revisionism.”

As for the various ultraleftists for whom “revolutionary defeatism” is the only conceivable answer to any war and in any circumstances, some of them would still like to claim continuity with Lenin. They avoid the contradiction by referring to periodizations of capitalist development in which intercapitalist conflicts before 1914 could be progressive, pro-democratic etc. (i.e., Marx was right about Poland, Lenin was right about the Russo-Japanese war, etc.), but all such conflicts after 1914 are necessarily imperialist. Hence, it is forbidden not just to take sides practically (fair enough), but also to even think about which outcomes of a war would be preferable from the point of view of the working class. Such considerations are dismissed as the geopolitical equivalent of “fortune-telling.” Alas, the materialist method seems to be applicable to everything *but* the realm of international relations, for one might otherwise commit the thoughtcrime of “taking sides”! For what it is worth, Marx and Engels sure did a lot of “fortune-telling” in their own time. Without getting into the details, we think that the underlying periodization based on ideas of long-term capitalist “decline” or “decadence” and a stagist misinterpretation of formal and real subsumption is to be rejected for reasons unrelated to any war. With that thrown out the window, the pre- and post-1914 distinction loses ground. (Note that Lenin himself in 1916 dismissed the idea that “national wars” are impossible in the period of imperialism.)³

Those who see themselves as heirs to the other strand of left communism may point to the councilist attitude to World War II, as expressed, e.g., by Otto Rühle. It is interesting to read his 1940 text in full. Rühle believed that the future was state-capitalist, not private-capitalist, and expected “democracy” to lose the war militarily and fascism to win. If the actual course of history took a different turn, perhaps the practical conclusions he drew from that analysis should be up for debate as well. There are surely a lot of important contributions in the Dutch-German tradition, but much of its lower-level analysis is steeped in expectations of a terminal crisis or of world revolution around the corner. (Incidentally, its writings on the national question are virtually nonexistent—perhaps because in Germany and the Netherlands, it was not as urgent at the time as in Central and Eastern Europe, a region that had been home to not just one but two “prisons of the nations.”)⁴

We have been working on an article on the Russo-Ukrainian war since basically the first week of the invasion. For us, this work has proven difficult, fraught with dilem-

mas and controversy, not to mention the dramatic changes in the course of the conflict. What follows represents a rough consensus so far, though in the form of rather scattered notes.

We do not think that whatever happens in Ukraine will spark a world revolution on its own. We do not see a movement capable of putting actual revolutionary defeatism *on both sides* into practice. We are also not inclined to see those few instances of looting and desertion (the favorite subjects of the “communization” tendency; we would be curious to learn how they propose to deal, under the existing conditions and given the existing balance of power between the workers and the state, with people who loot humanitarian aid or whatever else to sell it at exorbitant prices—this does happen!)⁵ on the Ukrainian side as the basis for world-historical hopes. With no recourse to the impressive but in our view bankrupt theoretical frameworks of the “imperialist stage,” “decadence,” or “terminal crisis,” we see nothing wrong about asking (1) which of the (realistic) outcomes of the war seem probable and which would be preferable. Only then can one ask (2) what communists should do, (3) what the working class should do. The latter two questions are not identical, for simple reasons of quantity: if it is advisable to flee a country at war, this can be useful advice to a group of political militants, but surely not to the working-class part of a population of forty million.

Note that, by definition, the way the first question is posed excludes certain fantasies, such as the one where there is no conventional military resistance at first, but the occupation is followed by a complete lack of cooperation by the working class in a quasi-Kapp Putsch scenario. For a multitude of reasons, including the existence of well-armed and experienced nationalists, this was out of the question from the get-go, but it is also becoming ever less plausible with each day of conventional warfare. It is similarly “realistic” to expect that now, in the face of cruise missile attacks, the Ukrainian people will readily sabotage the war effort including the supply and functioning of air defense systems—many of them Western-provided—which provide at least some protection of lives and life-sustaining power grids.

All of the possible outcomes of the Russian state’s aggression already come with the terrible price tag of up to a quarter million casualties (that is one estimate of the toll *so far*),⁶ scores of thousands of maimed, and millions traumatized, displaced, and dispossessed. How many are yet to be added to that count, we do not know. In this sense, any outcome will be terrible. Having said that, the preferable one, given what we know now, includes the implosion of Russia’s military effort due to desertion, mutiny, and “fragg-ing.” This is a realistic scenario in the sense that there are

³ Vladimir Lenin, “The Junius Pamphlet” [October 1916], translated by Yuri Sdobnikov, *Collected Works, Volume 22* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 305-319.

⁴ Otto Rühle, “Which Side to Take?”, *Living Marxism: International Council Correspondence* (Volume V, No 2: Fall 1940), 14-18.

⁵ See Andrew, “Letters from Ukraine, Parts 1-3,” available via the *Endnotes* website. But also see Andrew’s article and interview in the present issue, as well as the essay by Antithesi & friends. These pieces do argue in favor of looting and desertions on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides.

⁶ Helene Cooper, “Russia and Ukraine Each Have Suffered Over 100,000 Casualties, the Top US General Says,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2022.



indications of a gradual decomposition of the invading force, although we are clearly not there yet. (Some have offered a window into the current thinking of Russia's propagandists and pundits.⁷ Others have reported on everyday working-class antiwar heroism brewing under the surface.⁸) One of the possible steps after that would be a democratic, anti-militarist revolution in Russia, hopefully with a significant working-class component in terms of forms of struggle as well as demands. As we discussed in the interview with *Sozial.Geschichte Online*,⁹ this might send shockwaves around the whole CIS region, threatening the authoritarian capitalist regimes in Belarus, Kazakhstan, etc. In the best of worlds, such a course of events could turn into something like a twenty-first century 1905. Of course, at every junction, there are other possibilities, including the formation of a full-fledged military-nationalist dictatorship in Russia in response to the defeat, as well as a buildup for the next (and possibly the last) war.

The scenario would be foreclosed, however, should the Ukrainian military cease to fight or should aid from the West dry up. Despite all the assistance so far, the difference in military hardware and ammunition is still vast.¹⁰ Russia would be quick to resolidify its effort against a weakened Ukraine while also consolidating its rule internally. On this, two notes. Firstly, this does not necessarily mean that communists or even "the Left" must openly call for the continued arming of Ukraine. It does not seem that the positions or wishes of fringe political groupings are the decisive factor here, anyway. However, even remaining silent (so as not to tarnish one's defeatist credentials) would be preferable to some of the faux-internationalist

⁷ Gerrard Kaonga, "Russian TV Pundits Fear History Repeating Itself with Uprising Over War," *Newsweek*, 16 November 2022.

⁸ Nikita Sologub, "Whoever Hands Me a Weapon, From this Weapon will Perish: An Industrial Welder from Chelyabinsk Quit His Job after His Colleagues were Mobilised," *Mediazona*, 21 October 2022.

⁹ Peter Birke, "Interview with Karmina on 'The Tragedy of the Ukrainian Working Class,'" *Sozial.Geschichte Online* (№ 34, 2022).

¹⁰ Kiel Institute for the World Economy, "Ukraine Support Tracker Data," updated regularly and available here: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/data-sets/ukraine-support-tracker-data-17410/>

ideas completely divorced from reality that are put forward. Moreover, admitting that, right now, the still rather limited military aid from the West is helping prevent destruction and civilian loss of life on an even more massive scale does not amount to unconditional support for everything the Ukrainian armed forces are doing or may try to do in the future. The situation—not just on the battlefield—is subject to change, and an honest and realistic analysis will change with it.

Secondly, this does not mean that we should refuse solidarity with Ukraine's draft dodgers or campaign against fraternization with Russian draftees/POWs, including men forcibly mobilized by the two former (now "annexed") "people's republics"; both are good things even on a basic, pre-political level. Incidentally, there have been some encouraging signs of understanding and compassion toward Russian soldiers who refuse to fight or arrive at a critical position to the war—see, e.g., some of the extensive interviews with POWs conducted by journalists like Volodymyr Zolkin. Unfortunately, Ukrainian courts have not been lenient with the forcibly mobilized, despite the government's official position.¹¹ The Ukrainian activists defending their rights also deserve support.

At the same time, our views and the scenario sketched out above are clearly incompatible with some actions, such as the one at an Italian airport in March, where the local union refused to load a shipment of weapons for Ukraine.¹² (Not that it had any real impact beyond warming the hearts of a few ultras. It is of course a mere coincidence that a representative of said union who defended the action also participated in 2017 in a Stalinist-style May Day parade in the so-called Luhansk People's Republic,¹³ which ruthlessly crushes worker protest.¹⁴)

¹¹ Kateryna Semchuk, "Russia Forced Them to Fight, Ukraine Tried Them for Treason," *Open Democracy*, 16 November 2022.

¹² Riccardo Chiari, "Italian Airport Workers Refused to Load Weapons Bound for Ukraine," *il manifesto*, 16 March 2022.

¹³ As seen in public photos posted by lead organizer Cinzia della Porta.

¹⁴ See the section of our essay "Anti-People's Republics" in Karmina, "The Tragedy of the Ukrainian Working Class," 29 June 2022.

As for Ukraine itself, we do not hold out high hopes about its near future in the event of a victory. Fortunately, the far right does not seem to have been strengthened all that much, although we should note that ours is a view from the outside, through the media, social media, polls, etc. On the other hand, the softer versions of nationalism have surely grown in popularity—hence all the Western talk of the “birth” of “Ukraine as a modern nation.” The present urge to mete out harsh punishment to alleged “collaborators”—who, for some, include people who simply accepted Russian humanitarian aid or continued their work in social services—will hopefully fizzle out. This is currently on the agenda after the liberation of parts of the Kherson Oblast, as well as previous successes in the Kyiv and Kharkiv Oblasts. At least hundreds of criminal investigations are ongoing, but based on what we have seen so far, it seems that only the more serious charges (providing information about Ukrainian positions, helping coordinate logistics for the occupying force, assuming positions of power) can lead to prison terms. Anyway, the destruction and chaos brought about by the war is immense and the next years or even decades will be very difficult. Ukraine will be completely dependent on outside help, possibly including Russian reparations. We should not expect people fighting for survival in such conditions to act as a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. (It often comes to mind when reading fervent “defeatists,” that they surely place a lot of world-historical expectations on others, considering that they themselves are largely irrelevant at home.)

Unlike some comrades, we are not too concerned about “Western capital” coming to Ukraine to “plunder its resources” and “exploit its cheap labor power.” For one, Ukraine has had its share of experience with a nationally-oriented model of capitalist development which not only plundered and exploited it, but also did very little to develop the economy in a purely “rational capitalist” sense, such as by investing in fixed capital. The years since 2014 were at best a slight improvement. Also due to the ongoing war in the Donbass, Ukraine could not benefit from the economic boom of those years (unlike, say, neighboring Slovakia, where unemployment fell to 5% for the first time since 1990).

Other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including our own, have also seen experiments, albeit much shorter, with models of “national capitalism” in the early 1990s. When this came crashing down, the countries opened up to Western FDIs, implementing EU-accession related or other “neoliberal” reforms. This period brought a lot of suffering, especially to some strata of the working class (sections of the public sector, “post-socialist” legacy industries, the unemployed, and the racially excluded). On the other hand, the process was not completely unambiguous. Since then, there have been stretches of continually rising real wages and declining unemployment, reflected in improving living standards (comparisons across the former Eastern bloc using indicators like life expectancy are also telling). In other words, Western-oriented integra-

tion brought about “normal,” contradictory capitalist development. This is a slightly different trajectory than, say, in Germany, where real wages have been largely stagnant for the past two decades. Perhaps the US is similar. This should also be taken into account when thinking about what the working class in our region can hope for and what stakes it has in continued capitalist development.

Those who warn that the same is about to happen to Ukraine should also clearly list the alternatives:

- (a) world revolution and full communism (not on the cards for 2023, if you ask us);
- (b) continued “development to nowhere,” i.e., a fantasy of a strong, independent national economy acting as a “bridge between the East and the West” etc.; or
- (c) an orientation toward Russia in the position of a subservient client state.

Mixes of (b) and (c) have already been tried in Ukraine with little success in terms of standard indicators of capitalist development, even when compared to other post-Soviet countries. It is no wonder that many working-class Ukrainians want a “Poland at home,” so that they do not have to become migrant workers and only see their family every few months. Of course, whether a “Ukrainian Poland” is really possible, even with EU membership, is another matter. It is not 2004, the year of many CEE countries’ accession, and the EU faces a plethora of its own issues. But those who are up in arms about the circa 1000 state-owned enterprises still operating in Ukraine being privatized¹⁵ should reassure us (and the Ukrainians) about a path to (a), hopefully one where the working people of Ukraine are not expected to do all the work, including stopping a war by confronting both belligerent states head-on and at once. Alternatively, they should describe how (b) will be made to work this time—given all the world market constraints—and secure some actual capitalist development. Where is the capital going to come from that is needed for dealing not just with the decayed industrial base of the Ukrainian economy pre-2022, but even more so with all the destruction brought about by the war?

Again, none of this means we have to become cheerleaders for accession to the European Union or start organizing investment fora for Western corporations interested in Ukraine as the next frontier. But if our analysis is to be not even appealing but at least understandable and realistic-looking to people in the region, these conditions, possibilities, and hopes have to be taken into account. It is arrogant and patronizing to preach about the dangers of “colonization” by the EU from a position of EU living standards and freedoms, either in the core countries or in the more recently added states.

*1 December 2022
Bratislava, Slovakia*

¹⁵ See the report, “Ukrainian President Signs Law Ending Ban On Privatization Of State Companies,” *Radio Free Europe*, 28 October 2019.

UKRAINE THROUGH SOME MEMORIES OF THE YUGOSLAV WARS

ECHOES OF THE BALKAN CONFLICT IN THE CURRENT INVASION

BY ROB MYERS

This article may sit uneasily among others that look more at developments of Russian and US imperialism, the movements of capital, energy markets, etc. in trying to understand the war in Ukraine. I want to go back to some of my personal experiences in Bosnia and Kosova between 1993 and 2002, during the Yugoslav wars. Those wars were very different from the present conflict in Ukraine but today I often read similar arguments and perspectives that were made then in left circles. I'm not going to refer much to current debates. People will see the parallels.

Since this is going to be a personal reflection let me just say who I am—since some people read these with a mental clipboard waiting to pigeonhole writers according to their political grouping. I am a UK pensioner, not now a member of any political organization. From my teenage years in the 1960s till 1985 I was a foot soldier in a Trotskyist cult, the Workers' Revolutionary Party, led by the serial sexual groomer Gerry Healy. In those days I worked in aircraft and car factories. The breakup of the cult in 1985 made it possible for me to begin to think for myself and do things during the Yugoslav wars that would have previously been impossible, when building the "Party" was the only permitted activity. Indeed, my experiences in the war put an end to my "vanguard party" outlook. So if you have a pigeonhole simply marked "revolutionary," pop me in there.

On the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine I was at a meeting which sadly didn't even discuss the troops massing on the border; but in the closing minutes this was raised as something we ought to talk about next time! A comrade declared "Well, we know what our line will be: "No war but the class war." Amen to that! But the problem is, where is the class war? How is it being fought, who is fighting it? And above all what does that mean for us, worker militants, far from the war? What do we do?

This is what I want to try to consider in what follows. I was recently invited to Poland to speak about the Bosnian war. After I spoke a young woman took the floor. She had just returned from eastern Ukraine where she had meetings with miners and steel workers in Kryvyi Rih, the huge mining and industrial belt a short distance from the Russian front lines. It's worth noting that this comrade worked in the Amazon warehouse in Poznan until she was recently fired for her union organizing activities as a member of the base union "Workers Initiative." To summarize her report, the Ukraine miners and steel workers told her that for years they, and their whole community, had been fighting the mine owners and the Ukraine government over pollution, low pay, safety conditions, etc. but now they had no choice but to fight the Russians as well—because they had seen what had happened to their comrades in the Donbass, occupied by the Russians eight years ago. So, about half the workers had joined the army. The rest had continued to work but formed their own civil defense units which they'd had to equip themselves since they got nothing from Government. Interestingly, they reported, that senior management had all fled and ran the mines by Zoom!

I sat listening to this report and a kind of mental jolt went through me. This was the same kind of moment I had experienced in 1993. Before the Russian invasion I knew little about Ukraine. When the Yugoslav wars began, I knew nothing about the Balkans.

In 1992 and early 1993 our TV screens were full of scenes, first from Croatia and then from Bosnia of ethnic cleansing, mass killings and refugees pouring out of the country. But the main narrative being told by media and western politicians was of an explosion of ancient ethnic hatreds. The left added a bit more—tracing the rise of nationalism within the Yugoslav political elite in the Communist Parties of the different republics that made up the Yugoslav Federation and how they had made alliances with different sections of global capital. I remember talking about the mass killings with an old comrade of mine who had lived through WWII and he said, "What can you do but weep?" And I agreed: appalled at the mass killings but feeling paralyzed. If workers were swept up in this orgy of nationalism what could anyone do but weep?

For the most part this is where lot of the left stayed, writing about the various activities of imperialism that led up to this terrible situation, some blaming western interference, some blaming Stalinism, all writing about the "lessons" that must be learned but all, more or less, accepting that the Yugoslav working class had been silenced by the rise of nationalism and the war.

But then I began to hear from an old Serbian comrade giving a very different picture. In letter after letter, he detailed the way many sections of the Yugoslav working class had tried to fight against the collapse of industry and the economy and against the corrupt political elites as they tried to convert the socially owned property into their private wealth. (Yugoslavia did not have state owned

industries. On paper they belonged to the workforce) He wrote about the steel workers. In the 1980s the industry had collapsed. The European Union (EU) had helped draw up a "modernization" plan that involved shutting 70% of the plants. Meanwhile steelworkers from all over Yugoslavia marched on Belgrade. No politicians dared meet them. How could the "modernization" plan be pushed through in the face of such worker opposition? Not by legislation. But by 1993 war had done it. The steel works had been bombed and destroyed or just abandoned.

The violence we were witnessing was not so much about ancient ethnic hatreds, my Serbian friend wrote, but rather the violence needed to break up modern working-class resistance.

The terrible and violent disintegration of Yugoslavia erupted along ethnic and national lines but the driving force, exploiting old divisions, was the need of political elites and gangsters to break up modern working-class resistance, however incoherent, to the robbery of social property and collapsing living standards.

Had this working class completely vanished? With the war now raging in Bosnia, he wrote about the northern industrial and mining city of Tuzla, under total siege by Serbian and Croatian nationalists.

This town had been one of the cradles of the Yugoslav working class and to understand the situation in 1992 it's useful to go back briefly to 1922 and the Husina Buna, the miners' uprising. Then the Tuzla mines were worked by men from Hungary, Poland, Romania as well as local Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). The foreign miners lived in mine owned dormitories and every previous strike had been defeated by the authorities sealing off the dormitories and deporting miners back to their own countries. In 1922, however, with the young communist movement gaining strength, people were prepared and when a strike started the local population took all the foreign miners into their homes despite facing jail sentences for doing so. A long and bitter struggle followed, only beaten when the Bosnian government brought in troops and armed gangs. Hundreds of miners were dragged in chains through the pit villages in the deep snow of winter.

But this unified struggle of the working class laid the basis for Tuzla's militant history and later saw it become the biggest "free territory" during the Partisan resistance to Nazi occupation and above all saw it become the most ethnically mixed region in Tito's Yugoslavia. In the census of the 1970s, 70% of the Tuzla people simply declared themselves as Yugoslavs. Not Croats or Serbs or Bosniaks, as they could. It had the highest proportion of mixed marriages.

In the 1980s, this militant history and the ethnically diverse population saw Tuzla become a center of opposition to the rising nationalist political elites after the death of Tito. The Tuzla miners and their families led a huge demonstration of hundreds of thousands in Sarajevo in 1992, shouting "Down with all the nationalists." But this demonstration was fired upon by Chetnik (Serbian nationalist) snipers. War had begun.





The miners returned to Tuzla, seized the weapons from the local Yugoslav Peoples Army (JNA) barracks (by this time the JNA was an entirely Serbian Government force) and established the defenses of Tuzla and the surrounding “free territory”—free to all ethnicities.

So, as I read these letters from Serbia, I started to see a way to overcome my paralysis because here was a working class—not in the sociological sense of “workers” but in the political sense of people trying to assert their working class interests. This was what so excited me in Poland with the report from the Ukraine miners. I was no longer looking at things from an ignorant distance, from where all that could be seen was the elites, local and international, fighting for their share of the loot, but starting to see where “the class war” was, even if only dimly, a faint glimmer. My Serbian comrade made a simple proposal—the Bosnian miners had given a day’s pay each month to the striking UK miners in 1984-1985; couldn’t this solidarity now be reciprocated by British workers. Tuzla was being starved into submission; no food had got in for twelve months. Could British workers get supplies to Tuzla?

I won’t go into the Workers’ Aid for Bosnia campaign that some of us then began—you can listen to an interview I did about all this. Over the next three years, we took over 100 lorries of supplies as well as taking hundreds of people to Tuzla, including trade union delegations, and helped miners’ and teachers’ representatives to come out and do speaking tours of Europe. Instead, I want to concentrate on what I found in Tuzla and how this was so at odds with what most of the left were writing, where you would not find a hint of this working-class city or its resistance to ethnic division. All they could see was the Bosnian flag, for them just another symbol of nationalism.

In fact, even before I first got to Tuzla, I had a sense of its character. In Manchester, where I live, two of us organized our first public meeting, “Solidarity with Bosnian miners, Stop ethnic cleansing.” A couple of hundred people turned up testifying to the widespread public horror of what was happening. (It was this huge public outrage at ethnic cleansing that made it possible for us to collect money, buy lorries, get food, warehouses and find drivers.) At the meeting were several newly arrived Bosnian refugees, including a woman from Tuzla who stood up and spoke movingly of how she had brought her children to safety while her husband had stayed behind to defend their city. “It is a workers’ city and I think only a workers’ convoy will have the determination to get there,” she said.

It took us only a few weeks to raise enough money to buy lorries and fill them with food but it took many months to get through the military blockades and reach Tuzla. The minute you arrived you felt the reality of the refugee woman’s statement “this is a workers’ city.” Built up over coal and salt deposits, the city had become the center, not just of mining, but of associated chemical industries. Now everything was idle apart from the coal mines. The siege had put an end to all other activities. But everywhere you felt the presence of the working class. Educa-

tion was a good example. The teachers’ unions had organized education under siege, from primary to university level. Without any pay and without any resources the teachers had kept the classes going for all ethnicities. We visited many schools, often held in basements because of the shelling, and over and over we heard the same thing from children, “Before the war we never thought who is Serb, who is Muslim, who is Croat, we were just friends. Now the enemy want to divide us but they never will.” A miner in a bar laughed when we talked about ethnic division: “Down the mine we are all just workers.” There were still many people alive who had been in the Partisans, many people who had enthusiastically built the postwar socialist society. I visited an old woman dying in hospital, the mother of the refugee in Manchester. “We built this hospital,” she told me proudly. Many homes still had their picture of Tito.

Of course, when I say it was a workers’ city this was not really true. Everyone we spoke to, politicians, judges, journalists, police chiefs—all acknowledge their roots in the mining community but in reality, the city’s political leaders all came from the old CP bureaucracy and had converted themselves into Social Democrats. In the immediate outbreak of war, citizens’ committees had sprung up everywhere to organize things like security in each tower block, which was where people lived. But over time the city bureaucracy had stifled such self organization. The ad-hoc military units gave way to regular army organization. Meanwhile, Tuzla was completely cut off from Sarajevo, the capital where the overall Bosnian political and military leadership was. And Sarajevo was firmly in the hands of the SDA, the Bosnian Muslim nationalist party. But in Tuzla the SDA had virtually no influence and throughout the war there was an uneasy alliance between Sarajevo and Tuzla. And in Tuzla there was an uneasy alliance between the working class and the political/military leadership.

Here, I guess, is the heart of the problem with “No war but the class war.” All the outside political commentators on the left could only see workers supporting “nationalism” and various bourgeois warmongers. But were the Tuzla miners and citizens simply uncritically acting as cannon fodder to further the aims of the would-be bourgeoisie in Sarajevo? They were, after all, fighting as units of the Bosnian army, ultimately under Sarajevo’s control. But were they fighting for the same things?

Many Tuzla citizens were clear what their war aims were, defending their lives, the existence of their city and the right of all workers to live together. It might not seem very revolutionary. But is that very surprising? They had lived through five decades of Stalinism that used the words of socialism to justify the one-party rule of the bureaucracy. Indeed, the only person still waving the red star was the Serbian leader, Milosevic, who was overseeing their bombardment. The collapse of the old regime had coincided with war. The workers had no independent political parties, so was it surprising that they could only hold onto the most elementary aspect of their militant past—the right of all workers to live together?

And how did this these citizens' war aims fit in with the plans of the Bosnian elite; how did the workers willingly fight in "their" army. Well, very simple. Because of Bosnia's multi-ethnic population and the Serbian and Croatian governments' plan to divide Bosnia between them, the SDA Bosnian government, for their own ends, had to fly the flag of a "United Bosnia." So, on the surface the Tuzla workers and the Sarajevo nationalists had a common war aim.

So, we would sit in meetings with the miners, or teachers. We would visit the trenches, meet men and women of all ethnic backgrounds, poorly equipped, wearing jeans and trainers and talk to them of what they were fighting for. Their language was very significant. Surrounded and bombarded by Serbian forces, but in Tuzla the enemy was never called "Serb," but always referred to as "Chetniks" (the old name for Serbian royalists and nationalists), since there were many Serbs fighting to defend Tuzla. Then we would return to Britain and read endless articles in much of the left press about how workers in Yugoslavia must reject nationalism and unite against the bosses and imperialism. But unite with who? Yes, in Bosnia an ideal, politically sophisticated workers' movement would have tried to reach out to the Serbian masses. But you know what? It's very difficult, even for the politically sophisticated, to find a way to fraternize with someone with their boot on your neck and a pistol to your head. And what about the "unity" that did exist? In Tuzla, where they had fought against all nationalism and now, in order to survive, found that they had to fight in the Bosnian army. Didn't that "unity" merit support? Well, the answer from the left was overwhelmingly "no"—but only in the sense that they just wrote as if this actual working class didn't exist. For them, the only one was the one they invented, in the grips of nationalism.

Our solidarity efforts were criticized on all fronts for supporting Bosnian nationalism, supporting German imperialism, etc., etc. "Workers must break from their own bourgeoisie before they could be supported." One US group accused us of gun running for NATO, a curious idea since the West was itself imposing an arms embargo on Bosnia. But since we had to negotiate our way through hostile army front lines, this accusation could have done us great harm. A good thing only geeks read a lot of this stuff!

And then, even worse, the continual denial, by the some of the left of certain realities, that we saw with our own eyes, realities that didn't fit in with their "analyses." This was very strong in that section of the left that decided western imperialism had organized the breakup of Yugoslavia and that Serbia had opposed this. Utter historical nonsense—but never mind. Despite its collapse, USSR nostalgia was still strong in the western left, even the anti-Stalinist left. The crude "enemy of my enemy is my friend" was really very much at work.

Left groups denied that there were concentration camps run by the Serb nationalists—"western propaganda." The many "massacres" were "staged." In May 1995 a single shell fell in the center of Tuzla killing seventy-five young people who gathered for a basketball competition. We

knew some of the people killed. On the evening of the massacre all the bereaved families gathered together and decided that their children would be buried together in a public park, not in the traditional religiously separate cemeteries. They wanted to show the world that the children had lived together and died together. The local TV station told me that they had put out footage of the massacre and the funeral but no TV station anywhere in the world took their footage. Imagine my feelings then when I listened to left groups denying these events had happened or resort to "well all sides did bad things." (This, of course, is always true in war but in Bosnia, as in Ukraine, they are no equivalents between aggressor and the resistance). Moreover, time and excavations of mass graves have disproved all those claims of "fabricated" massacres.

Tuzla was not defeated. I don't want to go into the Srebrenica massacre which was part and parcel of the steps leading up to the dirty deal done at Dayton to stave off nationalist defeat that effectively rewarded the ethnic cleansers and foisted an unworkable, corrupt state on Bosnia. But Tuzla survived, its working-class ethos survived and that can be seen in the post-war events.

The closed factories were seized by vultures and asset stripped but everywhere the workers continued to resist with factory occupations going on for years as they fought both local and national government. Hundreds of workers marched on the Croatian border—now within the European Union. The marchers, from the silent factories, demanded to be let into the EU. They shouted "The EU now rules Bosnia and we have mass unemployment, so let us into the EU to find work to feed our families." The border guards forced them back.

Then in 2017, with youth unemployment standing at 70%, a demonstration in Tuzla was brutally attacked by the police. The next day almost the entire population took to the streets calling for jobs, and an end to the corruption of the political class, overseen by the EU. Government and police buildings were burnt down. The offices of the Social Democrats were ransacked. And young people tried to set up a council (a soviet?) to take control of the town. It didn't succeed, not surprisingly as this was the very first attempt to create a free, public space for discussion in anyone's lifetime. But their actions spread across the region with similar demonstrations and councils. They will be back.

But what's important here is how this long history of working-class militancy was not totally crushed. Trapped by Stalinism, hammered by war, crippled by mass unemployment but never eradicated. We did a little bit to help it; above all we tried, through our efforts, to resurrect the idea of a working class and international practical solidarity.

This initiative was supported by a number of political groups around the world but above all by thousands of people in Britain, many of them young unemployed, who hated the idea of ethnic division. So, it wasn't just a case of us "helping" the Bosnians. It was how, via our initiative, the Bosnian resistance helped give young people in the UK a radical political perspective. This is an important discus-

sion. I have said most of the left ignored Tuzla but not all. Several political groups did make their way to Tuzla—but then and now there needs to be a discussion about what the purpose of such visits are. There is/was a tendency to go to “sell” this or that group, this or that “outlook,” much as the way people visit picket lines to sell their group’s newspaper. I always believed that the main purpose of our actions was to try to rebuild working class internationalism, to get the class to begin to act as a class, responsible for its own. So, our focus was not primarily on what we did in Bosnia but what we did in Europe. How could the Tuzla resistance act as a spark to move some parts of the class outside the war. If you wanted to have a serious discussion in Tuzla about the role of the working class then the best way to do that was to try to show that class in practice. That’s why we crammed all our lorries with as many people as possible. We managed to get postmen in Liverpool to put their own lorry on a convoy. Three union members drove the lorry to Bosnia. On the way there, they disagreed with one of our slogans, “Lift the UN arms embargo, let Bosnia defend itself.” The postmen argued more guns meant more killing. Once in Tuzla they went to stay with Bosnian postmen and their families. At a press conference on Bosnian TV, the Liverpool postmen explained that having talked with their comrades they now understood why they needed weapons. I think this is how you strengthen the class. Not primarily by going and giving political lectures, though that can be useful.

From 1993 to 1995 we were going backwards and forwards with convoys of supplies. In the UK I could read left articles on the “lessons” from the war in Bosnia, concentrating on the duplicity of the west and the rottenness of the nationalist leaders in Yugoslavia. Of course, the west was duplicitous but actually most of these descriptions were partial or inadequate. Western policy was usually seen simply as being motivated by the desire to “colonize” this or that part of the Balkans but in reality its alliances with Balkan leaders were constantly shifting and of course there were differences between the western players. But the overall concern was how to control the working class and if you only see it as a passive pawn in the game this never really features. This question of control was especially evident with Kosova (Kosovo in Serbian, Kosova in Albanian).

I first visited Kosova in 1996, to make contact with the education and miners unions there.

I had spent a lot of time in apartheid South Africa, Kosova was far worse. Everywhere the threat of violence against an entire people from the oppressor. Again, I look through the left press. Endless articles about Kosovan Albanian nationalism, about the NATO bombing of Serbia, etc., but almost nothing about the history or conditions of Albanian workers in the period up to the bombing or their important role in trying to maintain Federal Yugoslavia. They appear only as dupes of Tony Blair or Bush.

When two of us travelled to Kosova in 1996 we had to go illegally, the area was sealed off. Milošević’s tanks had

rolled into the city a few years earlier and crushed the region’s parliament and its autonomous status that gave it exactly the same rights as the other Republics. When this happened, the Kosovar Albanians were the last people in Yugoslavia that tried to defend the Yugoslav constitution. The gold miners from Mitrovica first went on underground hunger strike and then led a mass march to the capital, behind the banner of “Defend Yugoslavia,” against what they rightly saw as Milošević’s attempt to turn the Yugoslav Federation into Greater Serbia. But they got no support from workers in the other republics. The various regional political bureaucrats all thought, “let Milošević have Kosova, then we will be free to do what we want.” A fatal miscalculation because in taking control of Kosova, Milošević hitched his cart to the horse of rabid Serb nationalism, led by people like Arkan, a gangster and psychopath who controlled a growing army of looters and killers. After he invaded Kosova, Milošević set his sights on the other republics.

Yugoslavia was dead. The prelude to the invasion saw Milosevic rally large parts of the Serbian population, including the intelligentsia, behind him with the myth that “Yugoslavia” and the Serb people were under attack from the West. The Kosova Albanians were just a front for NATO. Milošević also liked to shout about “Yugoslavia’s battle against the Nazis”—as if he could claim the mantle of Partisan Yugoslavia when he had actually just destroyed it. But much of the left repeated this propaganda. Meanwhile Milošević was welcoming people like leading British Conservative politician, Douglas Hurd, to advise him on the privatization of the Serbian telecoms industry.

In Kosova we met with miners who had been locked out of their mines for six years, as had all Albanians who worked for the state. Terrible poverty and hunger was everywhere. But again, as in Tuzla, the working class had organized itself. All teaching in the Albanian language was banned but the teachers’ unions had organized an entire underground education system. We visited a university philosophy class being held in a derelict house with no heating in the middle of winter. The room was packed with students in coats sitting on logs. The miners had organized a new trade union to try to get help for their starving members and also to try to prevent the destruction of their mines which were now being worked by scab labour brought in from Poland and elsewhere. But these were coal miners, not mineral miners, and the techniques are very different.

We began to repeat our solidarity convoys but, ironically, it was easier to get into a war zone than it was to get through the Serbian state control. Now our ongoing dialogue with the workers in Kosova is worth setting down in abbreviated form. When we first arrived the working class overwhelmingly supported a policy of nonviolent civil resistance. They knew that there were Serbian troops everywhere and that behind them were Arkan’s killers. The KLA, Kosova Liberation Army, the Albanian nationalist armed force had very little support.

The Dayton Peace agreement changed everything. Western lefts write about the NATO bombing of Serbia as if the US and UK had long wanted to destroy Serbia and free Kosovo. But in 1996 at Dayton, it seems clear to me that in private the US told Milošević, if you agree to the Bosnian peace deal you get to keep Kosovo. The West were perfectly happy to let Milošević control Kosovo—as long as he could control it. But Milošević wasn't in control of Arkan whose looting of Bosnia had come to an end. He took Dayton as a green light to begin a killing spree in Kosovo. The massacres of Albanians intensified and at this point the Albanians saw that passive resistance was hopeless and they turned to the KLA. The war began. The KLA knew they could never defeat the Serbian army and their tactic was simple and successful—make such chaos that NATO has to intervene. Most of the Kosovo Albanian civilian population fled across the borders into Albania and Macedonia.

So, I come to our discussions with the people we had been working with in Kosovo, many of our friends now went off to the mountains to join guerilla bands. Suddenly they were all calling for NATO intervention. The President of the University Lecturers' Union who was doing a speaking tour with us in Spain, flew off to have discussions with the US State Department. Horror of horrors! How can we go on working with them?

But hold on. This small population of two million people tried to defend a united Yugoslavia and no one came to their aid. They tried to peacefully resist Serbian military dictatorship and starvation. Same story. Now the killing squads were rampaging through the country murdering at will. We were there talking about working class internationalism, but who were we? A ragtag handful of workers without a gun between us. Where is this international working class? Is it to be wondered that they, in desperation, look to the only force which they can see as capable of saving them from annihilation—NATO?

So, we did go on working with them. Telling them everything we knew about NATO but understanding their desperation. I was in Mitrovica, the mining town, two days after the Serbs pulled out, and NATO forces went in. That evening the whole town was out in the streets, drinking, dancing and talking. French paratroopers patrolled. I sat with a group of young Albanians. I asked them what they thought of the NATO presence. They replied "we know why NATO are here, for their own interests, not ours. But this is the first time in our lives that we have been free to walk our streets at night so tonight we are partying."

The next day we went with the miners to stage a protest outside their mines. Having been locked out for ten years by the Serb government troops, they were now locked out again, by French paratroopers. Our video camerawoman was arrested for filming outside the mine and her footage destroyed.

When is Kosovo mentioned today by the left? Only in the context of NATO's bombing of Serbia. It's thrown in as part of "look at the crimes of NATO" argument.

No mention of the oppression of working class Albanian communities that took place under Milosevic with full western complicity. This would make the picture too messy, wouldn't fit the "narrative."

It seems to me that much of the Western left reacted to the Yugoslav wars in a semi-religious way. They had their commandments, like "no war but the class war" or "the main enemy is at home." As events rapidly developed, they sought to squeeze the new world into their old commandments. They took those bits of evidence that seemed to support their beliefs and ignore others. Even those who did dig a bit deeper when the war erupted in their faces and rushed around to get a "Marxist analysis" of the causes never tried to find the working class. They just wrote it off.

All these slogans, "no war but the class war," "revolutionary defeatism," "the enemy is at home," etc. are like stickers on a suitcase, a label to the contents. Look inside and there is a wealth of historical experiences but you can't just peel off the sticker and put it on today's suitcase. The present is always different from the past.

Over and over, people in the West, who are often not even capable of successfully organizing their own workplaces, somehow expect the workers of Eastern Europe to arise from the ashes of the USSR with a socialist outlook. Nor can some commentators understand why workers who have lived under Russian rule, both Stalinism and gangster capitalism, opt for life under western capital.

People dismiss the Ukraine Maidan protests as just the work of the US, etc. Really? Of course, the US was there, as were the Russians. But did the Ukrainian masses have no reasons for themselves to rise up and oust the corrupt leaders?

The miners in Kyrvyi Rih understand very well the difference between living under the rule of Zelensky and the rule of the Russians in the Donbass. They're not stupid dupes. Tuzla workers knew what a victory for the Serbian nationalists would mean and they fought it in the only way they could see at that time and in those circumstances. That was their class war. I don't suggest that the kind of campaign we organized in 1993 can be repeated in other circumstances but I think the spirit of it is important.

The miners in Ukraine are fighting their class war and I'm sure so are many others there. Of course, developing a relationship with them will lead you all into terrible political dilemmas. They want to defeat the Russian invasion. To do that they need weapons. Where will they get them from??? Oh my god, now you are on the road to hell! The old slogans are so much more comforting.¹

31 October 2022
United Kingdom

¹After the end of the Bosnia war some of the people who had been the main organizers of the convoys got together and decided to put together a book of their experiences. The aim was not just to tell the history of the convoys but to try to say to readers: "We did this, so can you." It is a scrapbook of personal memories of convoy people and Yugoslavs—with pictures! I'm happy to send people copies for the price of postage. Email me at robmyers_wa@hotmail.com

REVOLUTIONARY DEFEATISM TODAY

A DEFENSE OF THE PRINCIPLE IN LIGHT OF THE PRESENT CONFLICT

BY DEVRIM VALERIAN

Winter is drawing in. The first year of the Ukrainian war is coming to an end. The war itself though looks set to continue. The mere passage of time will not stop the horrors. Russia is talking of the war ultimately needing a negotiated settlement. The key word here is “ultimately.” There is no sign of light at the end of the tunnel. Neither side has the ability to win outright. At the moment there seems to be no basis around which a compromise can be made. In these conditions there seems to be no alternative to the atrocities continuing. We in Konflikt believe the war will go on and on.¹

The response of the vast majority of the left to the war is akin to that of the American public at the start of February. People across the land decide which team they are going to root for in the Super Bowl. The left, too, is doing the same thing. It treats war and human catastrophe as some sort of game where one has to pick a team to support. This is a more serious intellectual game. On a superficial level the arguments seem to have more depth than “the Rams suck,” but not by much.

On the most basic level, supporters of each side have accused the other of being “Nazis.” Those supporting Ukraine accuse Putin of being a fascist. Those supporting Russia say that the Ukrainians are World War II Nazis reborn. Putin himself, accused by some of being another Hitler, throws the same accusation back and talks of the “denazification of Ukraine.” The very word “Nazi” itself has become yet another slogan to encourage workers to go out and kill each other. On a slightly more sophisticated level, there are those who talk of Ukraine’s “right to self-determination.” They talk of freedom, and the right of people to govern themselves. Others claim that Russia

¹The Konflikt group is active in Bulgaria. Their writings can be accessed via their website: <https://konflikt.org/>

is fighting against imperialism. They, too, talk of freedom. Only this time it is freedom from American, not Russian, domination. We don't want to address these arguments in this article, as we've dealt with them before at length.²

In this piece we want to tackle a different subject, about what "revolutionary defeatism" means today. In a world where the working class is weak, and revolution seems further away than ever, does it even have any meaning to bring up ideas and approaches from a century ago, or is it just the same sort of leftist pontificating as the slogans of the rest of the left? The argument of the "defeatists" is a simple one. At heart it says that the interests of the working class are opposed to their own bosses, and aligned with those of workers in other countries. It's the same argument as that of Lenin and the revolutionaries in 1914. Opposed to the rabid pro-war jingoism of most "socialist" parties, the revolutionaries argued that workers should oppose the war, and rather than kill other workers to make the bosses in their own country richer, they should overthrow their own governments, and stop the war. In the end it was workers refusal to fight each other, and willingness to fight against their own governments that ended the war.

Today though, virtually nobody on the left takes this line. Nearly all groups claiming to be in the revolutionary tradition agree that it was the right line to take in 1914, but not now. If asked to explain in what way it was different, they have a host of answers to the question. Those who support Ukraine talk of how it is one small country being attacked by a bigger, more powerful one. It's as if they have the idea that before communists can take a position against war, both sides must be exactly equally powerful. Of course this will never happen, so these "communists" will never actually have to oppose any wars. In fact, what happened in 1914 when the huge Austro-Hungarian Empire attacked little Serbia was that Serbian socialists rejected the idea of national defense, and resolutely came out against the war and both sides. This was because they believed that the war couldn't be viewed in isolation, and it had to be seen within the context of imperial rivalry. The defenders of Ukraine today avoid this completely. They are completely blind that this "brave small country" is armed to the teeth by all the Western powers. America alone has supplied Ukraine with more money for arms already than Russia's defense budget for an entire year. This war truly is a conflict between rival imperialisms, America/NATO versus Russia. "NATO socialists" talk with some leftwing veneer whilst all the time supporting the same sort of line as their own government.

Those who support Russia do talk of imperialism. They just refuse to see that Russia is an imperialist state too. Usually they justify this by some talk of finance capital that they clearly don't understand. For them, every state or movement that is opposed to America is somehow

²Those who would like to return to those arguments can see how we approached them here: Konflikt, "The Real End of History is the End of War," 8 April 2022. Accessible here: <https://konflikt.org/en/articles/the-real-end-of-history-is-the-end-of-war/>

"anti-imperialist." They fail to see that imperialism today is a world system that no state can stand apart from. In their view, Russian bombs are good, whereas American ones are bad. The export of Chinese finance capital to Africa somehow takes on a progressive character, as opposed to America's "evil" exploitation of Africa. While certainly in one way it's not quite so repulsive as supporting your own government's policies, it's still calling on the workers of the world to unite behind anti-working class capitalist states. Those who are supporting Russia in this war tend to take up other "anti-imperialist" causes, such as supporting Iran's suppression of anti-government protestors, as they claim they are all organized by the CIA. What both of them have in common though is that when they come across people rejecting the war, they come out with the same line. When people say that workers on both sides should refuse to die to make the rich rich, they reply that it's not realistic. Which brings us to the question of what the term "revolutionary defeatism" means today.

"There is no possibility of revolution today," say those who decry the idea of revolutionary defeatism. "In a perfect world it would be possible, but not today," they bemoan. Leaving aside the fact that if we lived in a perfect world there wouldn't be this terrible war, it seems clear that most of the "left" have abandoned any idea of a revolutionary perspective at all. Any idea of workers' power is put off until some unknown point in the future. It leaves the "left" as little more than cheerleaders in some game of international geopolitics.

Nevertheless, we must realize the reality of the situation. The working class is weak, not just in Russia and Ukraine, but internationally. While we may be seeing an upturn in the class struggle currently, we are still a far cry from the level of class struggle that existed in the period of the late 1960s to early 1980s. Are we completely out of touch with reality to talk of revolution and defeatism today?

We think not. It's not just revolution that could stop the war. Rising class struggle itself could force the belligerents to the negotiating table. If workers in the West refuse to bear the costs of the war, and workers in the warzone refuse to fight and die in it, then the rival imperialists may feel forced to look for an end to the slaughter.

If the so-called revolutionaries are unclear on this, then the ruling class are not. In the UK, the Western country currently suffering most acutely from the crisis, and seeing the highest level of workers' response to it, the governing party is in no doubt on this question. The chairman of the Conservative Party has openly told striking nurses that they shouldn't ask for more money as it helps Putin and damages the war effort. "This is a time to come together and to send a very clear message to Mr. Putin that we're not going to be divided in this way... our message to the unions is to say this is not a time to strike, this is a time to try to negotiate," implored Nadhim Zahawi.³

³Rob Merrick, "Nurses Must Drop Pay Demands to 'Send Clear Message to Putin,' Cabinet Minister Says," *The Independent*, 4 December 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/uk-news/nurses-strikes-inflation-zahawi-putin-b2239291.html>

The subtext is quite obvious. Workers should shut their mouths, and accept below inflation pay rises, essentially pay cuts in order to enable the country to fund death and destruction in the war in the East. Nurses' leaders have been quick to condemn these words. "[It is] a new low [for the government to] use Russia's war in Ukraine as a justification for a real-terms pay cut for nurses in the UK," said Pat Cullen.⁴

We believe that the British government is clearly expressing its class interests here. The crisis and the war has caused massive inflation, and if Western regimes are to finance this war, they need to make the working class pay for it.⁵ Although the strike wave that is slowly spreading across Western countries is based upon economic demands, it ultimately raises deeper questions of whether the working class can be forced to pay for the war.

The American state is also very clear on this with Joe Biden using Congress to impose a settlement to stop a potential rail workers' strike. Even here in Bulgaria, a country which has a low level of class struggle, the state has used its courts to declare workers strikes illegal. One hundred and thirty-six nurses in Dobrich were individually prosecuted in order to discourage discontent in the health system.⁶

The message is crystal clear. Nothing must be allowed to break national unity and the ability of the West to finance its war. The converse is also true. It's not only that workers need large pay rises just to maintain already low living standards, but also that a massive pay revolt could threaten the war effort.

If the class is to build unity in order to fight these struggles, one of the potential obstacles to this is divisions over which side to support in wars. In the West, the relevance of this point may appear moot. But in countries like Bulgaria, where there are historic and cultural ties to Russia (and therefore more sympathy for it), there have been cases of physical fighting in the streets of the capital. Not between Russians and Ukrainians, of whom there are many here, but between Bulgarians themselves. This was on a very low level, but as the war intensifies and drags on it could well get worse. In the wars of the Middle East, it's a much more salient point.

⁴ Rowena Mason, "Tory Chairman's 'NHS Strikes Help Putin' Claim Dismissed as 'Ludicrous,'" *The Guardian*, 4 December 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/dec/04/striking-uk-workers-playing-into-putins-hands-says-zahawi>

⁵ Konflikt, "What Inflation Means to the Workers," 22 January 2022. Read here: <https://konflikt.org/en/articles/what-inflation-means-to-workers-2/>

⁶ Konflikt, "Призив за солидарност," 10 November 2022.

The Syrian war always had the potential to spread across borders. The same ethnic and religious groups exist across all the borders of the region.⁷ The same forces that exist in Syria also exist in Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon. Iraq has been war-torn for years now, Turkey has its near four decade long barbaric war against the Kurds, and Lebanon has seen firefights between the protagonists in the Syrian war. The threat of the war spreading there was very, very real.

For communists the question is unambiguous. It's not possible to build class unity around support for factions in a foreign war when the sides in that ethnosectarian war are built along the very same divides that are pulling the working class apart at home. Taking an internationalist position and arguing against all ethnosectarian factions abroad is an intrinsic part of building class unity at home, and stopping the war from spreading across borders.

This isn't the war to end all wars. War has become a constant. The decline of America and the rise of China will lead to new conflicts. While the working class in America and the West has not been divided along pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian lines, we've seen in the past how war has been used to reinforce divisions in the working class in the endless conflicts in the Middle East, and the bile and hatred thrown at workers from Muslim and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

For us, a refusal to take sides in the war is a basic step towards building the class unity that will be required to build a movement that can, if not overthrow the states involved in the war, then at least force them to stop the slaughter.

Then of course we remember that at the start of the First World War, the revolutionaries were a tiny minority. Yet four years later they stopped the war. This war will continue, and the situation at the front will get worse, and the crisis will cause economic attacks on workers in other countries to increase. We should always remember that "there are weeks when decades happen."⁸

15 December 2022
Sofia, Bulgaria

⁷ Devrim Valerian, "The Bloodbath in Syria: Class War or Ethnic War?" *Libcom*, 28 October 2014. Accessible here: <https://libcom.org/article/blood-bath-syria-class-war-or-ethnic-war-0>

⁸ Apocryphal quoted attributed to Lenin: "There are decades when nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen" [«Есть десятилетия, когда ничего не происходит; и бывают недели, когда происходят десятилетия»].





“Small countries, such as Belgium, would be well-advised to rally to the side of the strong if they wished to retain their independence.”

—Kaiser Wilhelm II to the Belgian king Albert, November 1913¹

“A great war is inevitable in the first decades of the twenty-first century, but will assume a maturing economic crisis, massive overproduction, a strong drop in profitability, an exacerbation of social conflicts and commercial antagonisms, demanding at the same time to re-share the world and regenerate the entire system... No more than in the past, no reformism will stop the march towards conflict, if not planetary, in either case more than regional.”

—*10 + 1 Questions on the War in Kosovo* (1999)²

“Don’t believe the propaganda, they’re lying to you here.”

—Marina Ovsyannikova, interrupting a televised news program on one of Russia’s main news channels³

¹ Marie-Rose Thielemans and Emile Vandewoude, *Le Roi Albert au travers de ses lettres inédites, 1882-1916* (Brussels: Office International de librairie, 1982), 85.

² Troploin, *10 + 1 questions sur la guerre du Kosovo*, (1999-2010).

³ Pjotr Sauer, “‘They’re lying to you’: Russian TV employee interrupts news broadcast,” *Guardian*, 14 March 2022.

PEACE IS WAR

THE MORBID RATIONALITY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE

BY GILLES DAUVÉ
TRANSLATED BY JAKE BELLONE

“War for peace,”⁴ “the cause of the weak against the strong,”⁵ “crimes against humanity perpetrated in the heart of Europe... a battle for civilization,”⁶ “a genocide in progress in Ukraine.”

In the previous sentence, the first citation is a piece from *Droit du peuple*, a socialist journal, and the second from the *Times* of London, a bourgeois paper, both written in 1914. The third comes from the Prime Minister of France during the War in Kosovo in 1999, and the last from the Ukrainian Prime Minister on March 9, 2022.

French media will never talk about the dictatorship in Chad (supported by France) like they do about the Belorussian dictatorship (supported by Russia). No more than they will invoke the millions of civilians killed by the French and American armies in the wars in Indochina and Vietnam in the same way as the massacre of civilians by the Russians in Ukraine.

Nothing new in brainwashing, except that propaganda intensifies when war approaches the heart of Europe. Russia denies it, prohibiting words like “war” and “invasion” (the French state waited until 1999 to officially recognize that between 1945 to 1962 what it had done in Algeria was “war” and not “operations”). The West euphemizes, delivering arms to Ukraine through the intermediary of the “European Peace Facility.”

When words are inflated, their sense breaks. In particular genocide becomes a synonym for massacre when the

word designates the extermination of a people as a people: Hitler did this to the Jews, but Stalin didn’t seek the elimination of the Ukrainian people at the beginning of the 1930s. Nor later did Pol Pot seek that of the Cambodian people, nor Putin now of the Ukrainian people.

Confusion is practical before it is mental. If ideologies are confused, if anyone can lay claim to socialism, to communism, to the proletariat, to “revolution” (the title of a book published by the current President of the French Republic), it is because up till now social movements have not accomplished a program which breaks with the order of things. So in political mythology and in discourse everything is permitted. Socialism having become national in 1914, the Nazis could claim it: the Nazi is the “national socialist.”

It is when we are reduced to passivity by failed or deviated revolutions that we receive information and images as a spectator of reality against which we can provisionally act.

Impossible prediction, theoretical certitude

Who predicted that in 2022 Russia would launch an operation of such a great magnitude against such a large part of the territory of Ukraine?

“We are going straight towards an armed conflict between England and the United States [and] this conflict can be dated with maximum exactitude,” declared [Leon] Trotsky at the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921.⁷

⁷ Léon Trotsky, «La situation économique mondiale: Discours au 3e Congrès de l'Internationale Communiste», *Le Bulletin Communiste*, 23 June 1921. A rough translation appears in Leon Trotsky, “Report on the World Economic Crisis,” translated by John Riddell, *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921* (Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers) 129.

⁴ Cited in Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 112.

⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, 113.

⁶ Michel Noblecourt, «Lionel Jospin évoque le «combat pour la civilisation» dans les Balkans», *Le Monde*, 22 May 1999. Accessible here: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1999/05/22/lionel-jospin-evoque-le-combat-pour-la-civilisation-dans-les-balkans_3552128_1819218.html

A century later, we ignore the fault lines and demarcation of “camps” engaged in future conflicts. But we know that rivalries between great capitalist powers—the US today dominant, China, Russia reborn, the EU up till now incapable of constituting itself as a political entity—builds up the conditions of regional and one day world war.

Everything is done to persuade us that contemporary states give in to violence for motives outside of the deep nature of a supposedly peace-loving capitalist system. In the twenty-first century, if Russia goes to war, the cause is the return of a nationalism fortunately outgrown by the West but revived in the East by a dictatorial power with outrageous ambitions.

In reality competition between capitalist enterprises have never been soft, nor has international commerce been a factor of lasting peace. Contrary to a common opinion before 1914, and taken up by certain socialists like Kautsky, the economic interdependence of great powers has never impeded war. Industrial and mercantile dynamism develops one zone at the expense of another, creates rival poles, each based in a territory and supported by a political state force which is also military.

Peaceful West, bellicose Russia

American capitalism rarely needs to occupy a country—its economic superiority, its higher productivity, its foreign direct investments permitting the US a sufficient control of large parts of the world without sending troops. In Italy or in France after 1945, and in Eastern Europe after 1991, American power relied as much on multinationals as on GIs. Germany and Japan were only occupied as a consequence of the Second World War, and the maintenance of American troops had as its goal do contain rival Russia. The US doesn't hesitate to intervene military on its borders, like in Mexico in 1914, not only to try and install and reestablish political leaders which suit them—they do not need to cross the Rio Grande to promote their investments in maquiladoras.

Although it is a superpower, Russia on the other hand (like the USSR in the past) is based on a capitalist dynamic inferior to that of the US, Western Europe, and China. Most of its strength on the world market comes from gas and petroleum exports. It also tends to seek control over its neighbors to ensure that they remain within its orbit. Not only does it turn its role as large producer of raw materials into an economic and political weapon, like the countries of OPEC. Its military power, for the moment, permits it to vassalize the countries of Central Asia and to play an international role for which few countries have the means. China is incapable, for now. It is not illogical for leaders in Russia in a weak position on the world market to believe they can guarantee the power of the country (and their perpetuation in power) by appealing more directly than their rivals to the force of arms. Especially since, unlike the time when the influence of the USSR was relayed worldwide by Stalinist CPs, the Russia of the twenty-first century does not have the soft power the US enjoys.

But why engage today in a war in Europe?

After 1945 the USSR had an empire, the US half the planet. America launched a new era of expansion, feeling no need to take over the Polish or Chinese market. Russia meanwhile consolidated its capital accumulation without anything to offer Western Europe other than ideology.

The confrontation took place on the periphery (Korea, Indochina, Middle East, Africa) and when it encountered an abyss (Cuban missile crisis, 1962), the US and USSR stepped back. Each superpower recognized the hegemony of its adversary in its particular zone where it acted more or less as it wanted to (Guatemala 1954, Hungary 1956, Berlin Wall 1961, Czechoslovakia 1968, etc.). Numerous crises were mastered without confrontation in Europe, without recourse to arms during the Berlin blockade for example (1948-1949). Two camps were opposed to each other, relatively equal in the sense that each was forced to respect the territory of the other, but very differently socioeconomically.⁸

“Bureaucratic” capitalism had succeeded in promoting industrialization and creating a powerful arms economy, but showed itself incapable of organizing labor and capital in a productive way. The domination of a class collectively owning both capital and the state curbed competition—the motor of capitalism—and ended up creating fiefdoms drawing their power not from a higher industrial and commercial productivity, but privileged links with the state. The crisis of Russian “bureaucratic” capitalism ended by dissolving into a system where the “oligarchs” are only the bearers of monopolies depending totally on political power. Unable to compete in the world market and foreign investment (like China has succeeded in doing), the Russian managerial class's only guarantee the continuity of the priority of military power. Whatever one thinks of GDP, statistics show a hierarchy of scale: in dollars GDP is about \$20 trillion for the US, \$13 trillion for China, \$4 trillion for Germany, and \$1.6 trillion for Russia, being the equivalent of South Korea or Italy. Russia is only a regional (super)power.⁹

After 1989 the superior dynamism of the US and Western Europe ended up peacefully retaking Eastern European space that the USSR had conquered before the war in 1945.

The stability of terror has also been a social stability in each of the two camps: the emergence or resurgence of new competitors (Germany, Japan, China...) came to break this status quo, eventually opening up the possibility of armed conflict in the heart of Europe.

The Soviet giant had at the time no interest in initiating a reconquest of Western Europe: in the twenty-first century the — relative — weakness of Russia creates a risk of war in the entire European region. After the forced

⁸ On third camp internationalists (“groups distinguished by their absolute refusal of support to any imperialist camp”) during this time period, see here: *Fragments d'Histoire de la gauche radicale, (Internationalistes du 3e camp (1940-1952))*.

⁹ See the most recent GDP data from the World Bank: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/Ny.Gdp.Mktp.Cd?most_recent_value_desc=true

secessions of peripheral regions (Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Ossetia) and the occupation of Crimea, the invasion of Ukraine is a new effort by Russia to preserve what it struggles to keep together.

It's frequently the weaker superpower which takes the initiative of the offensive. In the nineteenth century, when England dominated the world, it only attacked "underdeveloped" countries, leading to colonial wars in India and Africa. In the beginning of the twentieth century other imperialisms challenged its hegemony: German economic power had undermined the famous "European stability," and that of Japan threatened Asia. After 1945 everything calms down for a few decades thanks to the Russian-American division of the world (apart from India and equally China). But now the gravity of the European Union weighs on Russia's ex-satellites, and that of China on Asia.

The USSR was imperialist in its area of influence, compensating for its social weakness by protecting itself behind neighboring satellites in order to serve as a buffer between two separate but never watertight blocs—this margin practically no longer exists.

From Korea to Afghanistan, passing by Vietnam and Angola, the US and the USSR never ceased their proxy wars, but this time the periphery is very close.

If the other imperialisms only make war in the Middle East and Africa, NATO is progressively enlarged in the European East, Finland and Sweden are preparing to join the alliance.

In 1998 George Kennan (1904-2005) in 1945 the diplomat and architect of Soviet containment, thought this extension was a little unwise: "We have signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way."¹⁰ Ten years later, a CIA report warned against Ukraine joining NATO; this would be crossing the most dangerous red line in the eyes of not just Putin, but the entire Russian elite, and would encourage Russian interference in Crimea and in the east of Ukraine.

Those who preach moderation forget that "containment" and "pushing back" go together when the US decides it's necessary and possible, like Truman and Eisenhower demonstrated. For more than twenty years NATO at the same time contains and pushes back against Russia. It's normal that a state or alliance takes the opportunity from the retreat of a competitor to advance its pawns. The USSR did the same thing (aborted attempt to create an autonomous Azerbaijani Republic in the north of Iran in 1945, to set up Asia, in Africa...). In 2002, like the USSR armed North Vietnam, NATO leads a proxy war against Russia.¹¹

Whatever it is, Russo-Ukrainian peace will be the continuation of war by other means. At the European level, the question is whether the European Union will limit itself to a zone of free exchange, or if it will give itself a political

¹⁰Thomas Friedman, "Foreign Affairs: Now a Word From X," *New York Times*, 2 May 1998. Accessible here: <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html>

¹¹Tariq Ali, "Before the War," *London Review of Books*, 24 March 2022. Read here: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n06/tariq-ali/before-the-war>

direction around a Franco-German pivot, having a "European" army—a hypothesis less and less probable in view of the present evolution, which reinforces US dominance in NATO. Winning, or not losing, does not have the same meaning at all for Russia (a strong but regional power) and the US, led to refocus its world power against what will soon become its main adversary: China.¹² But we will avoid imitating Trotsky with such adventurous predictions.

Rationality—600 million deaths

However, the Russian invasion was a surprise. In 2014 the weakness of the rebels in the east of the country had pushed Russia to intervene militarily to aid the birth of the "popular republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk. But from there to trying to invade a large part of the country and besiege Kiev...

In 1982, was it "rational" for the UK to send an army to the edge of the world to keep control of some islands [i.e., the Falklands] that had neither economic nor strategic importance?

One could rationally estimate that Hitler had no chance of winning against the Anglo-Russian-American coalition, but he thought it was possible to vanquish the USSR before the US mobilized all its industrial power. War, we know, is the "reign of uncertainty." In 1914 the major states imagined that the war would be over in six months.¹³ When they entered Afghanistan, Russians (1979) then Americans (2001) believed that a massive military intervention would allow it to vanquish an adversary that was considered rather logically as militarily inferior. Through it, the real objective was to consolidate an empire—economically for the US, quasi-colonially for the USSR—against a rival, having a cost initially deemed reasonable. The two imperialisms could reassure themselves by recalling their successful exterior operations: Hungary in 1956, Santo Domingo in 1965.

But the issue is never essentially military. In 1918, the belligerents ended up stopping, less constrained by the stalemate on the ground than by the crumbling of the home front, above all in Germany and Austria-Hungary. On the contrary the Nazi regime was waging a "total" war since it was waged first for the domination of the German people, and if the latter did not show itself equal of the destiny assigned to it by the Nazis, for Hitler Germany deserved to perish. Ordinarily war is not waged to destroy, even less to destroy everything—but Nazi logic accepted the self-destruction of Germany in 1945. War is between two forces, neither of which decides what the other will do, and the reciprocity of actions contains the possibility of their exacerbation. Self-restraint (avoiding destroying what one wants to conquer) finds its own limits. It's one thing to be a murderer, another to kill oneself. Often the one excludes the other, yet Hitler did both: for him, politics was "all or nothing."

¹²Jerry Brown, "Washington's Crackpot Realism," *New York Review of Books*, 24 March 2022. See here: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/03/24/washingtons-crackpot-realism-jerry-brown/>

¹³See Hastings, *op. cit.*, 110-126.



Putin isn't Hitler, of course. But for Putin as well, the limit between a partial objective (to modify a border) and a total objective (force a change of policy, neutralize the country) is easily crossed. Sometimes the political direction of a country pushes it to go to the limit, which it crosses at its own peril.

But what is a war won or lost? And above all, what happens after? One repeats that the US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan ended up in failures, but in Baghdad as in Kabul, it was a matter of the police operations of a large country against a small one. Neither the major interests of the United States, even less their survival, were in the balance. To win is not—at least in Vietnam it was not—necessarily the occupation of the country, but no longer feeling threatened by it. Did the United States lose in Vietnam in 1975, while the country has been for twenty years open to foreign capitalists in search of low wages...

Whatever conclusion the Russo-Ukrainian affair has, in their confrontation with Russia, the United States — and after them the European Union — seek to place themselves in a position of force against China. There were two nuclear superpowers, now there are three. (Four or five, counting India and Pakistan.) If the future employment of atomic arms isn't certain, it would be naïve to exclude it on the grounds that it would have catastrophic effects for

humanity, but also for the masters of the world, attached to their position and privileges.

The only judge of the "vital interests" of a country, and the means they will choose to defend them, is neither humanity nor an abstract reason, nor a definition of sovereignty, it is the leaders who are at the head of state. If he had the atomic bomb, the Nazi Hitler would not have hesitated to use it. The Democrat Truman hesitated (one of the differences between fascism and democracy), and used them twice.

Five years later, faced with the setbacks suffered in Korea, the American president declared that he was considering all possibilities, "which includes all the weapons we have," including nuclear weapons: "we have seriously thought about it."¹⁴ The nuclear threat was reiterated by Nixon against North Vietnam (1969) and by Trump against North Korea (2017).

In the 1960s, estimating the USSR would be incapable of surviving a first atomic strike and to retaliate with significant reprisals, the American General Staff considered an atomic attack against the USSR and China, which would cause around 400 million deaths, plus 100 million in neighboring countries and as many in Western Europe, i.e.

¹⁴Andrew Glass, "Truman Leaves Nuclear Option on the Table in Korean War, 1950," *Politico*, 30 November 2017.

600 million in all. Absurd, one would say: the price would be too heavy... but for whom? Rulers are not mad, nor soldiers bloodthirsty. There is a method to their madness, as Shakespeare would say; a monstrous adversary demands the use of means more terrible than his own.¹⁶

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the United States have updated their plans, as Russia and China have theirs. State rationality is to act according to the interests of the country and the interests of its leaders, which coincide. The objective is to perpetuate itself, not to commit suicide, but disproportionality and excess are part of the equation. In 1914 empires did not act irrationally, nor the Nazis in 1939 or 1941. In Vietnam, Domino Theory had its own rationality. Likewise the “strategy of terror,” where to limit their own destruction (Mutually Assured Destruction, MAD), the United States regularly sought to obtain and maintain a superiority over the USSR, therefore a chance of winning. At the cost of hundreds of millions of deaths, but it is a price that we are ready to pay, because, however horrible it may be, it can be deemed preferable to enslavement by “the enemies of the human race” who would do even worse.

When the nation is incomplete

During the Sino-Japanese war, the nationalist government had the dykes of the Yellow River destroyed to delay the advance of the Japanese troops—objective achieved, and the flood killed 500,000 Chinese. Probably the greatest war crime in all of history, with the particularity of having inflicted by an army on its own population.¹⁷ The day any government seems fit to kill 500 million to save a billion, it will do so without hesitation.

The United States would have about 1,350 nuclear warheads ready for use (including a hundred on bases in Germany, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands), against 1,400 on the Russian side.¹⁸ At this level of “overkill,” the gap between respective overkill abilities loses its meaning.

Whatever one repeats about a globalization that would have absorbed states and borders under the domination of a cosmopolitan financial oligarchy and trans-state multinationals, the planet is not deterritorialized. It remains organized into state entities — without however resembling the American “melting pot,” some function fairly well as national states, others do not, and the countries that dominate the world belong to the first group. The United States, China, Russia, India, are national states, and a hitherto unresolved weakness of the European Union is that it is not a national whole — federal or not.

A state is a political power capable of imposing itself on a territory it controls. What is specific about a national state is to

¹⁶Tom Stevenson, “A Tiny Sun,” *London Review of Books*, 24 February 2022. See here: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n04/tom-stevenson/a-tiny-sun>

¹⁷Rana Mitter, *China's War with Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014), 157-162.

¹⁸Federation of American Scientists, “Status of World Nuclear Weapons.” Available here: <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

bring together components that are often very diverse in terms of language, origin, or religion, thanks to the possibility of a self-centered capitalist development on a territory controlled militarily but also financially... The national presupposes this modern creation, the individual, a being freed from ties of birth and in principle “free” to become bourgeois or proletarian, and it responds to the need to link these individuals into a new community when the preceding ones were dislocated... Beyond individuals, the nation reunites classes... through a fluid circulation of capital as well as labor; a relative equalization between levels of productivity of its regions... On its own the market is not sufficient: the addition of consumers does not create cohesion.¹⁹

Because they weren't limited to exporting raw materials or to welcoming foreign capital but had a competitive industrial force, the United States was able to integrate the territories conquered from Mexico in 1845-1848, which added six new states to the Union. It is the ability to insert itself into the global capitalist system that makes it possible to encompass the entire population by giving it a sense of belonging to “The United States of America,” beyond the criteria of language, birth or religion. From then on the Spanish speaker is not first or essentially “Spanish” (“Hispanic”) or “Latino,” they are American. We are writing the population as a whole, not the totality, and this set has itself fluctuated—“nativism” hostile to new immigrants, limitation of Asian immigration, anti-Jewish quotas in elite universities until the 1950s, and it is better to be white than African American... Despite everything, capitalism promotes a (very relative) equalization, including at the top. Men and women of color have become Secretary of State, Chief of Staff of the military, or President of the United States.

Where such a socioeconomic unification of the country, and therefore a political pacification, is impossible or unfinished, the developmental gaps between regions encourages the political center to ignore them, even to discriminate against them, favoring centrifugal forces which tend to dissociate from a center incapable of mastering them.

Countries born during the nineteenth century from regions successively detached from the Ottoman Empire experienced permanent instability, notably in Greece and Serbia, where in 1903 the royal family was massacred and replaced with a new dynasty.²⁰ These incomplete nations are caught up in the game of powers stronger than themselves, starting with France and England. Not without reversals of alliance Great Britain, fearing that the independence of new Slavic states reinforces Russia—in the Crimean War (1853-1856), yesterday as today peninsula of strategic importance for the Russian navy, France and England ally with Turkey against Russia.

In the East and in the Balkans, “minorities” pose a problem. Engels writes to Bernstein on February 22, 1882: “The Serbs are divided into three denominations... Where these people are concerned, religion actually counts for

¹⁹Tristan Leoni, «La Nation dans tout son état», *Douter de tout... pour tenir l'essentiel*, 2019. See part 1: https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page_id=2158.

²⁰Aleksandar Obrenović and his wife Draga Mašin were assassinated in a coup that installed the rival Petar Petar Karadžević as king;

more than nationality, and it is the aim of each denomination to predominate. So long as there's no cultural advance such as would at any rate make tolerance possible, a Greater Serbia would only spell civil war."²¹ The Austrian annexation in 1909 of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a million Serbs lived, ruled an opposition between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia—an explosive situation from which came the spark of 1914, and which will reappear at the end of the twentieth century.

The “nationalities” movement of old, then struggles for national liberation in the twentieth century, was a historical novelty on a global scale. But the creation of a national whole is only possible where there is relatively homogeneous and coherent capitalist development: otherwise, “religion [or any other criterion of identity—GD] counts for more than nationality.”

Not only do most new states suffer disunity, but as William II remarked in 1913 to the Belgian King, it is often necessary for a small country to take sides. This is a risky game, however.

Generally independence is acquired thanks to a great power, and frequently guaranteed by another—a rival of the first. In 1948 the nascent Israeli state benefitted from Czech arms delivered in agreement with a USSR seeking to weaken English domination in the region. Then Israel turned towards other support. The same with Egypt, which was armed by one camp and then another. With risk of reversal—the Kurds relied on the United States in their fight against Daesh, but what will become of Rojava if Americans give priority to Turkey, the pillar of NATO in the region?²²

The protection of a “small” country by a “big” country is no necessary guarantee of security. In April 2008 NATO announced that it was ready to accept Georgia and Ukraine—in August, Russia attacked Georgia. The “aggressor/aggressee” distinction indicates the place where a conflict breaks out, but not its cause or logic.

There are so many economic, financial, political, and military aspects that determine the internal and external policy of a state—especially if it is located in a geopolitical zone of great importance in interimperialist rivalries, such as Eastern Europe—that it is obliged to sell its “independence,” and thus its territory, economy, and government, to one of the imperialist poles that can best promote its national interests or, at least, protect it from the lusts of enemy countries.²³

What is a “Ukrainian”? What is a “Russian”?

“Our history is different,” says a Ukrainian to explain why they’re destroying statues of Lenin and why at the same time everywhere the portrait of Stepan Bandera flourishes.²⁴ The Bolshevik leader symbolizes dictatorship and

²¹ Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Eduard Bernstein, 22 February 1882,” translated by Peter and Betty Ross, *Collected Works, Volume 46* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1992), 206.

²² Gilles Dauvé & Tristan Lioni, “Rojava: Reality and Rhetoric,” *troploin*, February 2015.

²³ International Communist Party, “In its Confrontation with American and European Imperialisms, Russian Imperialism Launches Its Troops to the Territorial Conquest of Strategic Areas of Ukraine,” 24 February 2022.

²⁴ See Tim Judah, *In Wartime: Stories from Ukraine* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2015), 13-15.

foreign domination. Conversely, whatever his responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews (and many Polish civilians), the militant nationalist would embody the Ukrainian aspiration for freedom. Born in 1909, he represents above all the turns and reversals inherent in any national movement. Alternately allied then opposed to the Germans who imprison him in 1941 because they do not want an independent Ukraine, then fighting alongside them, then briefly against the Soviets, collaborating after 1945 with the German and British secret services who until 1945 will maintain anti-government maquis in Ukraine, Bandera dies in 1959, very likely assassinated by the KGB. First a supporter of ethnic nationalism, he ends up a follower of a certain social democracy. Ideology of circumstance, search for compatible allies... nationalism uses the support it finds and changes it, sometimes successfully, ultimately at its own expense.²⁵

As it exists today, Ukraine is not the only recent state reality in the region. Before 1914 very few thought that there existed a Belorussian people justifying the creation of an independent state, and in Vilnius, capital of present-day Lithuanian, barely a few percent of inhabitants spoke Lithuanian. Transcarpathia, Galicia (ex-Austrian) in the west, Crimea in the south... the components of Ukraine varied over the course of the twentieth century, like what we call Russia today, Ukraine, Poland, Belarus, and Lithuania have experienced shifting borders since 1917.

And yet the countries that emerged from the Russian and Ottoman empires suffer not only from their exterior borders being called into question, but also if not more so from what could be called interior separations.

The capitalist mode of production brings together and unifies populations where the wage relation, circulation of labor and capital, and endogenous development allow it. In countries like France, Great Britain, the United States, different languages and religions coexist. But one language dominates, sometimes two (French and German in Switzerland). Spanish is the mother tongue of 40 million Americans out of 330 million, and they profess a Catholic faith in a majority Protestant country, without ever giving rise to an “ethno-confessionalism,” without this dividing a society characterized by “the versatility of workers... and the free transition from one branch of industry to the next... the constant development of new forms of work... in consequence the progressive division of labor in society as a whole” (unpublished sixth chapter of *Capital*).²⁶

Lacking these conditions, the European states born after 1914-1918 in the interwar period suffer (and despite population transfers continue to suffer) a “problem of national minorities.”

We will not summarize the episodes, after 1918, opposing Bolsheviks, White Russians, Poles, and various other parties and regions of what is today Ukraine, under the influence of the victors of 1914-1918, France in partic-

²⁵ Stephen Dorril, *MI 6: Inside the Covert World of Her Majesty's Secret Service* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 223-248.

²⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* [1867], translated by Ben Fowkes (New York, NY: Penguin, 1976), 1034.

ular. In 1920, with the support of part of the local population, Poland invaded Ukrainian territory hoping to create a buffer-country there to protect it from Russia. It failed but annexed the western regions of the country and a part of Lithuania and Belarus.²⁷

In 1945 the Polish border was moved to the west, causing the displacement of millions of inhabitants: the forced departure of Germans to Germany, and Poles residing in Ukraine, Belarus, and in Lithuania towards a Poland that had just been granted East Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia. One of the objectives is to constitute states having a homogeneous population. "All countries are built on national principles, not on the principle of nationalities," declared [Władysław] Gomułka, the leader of this new Poland, in May 1945.²⁸

Federated with the USSR, the Ukrainian SSR provided one third of the Union's industrial production, but its economy remained too dependent on Russia for a self-centered development promoting social and political cohesion of the country. With the USSR gone, the majority of Ukrainian citizens have a good command of the Russian language and millions of them work and live in Russia. But if, in Donbas, a few million inhabitants call themselves "Russians"—unlike those from Kiev—and if Russia has been able to manipulate a separatist "ethno-nationalism," it's because this region and its population have been only very partially integrated into the rest of Ukraine.

National incompleteness is reflected in political life. The famous Russian "oligarchs" have their equivalent in Ukraine. A "Gas Princess," Yulia Tymoshenko, was the first prime minister, and a "Chocolate King," Petro Poroshenko, president of the republic. Ukrainian parliamentarianism is far from the practices of Western Europe. While Ukraine has an important military industry and an exporting agriculture, monopolies sometimes reinforced by media empires dispute and distribute political-economic power, and it has happened that the State directly appoints an oligarch governor of a region. The Orange Revolution of 2004 did not put an end to it. Nor did Maidan in 2014.

Twenty years ago Emmanuel Todd wrote in *After the Empire* that

Ukraine has enough cultural differences with Russia to allow it to take on its own identity. But without a social dynamic of its own Ukraine can only escape Russian control by being pulled into the orbit of another power. The force of America is too far away and too immaterial to serve as a counterweight to Russia. Europe is a real economic force with Germany at its center, but it is not a military or political force. But if Europe wants to acquire these latter dimensions, it is not in its interest to grasp at Ukraine because it will need Russia as a counterbalance to emancipate itself from American control. Here we can take the measure of America's concrete economic nonexistence in the heart of Central Asia... All that America can do is hold up the illusion of being a financial power by maintaining political and

²⁷ Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920 And "the Miracle on the Vistula"* (London: Pimlico, 2003).

²⁸ Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus 1569-1999* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 187.

ideological control over the IMF and the World Bank—two institutions, we may note in passing, Russia can now do without, thanks to its trade surplus... [The US] was not able to propose a second Marshall Plan, which the countries coming out of communism really needed.²⁹

To win its independence, after 1914-1918, the Ukrainian national movement had successively relied on Germany, on the Entente, that is to say the victors of the war, then in 1920 in Poland. A century later, "Ukraine had long exploited the contradictions between Russia and the West. But in the end, this proved a dangerous game. Ukraine mattered to Russia more than any other country."³⁰

In 2014, Russia attempted to federalize Ukraine to its advantage: but the annexation of Crimea "did not succeed in mobilizing the support of ethnic Russians outside the area directly controlled by the Russian military."³¹ In 2022, the Kremlin hoped to repair this failure by expanding its ambitions beyond Donbas: the error is to have underestimated the national factory—in the adversary.

The popular republics of Luhansk and Donetsk are added as micro-states born under the armed pressure of Russia—Transnistria detached from Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia taken by Georgia.

In ex-Yugoslavia, Belgrade created secessionist entities: in Croatia the Serbian republic of Krajina (today defunct), and in Bosnia-Herzegovina the Republic Srpska is today an integral part of the country but where separatism remains quite lively. Having become independent in 2008 thanks to the action of NATO, Kosovo is still not recognized as a state either by the UN or the European Union.

Even if these "phantom" states owe their existence to war, others seek to emerge under the pressure of an economic and social dynamic which gives them the capacity of autonomy pushing for separation: Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders, and Padania (only the first two have a chance at success). The unheard of global socializing power of capitalism is also a disaggregating force, composing, undoing, and reforming assemblages of populations.

The war in Ukraine will probably end with a compromise recognizing a greater degree of autonomy in Donbas (perhaps increased a bit along the Black Sea), even independence. As for the Ukrainian *Union sacrée*, it will have succeeded in "Ukrainizing" the population.³² "Russian-speaking" included, except in the southeast, proving the lack of viability of a Ukrainian nation as it existed within its borders, traced in 1945 and confirmed in 1991.

1914-2022

In the decades before 1914 Engels was not the only one to consider the possibility of a European war where "our

²⁹ Emmanuel Todd, *After the Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* [2002], translated by C. Jon Delogu (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 162-164.

³⁰ Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 79.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 100-119. See also Judah, *op. cit.*, 156-159.

³² Tritsan Leoni, "Farewell to Life, Farewell to Love... Ukraine, War, and Self-Organization," *Douter de tout... pour tenir l'essentiel*, 8 May 2022. Read here: https://ddt21.noblogs.org/?page_id=3460

party in Germany, temporarily overwhelmed by the tide of chauvinism, would be dispersed, while exactly the same would happen in France.”³³ This conflict “of an extent and violence hitherto unimagined” where millions of men will fight, involving the fall of empires, “universal exhaustion and the creation of the conditions for the ultimate victory of the working class... The war may push us into the background for a while, it may wrest many a conquered base from our hands. But by the end of the tragedy... the victory of the proletariat will either have already been achieved or else inevitable.”³⁴ Despite “a recrudescence of chauvinism in all countries” and “a period of reaction based on the inanition of all the peoples by then bled white,”³⁵ capitalism would therefore be disrupted to the point that its perpetuation becomes impossible.

In the face of militarism, the worker and socialist movement did not remain inactive. As it agitates in the factory and in the street (and in parliament), it attempts to intervene in within the military institution: the CGT sent a small sum (the “sou du soldat”) to its conscripted trade union members to maintain their link with the working class. But parties and trade unions could envision nothing else than a “struggle for peace” that’s supposed to render war impossible: nothing was planned in the event, supposedly improbably, where it comes all the same. Believe it or not the threat of calling for a general strike (peaceful for the moderates, insurrectionary for the radicals) had as little reality as the proclaimed intention to make a revolution... someday.

As well, among most future belligerents, the month which separates the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war against Serbia is marked by numerous massive demonstrations against the threat of war: but their goal is to exert pressure on bourgeois governments, not to act by itself qua proletariat. It was only logical—the vast majority of socialists and trade unionists (and some of the anarchists) behaved as adversaries and working class partners of a bourgeois world. To accept in fact (whatever one thinks or says about it) the essence of society already paves the way to accepting major decisions taken by its leaders—war in particular. In the summer of 1914, the Second International perhaps betrayed its ideology, but not its practice.

Faced with what the proletariat is unable or unwilling to prevent, for Lenin every revolutionary must wish for the defeat of their own country, and to contribute to it as much as possible. In Russia, from the point of view of the working class and toiling masses the “lesser evil” would be the defeat of tsarist monarchy. Lenin thinks future revolts

³³Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Bebel, 22 December 1882,” translated by Peter and Betty Ross, *Collected Works, Volume 46* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1992), 415.

³⁴Friedrich Engels, “Introduction to Sigismund Borkheim’s Pamphlet *In Memory of the German Blood-and-Thunder Patriots, 1806-1807*,” [15 December 1887], translated by Barrie Selman, *Collected Works, Volume 26* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1990), 451.

³⁵Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Paul Lafargue, 25 March 1889,” translated by Peter and Betty Ross, *Collected Works, Volume 48* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 2001), 283.

are possible in the army like in 1905. Unrealistic? No, if one reckons that the capitalist world is in a grave crisis, a crisis provisionally overcome by the *Union Sacrée* but which will inevitably reappear, exacerbated by the pursuit of war. From the usual vision of capitalism as warmonger, Lenin passes to that of capitalism as the cause of war and therefore of revolution.

Once the war began, in the beginning only a small minority could act by basing itself on the conviction expressed by Liebknecht that for everyone, the enemy is in their own country.³⁶ For, in order for “revolutionary defeatism” to become a material force, it was necessary for the stalemate to use up military and patriotic energies, as Engels had already seen the possibility. “It is a manifest fact that the disorganization of armies and a total relaxation of discipline have been both precondition and consequence of all successful revolutions hitherto.”³⁷ “Best of all would be a Russian revolution which, however, can only be expected after severe defeats have been inflicted on the Russian army.”³⁸ The Bolshevik strategy only made sense founded on the reasoned certainty “that the war is creating a revolutionary situation in Europe”³⁹: Lenin called for a split (then considered premature by Rosa Luxemburg) of a vast political movement which failed, certainly, but whose “healthy” parties had to separate in order to (re)create revolutionary parties, taking advantage of the general crisis caused by the war to destroy capitalism.

The situation is not the same a century later, in particular noted by the absence of substantial radical minorities like Lenin was addressing. And opposition to imperialist wars (like in 2003 against war in Iraq, for example) is either simply pacifist or incapable of having an impact on the situation.

Calls for desertion, defeatism, and sabotage of the war from both sides, launches today from numerous groups [*milieux*] are certainly the only viable position from the class point of view. They are commendable and shareable—and certainly more dignified than the unilateral anti-imperialism of those who feel obliged every time to support the “weaker” imperialism. This, at least in principle. But such appeals [*appels*] risk being, at bottom, if not “ideological,” at least completely sterile.⁴⁰

Revolutionary defeatism?

“What use is an internationalist principle if your village is being shelled by a Russian tank? To what extent do workers in Ukraine just have to defend themselves against a military aggression? Could we tell people in the Warsaw

³⁶Karl Liebknecht, “The Main Enemy is at Home!” [May 1915], translated by John Wagner.

³⁷Friedrich Engels, “Letter to Karl Marx, 26 September 1851,” translated by Peter and Betty Ross, *Collected Works, Volume 38* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1982), 469-470.

³⁸Friedrich Engels, “Letter to August Bebel, 13 September 1886,” translated by Peter and Betty Ross, *Collected Works, Volume 46* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1992), 487.

³⁹Vladimir Lenin, “Revolutionary Marxists at the International Socialist Conference” [5 September 1915], translated by Julius Katzer, *Collected Works, Volume 21* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 390.

⁴⁰Lato Cattivo, *Du moins, si l'on veut être matérialiste*, 2 March 2022.



ghetto, in Srebrenica, or in the moment of an ISIS attack not to take up arms, because their arms might be supplied by nationalists or that their resistance falls in line with the interests of one of the big imperialist powers?”, asked a participant at a discussion organized by Angry Workers on March 12, 2022. “I guess we can’t.”⁴¹

(In passing it is abusive to compare Ukrainians forced to find the means to protect themselves against invasion, and the insurgents of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. Back to the wall, lacking practically any exterior support and destined for a certain death, the Jews of the ghetto preferred to die weapons in hand. The Ukrainians in 2022 fortunately have more than this sole option.)

If the question is legitimate, it is valid for the summer of ’14, under the fire of German cannons, to the inhabitants of Belgian villages, where the invader shot thousands of civilians, forcing millions of people to seek refuge in unoccupied regions of France.

⁴¹ One of the participants from Angry Workers, *Fragments of a Debate on the War in Ukraine*, 12 March 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.angry-workers.org/2022/03/10/fragments-of-a-debate-amongst-angryworkers-on-the-war-in-ukraine/>

To answer in the place of Ukrainians would be impossible, and moreover without nearly any practical consequence. To the urgency of the world we have no immediate solution, and communist minorities don’t have the capacity to do more than proletarians themselves in the situation of countries in which they live.

Faced with Russian aggression, a collective resistance was set up, village and neighborhood mutual aid, with aspects of grassroots democracy, creating battalions of volunteers, military and nursing training centers, welcoming refugees, sometimes bypassing (short-circuiting) official hierarchies, with barter, too (exchange of a stock of weapons for a vehicle), without discontinuity between a “civil” material solidarity and the “armed” self-defense of its city and its own life.

A widespread stance among “radical” groups consists in preaching and practicing a form of revolutionary defeatism but only in one of the two camps, in Russia, to weaken its war effort, while supporting or joining a supposedly autonomous resistance inside Ukraine, trying if possible to extend it.

And yet this multiform reaction parallels the military action of the state and completes it. Very few of its participants have for their goal to substitute for it. The hope is that a direct democracy propagates in Ukraine thanks to the self-organization of resistance relies on no concrete fact. The situation being what it is, it is impossible to protect other than by arming the population without relying on the state or in return, whether one wants it or not, giving it support. There is no Ukrainian people fighting alongside the state without being dominated or surrounded by it. On this subject, the reference to the war in Spain is particularly unfortunate. In the summer of '36, those anarchists who accepted the maintenance of a bourgeois government under pretext that it wasn't the true power, which was in the hands of the popular classes leading the anti-Franco war by autonomous organizations, were cruelly denied a year later. May 1937 showed who had power. The Republic repressed the most radical, brought down the workers militias, definitively transformed the insurrectional movement into a frontline war, winning the game against the proletarians before losing it to Franco.⁴²

In 1914 it was not because of chauvinistic warmongering that all the socialist parties accepted national unity, but in the name of the interest of the people (and the proletariat), therefore of its right to defend itself against the invader. In 2022, while admitting in Ukraine that two imperialisms are opposing each other, some recommend supporting a camp (because democracy is under attack) against the (dictatorial and aggressive) other. History stutters.

We are neither pacifist nor nonviolent—the revolutionary uprising of society necessitates a recourse to arms. But an armed struggle, even self-organized, is not sufficient to put into question the foundations of a society. By itself, a movement of partisans, even important in number, contributes to the defeat of the enemy, without as a consequence initiating a revolution. It's not surprising that a priority of a number of our Ukrainian comrades is the departure of the invader,⁴³ but if they're hoping for a profound social transformation, it's doubtful that national unity would be favorable to it—"the people" resemble all Ukrainians, all classes mixed together (excluding only the applicable cases of enemy collaborators), the postwar period will not go against the interests of the owners. At best some reforms will come out of it, certainly not a large direct democracy nor structural changes.

Another thing would be the emergence of groups at the head of the resistance towards a situation of "dual power," ending up in confronting not only the Russian army (itself weakened from within by its failures, even undermined by mutinies, but equally that of a Ukrainian state itself also contested from within. We are not there. There are not in

⁴² See Gilles Dauve, "When Insurrections Die" [1999] translated by Loren Goldner, *Endnotes № 1: Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the Twentieth Century* (October 2008), especially the sections "Barcelona 1936" and "Barcelona 1938," 43-51.

⁴³ See Andrew, "Letters from Ukraine," *Endnotes*, March-April 2022. Part 1: <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/andrew-letters-from-ukraine-part-1>. Part 2: <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/andrew-letters-from-ukraine-part-2>. Part 3: <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/andrew-letters-from-ukraine-part-3>

Ukraine three forces at present: the Russian invader, official army, and as well a popular autonomous resistance that is able to expand. Moreover, insofar as the latter would allow itself to be recruited neither by regular troops nor by territorial defenses, it would not have access to the weapons which decide the fate of combats (for example anti-tank missiles), nor to logistics that have become indispensable (ammunition, fuel, food, evacuation of wounded, etc.) and would only play an auxiliary role. In 1944, the Resistance and the maquis contributed to the German defeat, but France was liberated by the Allied armies.

As with every serious crisis, a war sets in motion the foundations of a society, but it mends fractures as much as it aggravates divisions, and anything can come out of it provided it appears to offer a solution: the Bolshevik Party in Russia in 1917, the fascists in Italy in 1922. The shock of a war does not entail *ipso facto* an antiwar reaction—which is susceptible to taking the most opposing forms, revolutionary, conservative, or reactionary. Exactly one hundred years ago Lenin, who in terms of revolutionary defeatism was speaking from experience, asserted that with regard to the question of "national defense," "working people will inevitably decide it in favor of their bourgeoisie."⁴⁴ The past century has rather proven him right.

Liebknrecht's formula makes the most practical sense in the aggressor country. After 1918, dockworkers in various European countries interrupted arms deliveries to White Russians. On a smaller scale, in 2003, during the war against Iraq, in Great Britain, a mobilization to blockade military bases coincided with the refusal of railway workers to transport equipment for the army. In 2022, Russian anarchists destroyed army recruiting centers, Belarusian railway workers sabotaged railroads ferrying Russian troops and materials to Ukraine, and American, Swedish and British dockworkers opposed the unloading of ships Russians. If these movements could continue, and there is a growing rejection in Russia and among the invading troops of an unpopular war because of the trampling on the ground and the return of too many "zinc coffins," then defections, mutinies, even fraternizations would become possible. As of this date, this is not (yet?) the case.

In 1940, Otto Rühle wrote: "The question confronting us today is whether Liebknrecht's slogan: 'The enemy is at home!' is as valid for the class struggle now as it was in 1914."⁴⁵ To which he replied: "No matter to which side the proletariat offers itself, it will be among the defeated. Therefore it must not side with the democracies, nor with the totalitarians."⁴⁶

13 June 2022
Paris, France

⁴⁴ Vladimir Lenin, "Notes on the Task of Our Delegation at the Hague" [4 December 1922], translated by David Skvirsky, *Collected Works, Volume 2 I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 447.

⁴⁵ Otto Rühle, "Which Side to Take?," *Living Marxism: International Council Correspondence* (Volume V, № 2: Fall 1940), 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

CONTRADICTIONS IN THE GERMAN DISCOURSE AROUND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

IDEOLOGY AND INTEREST, TURNING POINTS,
BEYOND THE LOGIC OF THE STATE

BY KONSTANTIN BETSCHEIDER

When Russia invaded Ukraine, German news outlets were dumbfounded. For years there had been a broad, if not unanimous, consensus that a full-scale war would be out of the question even though Russia was clearly following its own agenda in Ukraine and desired more influence. As late as December 2021, with Russian troops massing at the border, the public broadcast station MDR ran an article entitled “The Russians don’t want war.”¹ It listed all the reasons why the outbreak of major armed conflict was not in the cards. This assessment accurately captured the prevailing wisdom among most German policy experts at the time, which led to considerable confusion when the (allegedly highly improbable) invasion finally unfolded. The immediate reaction was a shock that easily surpassed any major war within the past thirty years. It was difficult to make sense of the situation, even though Germany’s political analysts are highly experienced in rationalizing situations according to the needs of the national agenda. The following article tries to examine this confusion and its impact on Germany’s political landscape that will likely continue to reverberate for many years to come. The first part provides a short characterization of a few general considerations of German foreign policy that are by no means exhaustive, yet necessary to understand what generally shapes considerations of international relations in Germany. Next, the second and third parts, try to show how those considerations were applied to the situation in Ukraine specifically and shaped the German response to the conflict both domestically and abroad. Finally, it looks at the German left, whose disarray in response to the war has all but mirrored the general confusion in Germany.

¹ Interview with Aleksej Makarkin, „Die Russen wollen keinen Krieg“, *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*, 17 December 2022.

From the outset, German policy on Ukraine was situated within another framework than the one prevalent in other wars, as for instance Kosovo, Darfur, or Iraq was in the late nineties to early aughts. The essential difference to those conflicts was that the open conflict with Russia not only threatened a pillar of German energy—namely Russian gas imports—but also put the strategic position of Germany as a *Mittelmacht* [untranslatable, roughly “middle power”] to a test that was at odds with the very structure of this role. This German self-conception alludes to several things at once: It first became popular in the seventies, following Waldemar Besson’s formula of Germany as a middle state between the USSR and the USA that was not only geographically situated in between those two, but also had to act as a political intermediary. Furthermore, the *Mittelmacht* concept terminologically distinguished the rather limited capabilities of the German state from the vastly superior international force of the so-called superpowers.² Lastly, the commitment to serve as a *Mittelmacht* entailed an ostentatious disavowal of pursuing national(ist) interest, or at least of publicly articulating them, which became a tool of German foreign policy in its own right. Deliberately presenting itself as an honest broker became part of the Federal Republic’s political capital and granted it a seat at the negotiating table even if Germany had no proper involvement in the issue at hand. This can be exemplified with the negotiations over Iranian nuclear program. These talks were conducted by the so-called P5+1 group: the “five” being the members of the UN’s security council, the “plus one” being Germany.

² Wilfried von Bredow, „Die Mittelmacht“, in *Die Mitte*, hg. von Bernd Guggenberger und Klaus Hansen (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1992), 162.

Such a strategy enabled Germany to have a say in international matters while the lion's share of the expenses was shouldered by other parties. Maintaining this position made it necessary to pursue its own interest with a putative modesty. In consequence, Germany developed a tendency to realize its aims by expressing approval or disapproval towards the activities of its allies and partners, thus creating the impression that it simply acted out of diplomatic necessity rather than in pursuit of its national agenda.

Understanding this strategy is crucial to get a grasp on Germany's position towards Ukraine that consists of simultaneously acting as a part of NATO while at the same time acting as a permanent obstacle within it. Germany's opposition to Ukraine's membership action plan in 2008 is paradigmatic in this regard.³ When the US administration at the time proposed NATO membership for both Ukraine and Georgia at the alliance's Bucharest summit, France and Germany blocked the corresponding motion. While France at least somewhat coyly and only semi-officially admitted that this was due to Russia's firm opposition to the plan, Germany insisted on stressing that the main reason was Ukraine itself, specifically the corruption in the country: Condoleezza Rice mentions in her memoirs that France was hesitant at first but finally fell in line with Germany's reservations.⁴

In the case of Ukraine, this form of foreign policy is catalyzed by the contradictory material interests that are intertwined with possible positions towards Russia's war. Historically, Germany's reemergence as Europe's economic motor was predicated upon its firm integration with the Western Bloc through NATO and the ensuing ideological commitments as expressed in the so-called "liberal-democratic basic order" [*freiheitlich demokratische Grundordnung*].⁵ The liberal-democratic basic order can be understood as an implicit negation of the socialist East on the one hand and the fascist past on the other: it institutionalized a tendency of Germany's ideological state apparatus to rely on its Western allies that also guaranteed the security of capitalist reproduction in Germany. Until today, Axel Springer Verlag, which also publishes Germany's biggest daily newspaper (BILD), contractually asks its authors to affirm their commitment to maintaining Germany's status as part of the "Western states" [*westliche Staatengemeinschaft*].⁶

Yet, ignoring the warnings of its "Western" allies—notably the two Donalds, Trump and Tusk—Germany has increased the reliance of its material reproduction on Russia. Donald Trump's repeated claims that 70% of German natural gas came from Russia were a typical exaggeration. Yet in the wake of the Russian invasion in February 2022, German politicians were forced to publicly concede that the critics of German energy supply by Russian companies

³ Author not listed, „Die Ukraine wird eines Tages der NATO angehören“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 July 2008.

⁴ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 2011), 667-680.

⁵ Often abbreviated using the acronym fdGO in German, based on a 1952 ruling outlawing an anti-constitutional rightwing extremist party.

⁶ Lars-Broder Keil, „Es gilt das freie Wort“, Verlagswebseite, *Axel Springer* (blog), 29 June 2021.

warning of political blackmail by Russia had been proven right.⁷ This debate, which keeps influencing the reasoning of the German political establishment, emerged in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukraine crisis.

Up until then, the political establishment had managed to portray Gazprom's increasing penetration of the energy market as a pluralization, which was true at least to the extent that the cooperation of the chemical giant BASF with Gazprom in the 1990s broke the pipeline monopoly of Ruhrgas.⁸ In fact, pluralization was complemented by the political argument of rapprochement with Russia, which since the Cold War era had been a means of German *Ostpolitik* under the "change through trade" concept. Given the Kremlin's Ukraine policy in 2014, however, this suddenly turned from a bonus into a malus. Against its own wishes, Germany was predestined to take a leading role in coordinating European activities in response to the unfolding crisis. Not in spite but precisely because of Germany being Russia's most important European trading partner, all eyes were on Berlin, which was left with little choice but to spearhead the very sanctions that would directly affect its own economy in significant ways: in 2015, the German share of the loss in trade volume due to the sanctions regime amounted to almost 40%. This was almost tenfold higher than France, which, in comparison, had to put up with just 4.1%.⁹ The fact that the concessions made by German foreign policy in the context of these sanctions were made much more grudgingly can be seen quite well in the speed with which the rapprochement with Moscow was resumed as soon as the international attention on this issue died down. Whereas in 2017-2018, the debate on Russian influence in the U.S. elections and the Skripal affair acted as spoilers, in 2019, the continued stagnation of the Minsk process no longer prevented Germany from seeking a rapprochement with Russia at the diplomatic level: on the economic level, it had never quite ended anyway as the reliance on Russian gas remained a constant in German planning.¹⁰

It was not until the recognition of the People's Republics in Donetsk and Luhansk on February 22, 2022 that Chancellor Scholz finally decided to put an end to the prestigious, yet controversial Nordstream 2 project—a pipeline that until then had been emblematic of Germany's special approach to Putin's Russia and whose accompanying ideological program had blossomed into something as absurd as the sponsoring of several attractions in Germany's largest amusement park.

⁷ The warning in question has been around since the eighties, when the connection between Western Europe and the Siberian Natural Gas Pipeline became a test for European-American relations. Brandon T. von Kannewurff, "Undermining 'The Deal of the Century': The Siberian Natural Gas Pipeline and the Failure of American Economic Pressure on the Soviet Energy Industry," *James Blair Historical Review* (Volume IX, № 2: 2019).

⁸ Aurélie Bros, Tatiana Mitrova, and Kirsten Westphal, *German-Russian Gas Relations: A Special Relationship in Troubled Waters* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2017), 18ff.

⁹ Hans-Joachim Spanger, "The Perils of Path Dependency: Germany's Russia Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* (Volume LXXII, № 6: July 2020), 1053-1072, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12f.

To summarize: Even if one were to subscribe to a somewhat simplistic understanding of the notion of material interest, Germany's position with regard to the Ukraine crisis was riddled with contradictions from the very outset.

Ideology and interest

It was precisely this contradictoriness—or, if one sticks to Althusser, the overdetermination—of the situation that ensured that no ideological uniformity emerged in the German response to Putin's war of aggression.¹¹ As far as the press apparatus was concerned, the journalist Hasnain Kazim summarized the state of affairs in *ZEIT* weekly on May 30. In an article entitled "Can it be that democracy is doing fine?" Kazim sang the praises of the "debate culture in Germany," alleging one had to attest that its disputes "are largely oriented toward content, despite all their harshness." In defiance of cancel culture and social division, he rejoiced, there was now an open debate on the ways to shape the long-neglected relations with Eastern Europe, the dependence on a totalitarian Chinese state, and the manner in which human rights and freedoms can be defended most efficiently. Offering his concluding verdict on the supposedly open debate culture in Germany, he brought to the fore the whole cynicism of a take such as his: "One could speak of an intellectual spring, if this were not forbidden in view of the catastrophic situation of the people in Ukraine."¹²

In reality, Kazim's argument was rooted in the fact that the sudden outbreak of war set in motion contradictions that up to that point had been in an indissoluble stalemate, and that the bleak technocracy gave way to a mirage of intellectual heroism in which every open letter and every position had a virtual influence on the course of the war. It was precisely the indecisiveness of the war that enabled German realpolitikers to mobilize it as an argument and bargaining chip on issues that were considered difficult to negotiate in Germany: rearmament of the Bundeswehr, the composition of the energy mix, the position of the Federal Republic in international affairs, especially with regard to its willingness or unwillingness openly assume a leadership role (in Europe?), and finally, the question of the Germans' relationship to their state as a whole. Each of these debates could claim to have a factual basis in the structure of the conflict: the crux of the matter remained that they were not designed to end the war in Ukraine.

While public statements, especially by the foreign minister, sometimes went so far as to decree that a "peace of surrender" was unacceptable—a position that went far beyond the line usually peddled by proponents of arms exports, namely that it was the people of Ukraine and not the Germans who had to decide whether they were tired of fighting—material aid to Ukraine fell far short of expectations and even promises. The prelude in this respect had been the delivery of 5,000 steel helmets at the begin-

¹¹ Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination" [1962] translated by Ben Brewster, *For Marx* (New York, NY: Verso, 1969), 87-128.

¹² Hasnain Kazim, „Debattenkultur in Deutschland; Kann es sein, dass es der Demokratie bestens geht?“, *ZEIT*, 30 May 2022.

ning of February, instead of the 100,000 units of protective equipment, including helmets, that Ukraine had hoped for. The alleged "gesture of solidarity" (Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht) drew scorn not only within Germany and, in the runup to the war, raised the question whether German solidarity was little more than a paper tiger.¹³ In concrete terms, German officials were extremely reluctant to provide aid as far as concrete material support was concerned. In addition to heady declarations of solidarity and appeals to perseverance, Germany provided enough aid by absolute numbers to place fourth among international donors (after the USA, the EU, and the UK) but in terms of GDP it was only enough for fourteenth place.¹⁴ Compared to other EU countries, especially the neighboring Baltic states and Poland, Germany's response could therefore have been much more resolute if not for the lack of political will. However, Germany's move to block Russia's expulsion from SWIFT—citing potential economic repercussions—raised early doubts that such will could ever emerge to the same extent as in other Western countries.

In general, the main burdens on the German economy as a result of the Russian attack on Ukraine were less due to the aid to Ukraine rather than because of changes in the relations with Russia, whose most significant influence is its centrality for German energy supply. Consequently, the German government refrained from using the most sensitive economic lever in its policy vis-à-vis Russia: it is not least thanks to its effort that no European gas embargo against Russia came about, as the projected economic consequences with additional costs of up to 1,000 euros per capita seemed too threatening in spring.¹⁵ Not only with regard to the conflict dynamics in Ukraine, but also to its own budget, Berlin's hesitation ultimately brought about the worst of both worlds.

The combination of verbal armament and a willingness to fight "to the last Ukrainian" all while refusing to provide the Zelensky government with the forms of military support it urgently demanded led to a situation in which 1.2 billion euros in aid had flowed into Ukraine by August. However, during the same period Germany compensated the allegedly hostile Russia with 12.5 billion in June for the gas it had supplied since the outbreak of the war.¹⁶ From the beginning, the line was that a Ukrainian "peace of surrender" was to be avoided at all costs, which precluded attempts to undermine Ukraine's ability to defend itself in exchange for de-escalation: at the same time, however, Germany proved incapable of pushing the Russian Federation into a position of weakness in the long term or giving up its own dependencies. Decreeing end to Russian gas

¹³ Christopher F. Schuetze, "Germany Draws Mockery for Promising 5,000 Helmets to Help Ukraine Defend Itself" *New York Times*, 27 January 2022.

¹⁴ Christoph Trebesch, "The Ukraine Support Tracker: Which Countries help Ukraine and How?" (Working paper, Kiel: August 2022).

¹⁵ Rüdiger Bachmann, "What If? The Economic Effects for Germany of a Stop of Energy Imports from Russia," *EconPol Policy Report* (Volume VI, No 36: 7 März 2022).

¹⁶ Anonymous, "Financing Putin's War: Fossil Fuel Imports from Russia in the First 100 Days of the Invasion," *Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air*, 13 June 2022.

imports by 2024 instead of forcing a switch to alternatives as early as this spring not only shored up Russian financial reserves and thus its war chest but it also failed to create incentives to bring about alternative supply options in timely manner, which would have minimized the economic consequences: To some extent, this echoed Germany's approach in the wake of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when it had declared Russian gas to be without any alternative. This time around, Germany maneuvered itself into a situation allowing Putin to take a position of strength vis-à-vis Europe and effectively retaliate against European sanctions. September brought a complete halt to gas deliveries through the Nordstream I pipeline. In the end, the gas embargo came in spite of everything: yet it was Russia pulling the trigger, and not the West.

Irrespective of how one ultimately assesses the German reaction to the Russian aggression, there was one obvious lesson: In the end, it is neither debates, nor declarations or positioning of any kind that proved decisive, but rather the interests of capitalist statehood in a narrowly understood sense. Just as German politics did not count on the fact that even the most sworn-in population would comply with privations forced on them over the winter—even the otherwise resolute Annalena Baerbock declared that gas embargoes were out of the question given the prospect of popular uprisings¹⁷—so too will the lively feuilleton debates not cause significant changes in the concrete policies of the federal government. Nevertheless, debates about the war did not simply go nowhere: instead, the ensuing insecurity led to new dynamics in domestic disputes.

Zeitenwende: Between „Sondervermögen“ and „Gasumlage“

Whereas Germany stuck to the Western consensus as far as possible—ideologically, at least—on the international stage, while still keeping open its channels to the East, a clear change was perceptible with regard to the home front. Perhaps for the first time since 1945, German ideologists considered themselves to be a direct party to a war. Of course, not everyone went as far as *Spiegel* best-selling author Katrin Eigendorf, whose book *Putin's War: Wie die Menschen in der Ukraine für unsere Freiheit kämpfen* [*Putin's War: How the People in Ukraine Are Fighting for Our Freedom*] explicitly linked freedom in Germany to the conflict in Ukraine. However, that the political viability of her position was sound was certainly testified to, not least by the German foreign minister's confession that Ukraine was also defending "our freedom, our order of peace."¹⁸ There was a clear preference early on for an interpretation that conceived of the nation, at least virtually, as being under attack. In the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion, Chancellor Scholz had delivered a speech in which he described February 24, 2022, as a "turning point [Zeiten-

¹⁷ Cf. Faisal Islam, "Germany Rules Out Immediate End to Russian Oil Imports," *BBC*, 20 April 2022.

¹⁸ Quoted in „An Kiew's Seite—,so lange es nötig ist“, *Nachrichtenseite, Tagesschau* (blog), 28 August 2022.

wende] in the history of our continent." He went on to affirm that "we want and will secure our freedom, our democracy, and our prosperity... It shatters the European security order as it has endured for almost half a century since the Helsinki Accords."¹⁹

This rhetoric went far beyond the statements that Foreign Minister [Joschka] Fischer had made in 1999 about the war in Kosovo: although it was recognized as a war with German participation, it was a war in which the Bundeswehr essentially acted as a humanitarian intervention force to mediate an external conflict.²⁰ In other words, at that time it was a question of the Bundeswehr participating in the war, whereas this time the participation of the state of Germany—albeit as an imposed one—was on the agenda: our security order, our freedom and our democracy had been attacked.

This point could not be entirely dismissed: there is an argument to be made that February 24 was also an attack on the Pax Americana, which as of yet remains one of the most decisive components of Germany's security considerations. The attack on Ukraine, which was not formally under NATO's protection but had long since received the US blessing for its membership application and considerable military support since 2014, confronted the German leadership with the inevitable question of whether, going forward, the big brother across the Atlantic would still guarantee peace and security in Europe. In this sense, it was only logical that one of the first consequences of the war resulted in announcing a special fund of 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr, thus bringing the German defense budget at least close to the 2% demanded by NATO.²¹

Thus, the unity government of the SPD, FDP, and Greens would now realize what the nominally left-wing parties of the coalition—i.e., the SPD and Greens—had steadfastly opposed under the aegis of the CDU as late as 2019 and 2022: an increase in the defense budget, for which even the debt ceiling had to be lifted by a two-thirds majority of the Bundestag. While calls by the Left Party [Die Linke] to spend the money on social issues instead had been foreseeable, thirty deputies from the right-wing populist AfD also refrained from voting for the motion, even though at least half of their parliamentary group was in favor of it. In the end, an overwhelming majority of 590 to 80 decided that an increase of its defensive capabilities was in Germany's interest.

The votes of liberals and conservatives in favor of rearmament to defend human rights testify to the fact that the *Zeitenwende* is the confident admission that the European order comes from the barrels of guns and that the Social Democrats and Greens will fall in line with the military needs of this order. The astonishing unity with which the nation's representatives appeared on this issue anticipates a possible resolution of the split that had existed

¹⁹ Bundesregierung, „Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz am 27. Februar 2022“, 27 Februar 2022.

²⁰ Ian Traynor, "Greens Back NATO Amid Uproar," *Guardian*, 13 May 1999.

²¹ Holger Hansen, "German Lawmakers Approve 100 Billion Euro Military Revamp," *Reuters*, 3 June 2022.

in recent years between the left and right wings of capital, described by Nancy Fraser as the opposition between reactionary populism and progressive neoliberalism.²² The fact that Ukraine can serve as a projection surface for two kinds of longings helps: on the one hand, it can rightly claim to be a bastion of civil freedom—especially for people from the LGBTQIAP+ spectrum²³—at least relative to the Russian Federation; on the other hand, its national ethos even appeals to broad swathes of the right.

However, this theoretical potential to bridge divides does not mean that the entire political spectrum has actually rallied behind the official line: after all, projections to the contrary are also to be had with the military adversary. The initial Russian justification of the campaign as an antifascist measure could appeal to paleo-Left sympathies for the legal successor of the Soviet Union. At the same time, rightwingers could approve of a supposed military strike against Jewish corruption and the Globohomo elite. Still, beyond small splinter groups of the “lunatic fringe,” hardly anyone was ever demanded more than an end to the sanctions regime against Russia. The fact that there were voices on both ends of the political spectrum arguing for moderation—contrary to the hegemonic ideology, which called for a tougher stance on Russia—in turn enabled the NATO-sympathetic bloc of ideological state apparatuses to marginalize this position extremist. The fact that similar demands were also made by factions that could qualify as either left radicals or right extremists, including trade unions and East German middle-class companies, did little to soften such an interpretation. But at best this was a topical marginal note in the political section of German newspapers.

The fact both wings of capital converged in this dual strategy, which ideologically favored a tougher approach and but politically and economically sought to curb the harsh measures advocated both west and east of Germany's borders, demonstrated that something about it was entirely in the interests of the German state as the ideal total capitalist. This “something” consisted of the shared conviction that the capitalist order would continue to be the only game in town for the foreseeable future and, moreover, would need ever-increasing means of violence to secure its “peaceful order.” The *Zeitenwende* insinuating that the Pax Americana was no longer a reliable security guarantor, simultaneously implied Germany that it would now have to make greater efforts to support, or rather restore, the status quo (ante): more specifically, that it would have to experiment with the degree to which society could be expected to bear the additional defense burden. Strengthening the Bundeswehr is not just an abstract budget item but rather comes in lockstep with very real additional burdens for private households and industry alike. While it would have been possible to cushion the fallout of both

²² Nancy Fraser, “From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump, and Beyond,” *American Affairs* (Volume 1, № 4: Winter 2017): 46-64.

²³ Except, as Andrew and others note, when it comes to compulsory military service: as part of the current draft eligibility of able-bodied men aged 16-60, transwomen are considered men by the Ukrainian state.

sanctions and embargoes against Russia through a similar pot of funds, it was initially decided instead to pass on the increased energy costs to consumers. The formal reason for doing so was that the increased energy prices were intended to have a control effect on energy-saving opportunities. While the outcome of this program was particularly close to the hearts of the Greens, its methodology coincided with the Liberals' desire to give the market as much regulatory capacity as possible. The Greens were given the opportunity to prove that they would continue to be a reliable partner in individualizing the costs of an energy turnaround at the highest possible level. Robert Habeck's plain rejection of subsidizing the costs of energy-saving shower heads through state aid achieved dubious fame: when asked about a possible energy premium, he first invoked the war against Putin, then presented the individual burdens as an act of solidarity. The statement deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

It always sounds so banal: Energy and Climate Minister Habeck says: Replace the shower head, save 30% on energy. Hahaha, a shower head is supposed to save us from Putin... but if you look at the sum, it adds up to quite a lot. And that times forty million households... so let's say each household manages to save 10% on energy, and that times forty million, then that makes a difference—and that's what I'm betting on. We're not having fun here, it's a serious situation, and if we don't help each other, we won't get through it, and if someone says: I'll only help if I get another fifty euros, then I'd say: „Die kriegst du nicht, Alter“. [Roughly: “You won't get that, dude.”]²⁴

The amazing thing about this quote is not only the casual way in which Habeck rejects the call for subsidies, though media focused on this part, but also the way in which he exhibits his understanding of the measures. The energy minister is outraged about people scoffing at the idea that “a showerhead should save us from Putin.” However, this indignation does not arise from what he might consider a fundamentally false and mocking representation of the energy measures, but from the fact that he believes the effectiveness of even such small gestures is underestimated. By accepting “we have to save ourselves from Putin” as a framing of the crisis, the German situation is put on a par with the one in Ukraine. Energy-saving becomes a war effort. But if changing showerheads is a war effort, then energy consumption is lacking in solidarity, not only with the other beneficiaries of German gas storage facilities, but also with the people in Ukraine. The fifty euros that the minister refers to are roughly the purchase price for one of the showerheads to be changed. The claim that the costs of the energy crisis should not be individualized but should be borne by society is therefore understood as a form of desolidarization: those who act in such a manner need not be treated with respect either. *Die kriegst du nicht, Alter* is the signal that the Greens are prepared to let individuals bear the costs of the energy transition rather than burdening industry and capital with further taxes that could

²⁴ ZDFheute Nachrichten, „Habeck, Flughafen, Chaos, Westbalkan, Ukraine, EU-Gipfel“, 23 July 2022. See here: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/habeck-gas-alarstufe-interview-100.html>



cross-finance such conversions. This also sets the course for future political decisions: as a sensible party that relies on personal responsibility and market signals, it will be able to be a junior partner for all those capitalists who do not overdo it with unecological policies in the coming energy and climate crises. However, mobilizing the logic of war takes up a traditional *topos* of the center-right as follows: the unity and security of the nation requires closing the ranks, being progressive now requires thinking of the national well-being, which is also that of the Ukrainians.

Barely twenty years ago, this idea would have been far outside the Overton window in Germany: the fact that the Bundestag votes unanimously in favor of war credits and the Greens take a public stand against putting additional state programs in place for the energy transition is unprecedented. Nevertheless, these bridges across the political aisle do not, of course, completely level the differences between the two camps: as is typically the case, when it comes to the national question, things are even more psychotic on the right of center. Thus *Focus*, Germany's third-largest weekly magazine, taking a cue from the *Economist*, warned of Putin (belatedly?) implementing the Morgenthau plan, threatening to deindustrialize Germany.²⁵ The model has nevertheless the potential to become paradigmatic: with the help of "progressive" support to ideologically and materially raise the state of capital and to swear the population to sacrifices for the ability to defend itself, it also lays the groundwork for a scenario in which this very state can be taken over again by the right. The conservatives are already waiting in the wings to do just that and are making a name for themselves by hinting at subsidies for the coming winter: and

²⁵ „Putin verwirklicht Morgenthau-Plan und Deutschland droht Deindustrialisierung“, *Focus*, Nr. 11. September 2022. Accessible here: https://www.focus.de/finanzen/analyse-unseres-partnerportals-economist-putin-verwirklicht-morgenthau-plan-und-deutschland-droht-deindustrialisierung_id_149608034.html

while the worst seems to have been averted by toppling the initially planned *Gasumlage* due to the extreme strain it would have put on the industry and the German economy in its totality, the signals have been heard loud and clear. Over and over both Green Party and Social Democrats had made clear that once push comes to shove, all their talk of supporting the economically weak in a shift towards a greener future would be thrown overboard in favor of the industry.

Beyond the logic of the state

That the Western-oriented liberal and bourgeois feuilletons had long since tried to influence the positioning of the German government, against its most shortsighted economic interests, in such a way that it should orient itself more clearly to the West or even surpass it in questions of military aid, and consistently failed in doing so, did not prevent the political left from staging itself as if it depended on its positioning how the fronts in Ukraine ultimately ran. This was exemplified by the departure of a number of authors from the venerable leftwing debate magazine *konkret*, who turned their backs on the journal after it failed in their view to take a clear enough stand against the Russian war.

The critics rightfully objected to the fact that immediately before the Russian invasion, *konkret* had published a polemic about the "NATO aggression against Russia," and that the magazine had stooped to claiming that a Russian campaign would not take place.²⁶ In the past, *konkret* had repeatedly taken positions that appeared relatively close to Russia within the German debate landscape, but this was the last straw. It did not matter for the critics that in the following issues *konkret* undertook a self-critical reap-

²⁶ Numerous authors, „Warum wir nicht mehr für Konkret schreiben“, *kontrastmittel*, 30 June 2022. You can read it here: <https://kontrast-mittel.org/2022/06/30/warum-wir-nicht-mehr-fur-konkret-schreiben/>

praisal of the previous course, since they resented the extensive justifications being given to the past misjudgments, even though those were now prominently juxtaposed with opposing positionings. This ambiguity alone was enough to cause a rift, which was subsequently used in the mainstream German daily press as an example of the radical left finally confessing and beginning to critically reappraise its own Putinism. Conspicuously absent from the debate, however, was a discussion on the merits of such criticism: many of the authors who turned their backs on *konkret* had not published in the magazine for months or even years, so their dissociation could at best be considered a symbolic act. Moreover, the indictment was based on points that, even if the facts were presented in a benevolent manner, could be considered an interested misunderstanding and, understandably, were not infrequently understood as malicious slander. Thus, for example, it was claimed that Kay Sokolowsky was calling to “nonviolently confront” the “state-approved butchers.”²⁷ The offending object referred to a passage in which Sokolowsky had tried to describe the dynamics of the mass media in the context of the conflict. He wrote in this regard in context:

The enemy against whom the regime is pitted must be portrayed as so sinister and dehumanized, so uniquely evil and beastly, that the very thought of confronting him nonviolently appears as insanity and moral depravity. To hew such an enemy image is the mission of the mass media, and they are all the more eager to carry out their task because it is good for circulation.²⁸

Remarkably, the alumni of *konkret* thus invoked in their accusation the very principle that Sokolowsky had warned against. This dynamic is interesting not because it represented a particularly glaring exception, but because it illustrates the rule: across the board, any ambiguity was read as direct partisanship for either of the two warring parties. Thus, not only was the possibility of neutrality—otherwise the common bourgeois fiction in the hermeneutics of conflicts—excluded, but beyond that, solidarity that ran across the front lines became suspect. Exemplary for this is the debate about those undermining the war effort by attempting to evade call-up orders, or rather the widespread failure to do so. Before the end of September 2022, for example, calls for granting Russians asylum were often dismissed on the grounds that there was no mobilization: while there had been a conscription, the official line had been that conscripts could only be deployed to defend Russian territory. Once Russia announced a partial mobilization, however, various media followed the line—often citing Ukrainian voices—that these Russians were not wanted because they had had no problems with the Russian campaign up until now and were only emigrating to save their own skin. Conversely, there was almost no debate about Zelensky’s admission to the *Washington Post* that he had known about the danger of war and had delib-

²⁷ First quotation Sokolowsky; second quotation the ex-*konkret* authors when paraphrasing Sokolowsky.

²⁸ Kay Sokolowsky, „Von den Schmierlappen“, *Abfall aus der Warenwelt*, 2 July 2022.

erately kept silent in order to preserve Ukraine’s ability to defend itself,²⁹ even though it would be fundamentally necessary to enable male flight movements, not least in view of the situation of homosexual Ukrainians. That the voices raising such issues remained almost inaudible—although they were present in the form of refugee organizations in particular—was also due to the fact that the hegemonic structure of the debate was so unmistakably sworn to the logic of war that every statement had to be considered ipso facto pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian. That significant parts of the left also allowed themselves to be coopted into this logic was hardly surprising, given that in the shape of the Greens a formally leftwing party had already been shaping opinion for some time, whose ideological principles, at least since its first government participation under Schröder, had significant intersections with a political style that since the early aughts has frequently been critically described as “human rights imperialism.”³⁰ While he is certainly an exception in his explicitness, the military theorist Carlo Masala, interviewed in October in the leftwing *taz* newspaper, is somewhat paradigmatic of the logic hidden in the rule when he says: “I want a Bundeswehr that is woke in the best sense of the word, defensible and armed to the teeth. I want a militant democracy and I also want an army that reflects the diversity of this society.”³¹

While Masala is de facto isolated, that does not make him irrelevant, given that his approach is shared by German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock. The vision of a feminist foreign policy driven by a “woke Bundeswehr” has considerable appeal, hence the progressive wing of neoliberalism has little difficulty in presenting rearmament as a temporarily progressive interest. Conversely, the part of the left that habitually argues in an anti-American fashion has its back to the wall due to Putin’s attack on Ukraine. and even those who until February had protested that Russia had interest in escalating the situation now declare that the war is to be rejected as a matter of course. It would be naive to take this at face value: even close friends of Putin, such as his social-democratic buddy Gerhard Schröder,³² are all too clearly prepared to concede that the war is a mistake. The fact that even Gazprom’s own, like Schröder, can take this position points to an objective advantage they have despite all their ideological isolation: they do not have to push for institutional restructuring but can retreat to reclaiming the status quo ante with Russia. The exception to this rule is the DKP (German Communist Party), which keeps campaigning aggressively for solidarity with the “people’s republics” in eastern Ukraine and remains

²⁹ Isabelle Khurshudyan, “An Interview with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky,” *Washington Post*, 16 August 2022. Available here: <https://washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/16/zelensky-interview-transcript/>

³⁰ See Uwe-Jens Heuer and Gregor Schirmer, “Human Rights Imperialism,” translated by Anita Mage, *Monthly Review* (Volume XLIX, No. 10), 1 March 1998: <https://monthlyreview.org/1998/03/01/human-rights-imperialism/>

³¹ Jan Feddersen, „Carlo Masala über die Bundeswehr: ‚Ich will eine wehrhafte Demokratie‘“ *Die Tageszeitung*, 16 October 2022. Accessible here: <https://taz.de/Carlo-Masala-ueber-die-Bundeswehr/!5884220/>

³² For more on this see Grigory Yudin’s piece “Another Russia is Possible.”

receptive for Putin's arguments. The party, which is quite small with just under 2,500 members, represents only a fraction even among the classically anti-imperialist forces, but it is able to place its positions in the daily newspaper *junge Welt* with some regularity: in the telling of the party's authors the situation in Ukraine before February amounted to a civil war into which Russia had rightfully intervened.³³

But such an extreme position is not even necessary: Moscow never seems to have expected anything more than a return to the *status quo ante*. The withdrawal of sanctions and the reconstruction of economic relations are what Moscow wants, to the extent that this is at all possible after the pipelines have been blown up. It is only in this sense that "Putinist" positions are actually acceptable within the German left.

The justification for such a restoring the *status quo ante* is not based on openly siding with Putin and his system. Instead, the common theme typically holds that Western support for Ukraine only prolongs the war needlessly and prevents a negotiated settlement. In this regard, public attention in particular focused on open letters by German talk-show intellectuals such as Alice Schwarzer and Richard David Precht, while the intra- and extra-parliamentary left remained relatively quiet.³⁴ However, occasional remarks like those of Sahra Wagenknecht—the extreme right-wing populist fringe of Die Linke—or scattered pro-Russian demonstrations by various local chapters of the same party, however, sufficed to push the claim that there is a left-right Querfront building up alongside Russia. Thus, the public broadcast ZDF asked in July, "Are AfDers and leftists 'Putin-understanders'?"³⁵ while the liberal FAZ conjured up the headline "Leftists and the Ukraine War: Understanding Putin and Capitulating."³⁶ Another public broadcast, BR, in turn offered an explanation of "Why so many leftists stick to Putin" by the author Christian Schiffer. Notably, he used the tagline "Querfront."³⁷ The shadow boxing against a fringe Putinism served not least to conceal a certain political powerlessness: it was neither the left nor the right that prevented a no-fly zone over Ukraine but NATO's strategic considerations, and even if the antiwar movement in Germany grew tenfold, German hesitation regarding arms deliveries for Ukraine could not be greater than it already was in the first place.

³³ Exemplary here is Harald Projanski, "Los von Moskau", *junge Welt*, 19 September 2022. See here: <https://www.jungewelt.de/loginFailed.php?ref=/artikel/434952.geschichte-der-ukraine-los-von-moskau.html>

³⁴ "Deutsche Prominente fordern Waffenstillstand", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 June 2022. Available here: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/ukraine-prominente-um-richard-david-precht-fordern-waffenstillstand-18140197.html>

³⁵ "Sind AfDler und Linke 'Putin-Versteher'?" *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*, 23 July 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/politbarometer2go-afd-linke-putin-100.html>

³⁶ Oliver Georgi, "Linke und der Ukraine-Krieg: Putin verstehen und kapitulieren", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 July 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/linke-und-der-ukraine-krieg-putin-verstehen-und-kapitulieren-18159446.htm>

³⁷ Christian Schiffer, "Querfront: Warum so viele Linke zu Putin halten", *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, 13 May 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/deutschland-welt/warum-so-viele-linke-zu-putin-halten-querfront,T5hBOTf>

The common denominator of the fallacies of both peaceniks and progressive defenders of Western freedom is to regard the state as a neutral executor of public opinion, although the Ukrainian war offers a rare display of the extent to which external circumstances inform the state's possible course of action. Hasnain Kazim's German culture of debate is real—precisely because it is meaningless. Positions are heard and recorded because any position could (potentially?) justify the latest government policy tomorrow. If Nordstream explodes, they did not want gas anyway; if Russia wins on any front, avoiding an escalation involving NATO was always the highest priority; and if Ukraine wins, they would have intended to deliver heavy equipment from the very beginning and had to overcome logistical issues first. Not only is there no lack of voices in Germany that want to have a say in the debate on war participation, but each additional voice in this cacophony only contributes to Germany further pushing its own claims, in particular of being an honest broker alongside the Western alliance. This does not imply quietism, since there is more than enough to be done beyond the logic of the state.

There is already talk that the creation of refugees is in fact an attack on European values and that refugees are still seen as a potential weapon.³⁸ Countering these claims would necessitate the creation of structures, such as grassroots initiatives, proving the empty talk of such insinuations and welcoming both Russians and Ukrainians who have no desire to die for their country—without any lengthy questioning of their exact intentions or suspicion that they are either economic refugees or just trying to save their own skin. For the time being, fighting for freedom of movement and enabling (supporting?) Russian refugees are more sustainable ways to throw a wrench in the works of the war machine than equipping anarchists with a deathwish at the front with old weapons or sending heavy equipment to the warzone indiscriminately. Conversely, the Ukrainian trade unions urgently need the support of Western comrades in a struggle that makes the voices of the working classes of Ukraine speak more clearly than the last deliveries from Rheinmetall and supports peace in Ukraine in the long term more than unwieldy letters to the German government asking whether one could not politely suggest to Ukraine to lay down its arms.³⁹

Proletarian solidarity across borders is necessary and possible: however, it must not delude itself into thinking that it determines the front line or directs the states according to its will if only it finally speaks up. The war will not be ended at the front anyway: it will be ended somewhere else and it will not be won.

6 November 2022
Zürich, Switzerland

³⁸ Isabel Schayani, "Krieg und Migration: Flüchtlinge als Druckmittel—und Waffe?", *tagesschau* (blog), 17 October 2022.

³⁹ "Offener Brief fordert von Scholz Stopp der Waffenlieferungen an die Ukraine", *Berliner Zeitung*, 22 April 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/offener-brief-fordert-von-scholz-stopp-der-waffenlieferungen-an-die-ukraine-li.223704>

ANOTHER RUSSIA IS POSSIBLE

ON THE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF WESTERN LEADERS FOR THE WAR IN UKRAINE

BY GRIGORY YUDIN
TRANSLATED BY ROSS WOLFE
AND ALEX GENDLER

I stand in a comfortable subway car of the Moscow Metro, reading military analysts' prognoses about the course of combat operations on my phone. A stranger comes up to me and, embarrassed, says "thank you."¹ Ever since the war started, this has been happening to me on a regular basis.

I'm a researcher, and my average day is spent at home on the computer. I don't go out into the street that often, and in recent months have begun to do so even less frequently. But since the war started—every day, without exception—strangers have come up to me on the street and on public transportation in order to say "thank you." This occurs wherever I happen to find myself: in Moscow and Vienna, in Yerevan and Berlin. What are they thanking me for? Simply for the fact that I publicly spoke out against the war from the beginning.²

This produces a strange sensation. It's as if you are a member of some sort of invisible order, a vast and silent opposition just waiting for its moment. Suddenly something is revealed to me, something many people are unaware of: that they are not alone. That there are people all around who have kept a sound mind, a sense of compassion and responsibility for their country. Yet they approach me one at a time, utter the word "hope," and then depart, dreary and desperate.

¹ Originally published in Russian. Григорий Юдин, «О моральной ответственности лидеров Запада за войну в Украине», *Межуза*, 1 July 2022. Read it here: <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/01/uvy-delo-ne-v-russkih>. Also translated into German. Grigori Judin, „Ein anderes Russland ist möglich—Der Westen ist so tief in Putins System verstrickt wie die Russen selbst. Diese Einsicht muss den Anfang machen“, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 29 June 2022. Available here: <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/ukraine-der-westen-und-die-russen-sitzen-im-selben-boot-ld.1690885>

² Svetlana Reiter, "An Interview with Grigory Yudin on Protests in Russia," translated by Maya Vinekour, *Meduza*, 2 March 2022. Available here: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/03/02/why-no-mass-protests-in-russia>

The indestructible force

I know the name of this anguish all too well—it's called "atomization."³ When the ties between us are corroded, when it feels stupid and awkward to talk about "dangerous topics" in any company, when the only source of information about our neighbors turns out to be public opinion polls, everyone feels surrounded by a dull, hostile, and embittered mass. You can merge with it and lean on its strength, or you can distance yourself from it and feel an air of superiority and sophistication. If you gather the nerve, you can even resist it. But it's impossible to speak with, much less contradict it. It presses against everything. It surges and threatens. It appears to be an indestructible force, despite the fact it doesn't exist.

Every day I get new messages from foreign journalists, all wanting to know the same thing: how can it be that eighty-some percent of Russians support this war? I hear astonishment and indignation in their question. Before their eyes arises the same old dreadful mass of merciless Russians, who as a single horde want to rob, rape, and kill. I start to type an answer into my phone: "Understand that this is not how it works. If on February 24 Vladimir Putin had announced that, for some important security reasons, he was transferring the territories of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics to Ukraine, his approval rate would be exactly the same..." I shake the stranger's outstretched hand and scan the subway car, reflexively trying to project onto its passengers the question of my journalist, who asks about them from afar.

³ For more on the problem of atomization and the war, see Doxa, "Russia after the Call-Up: An Interview with Grigory Yudin," *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*, 24 October 2022. See here: <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article64441>

I'd like to answer the journalist in such a way that he does not have to explain to his audience: "You see, the Russians are completely different; everything is arranged otherwise for them." Because this is untrue. Because, in order to understand how Russians think, it's enough to figure out how Gerhard Schröder,⁴ François Fillon,⁵ or Karin Kneissl⁶ thinks. None of them appears a bloodthirsty killer. None of them wants the suffering of the Ukrainian people. They simply want to live well and in such a way that they are left alone. They want the war to end as soon as possible so they can get back to "normal life"—the one where you can make decent money and be a respectable person.

Masters of this world

Regretfully, there's nothing particularly sinister about the Russians. Because if this were the case it'd be enough to simply isolate them, fence them off forever and safely shield the planet. Alas, it's not about the Russians. The fact of the matter is that Vladimir Putin has understood all too well how the contemporary world works. He recognized its vulnerabilities, and the levers that need to be pulled in order to manipulate it. The social order he's constructed in Russia is a radical variant of contemporary neoliberal capitalism—where greed reigns, where everything is measured by private wealth, and where cynicism, nihilism, and irony lend one a salutary sense of carefree superiority.

Putin didn't just suddenly emerge from the Siberian forests; he has corrupted financial and political elites for years. His oligarchs have enjoyed unbridled luxury and flattery around the world for so long that they've decided, not without foundation, they are masters of the world. He's so successfully perverted politicians from dozens of countries, including them on his boards of directors and openly sharing blood money with them, that he has every reason to consider them weaklings. Putin offered Russians the very principle that the powerful of this world have learned so well: "If you can't buy something with money, you simply didn't offer enough money."

My foreign correspondents wonder how Russians can be so "brainwashed by propaganda." But I look around and don't see any idiots. Instead, I see lots of people who've thoroughly internalized the main lesson: Don't try to contradict Putin; the world is set up in such a way that he always wins anyway. I look at those who tried to stave off the current catastrophe, who risked their freedom and lives, and saw every time that Putin's money decides everything. That after each crushed uprising Putin comes out of it with new contracts worth billions, his oligarchs get richer still, and his "European friends" get new positions

⁴Chancellor of Germany from 1998 to 2005 and former leader of the Social-Democratic Party. Had close ties with Putin, and is involved with numerous Russian state-owned firms including Nord Stream AG..

⁵Prime Minister of France between 2007 and 2012. Later unsuccessfully ran for President, before being convicted of embezzlement in 2020. Until recently a member of the Board of Directors at the Russian petrochemical company SIBUR Holding (he resigned from the post following the invasion of Ukraine).

⁶Minister of Foreign Affairs in Austria from 2017 to 2019. Putin attended her wedding. She currently blogs for Russia Today.

on new boards of directors. That international tech giants are prepared to make any concessions to earn income on the Russian market—from Google, which is ready to remain silent about physical threats to its top management by Russian special services, to Nokia, which helped Putin construct a total system of surveillance against his opponents. Every time these fearless Russians started over, again and again. They've been waging this war with Putin for a long while, only without antitank missiles⁷ and howitzers. And every time they heard: "No one will help you anyway, Putin has bought everyone." Today many of them have at last come to believe it.

My friends who work for international corporations tell me, one after another, about how their foreign management reacts to the war. Strictly speaking, no one reacts to the war. Not a word is said about it. By contrast, general aggravation is elicited by the notorious "sanctions," which force them to directly limit their revenue on the lucrative Russian market. And if in American and British companies it is necessary to conceal this discontent, so as not to anger their global leadership, then German and especially French firms almost candidly say that they do not understand what they have to do with the war in Ukraine or why they should lose money on account of it.

Where hope can spring

In an interview for *Der Spiegel*, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz explains that Masha Gessen's recent book *The Future is History* influenced his understanding of Russia.⁸ Over the course of several hundred pages, this book advances a single thought: Russia never changes. Its past, present, and future are totalitarianism; any effort to alter this is futile.⁹ Vladimir Putin and his liberal critics have long concurred on this point: Russia can't be changed anyway. Scholz gives me the impression of a man frightened by this Russian peril, the peril of a fearsome horde which is impossible to deal with.

I look around my Moscow subway car again. Heavy stares, fixed on the window or the floor. Russians are famously unsmiling. Hope will not spring here until the world acknowledges that Vladimir Putin and his war are the inevitable result of all global development in recent decades. Not until global business feels a sense of responsibility for the lives of Ukrainians, and not just the dividends of its shareholders. Not until the world realizes we're all riding in this Moscow subway car. Not until Chancellor Scholz believes another Russia is possible.

29 June 2022
Moscow, Russia

⁷Yudin writes NLAW, which stands for "Next generation Light Antitank Weapons," mostly shoulder-fired missiles.

⁸Melanie Amann and Martin Knobbe, "There Cannot Be a Nuclear War": An Interview with Olaf Scholz," *Der Spiegel*, 22 April 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/interview-with-german-chancellor-olaf-scholz-there-cannot-be-a-nuclear-war-a-d9705006-23c9-4ecc-9268-ded40edf90f9>

⁹Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2017).

BEHIND THE FRONTLINES: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW

ON SOME ASPECTS OF THE WAR FOLLOWING THE UKRAINIAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE

BY FRIENDS OF THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY

FRIENDS OF THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY: You took a clear position against going to war on behalf of Ukraine, quite early on. In your “Letters from Ukraine,” you stated:

We should support mass desertions and mutiny on both sides as the only realistic way to stop conscription and break the atomicity of draft evasion. We should counter the image of a successful campaign that Ukraine is constructing: this war is unwinnable, and every minute spent denying it kills more and more people.¹

Following the latest [September 2022] military successes, we are witnessing a further escalation over the last few weeks. Many, including leftists, still hold out hope that the war could be won by Ukraine after all and thus that Putin’s regime will collapse. Do you stick to your social-revolutionary defeatist position? If so, why?

ANDREW: I do indeed stick to my position. And I have reservations regarding this newfound optimism. Two reservations, essentially:

The first is that I don’t think the full-scale invasion represents something completely new, and it is naïve to think that measures adopted recently will just end. Looking at the past eight years in Ukraine, a state of emergency is the rule.² Since 2014 the conflict in the Donbas has been used to silence any sort of dissent, any sort of revolt, any sort of critique of the Ukrainian state. Even among leftists, cost-of-living protests were labeled “pro-Russian.” The refrain was that certain things had to be sacrificed right

now for the bright future of European prosperity. Organizers of and participants in these protests were said to be supporting Russian interests. And these accusations were made by politically-active rightwing nationalists and assorted Nazis, who often worked together orchestrating campaigns of harassment. Just mentioning the existence of Ukrainian Nazis was seen as potentially harmful to the national cause. A lot of anarchists prioritized painting a nice picture of their own state, wanting to speed up accession to the European Union in the hope that things would improve once this eventually happened. So in my view, the invasion in February wasn’t such a break from what was already going on. It merely expanded the pool of people who would label things they didn’t like “pro-Russian” and intensified these earlier dynamics. Personally, I think it would be pretty foolish to believe that after the crackdown on labor rights, the centralization of power would somehow go away once stable political conditions are restored. It’s hard to imagine a world where the Ukrainian government simply gives up the legal framework it has built since the beginning of the war to suppress protest and participation in civil society, where anyone who dissents can be instantly tarred as an agent of Putin or whatever.

The second reservation I have with regard to this optimism has to do with how the war is actually being fought. Now I’m not a military strategist or expert, but even those who are most optimistic about recent developments—people like Zelensky, his generals, various nationalists—don’t really have a single, defined goal of what would count as victory. This is understandable, of course, as it’s impossible to say what it might look like. Do we go back to the pre-February [2022] borders? Russia could continue to

¹Andrew, “Letters from Ukraine,” *Endnotes*, 18 March 2022. Available here: <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/andrew-letters-from-ukraine-part-2>

²Volodymyr Zelensky formally declared a state of emergency on February 24, 2022, but extraordinary conditions have existed since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the civil war in Donetsk and Luhansk that same year.



shell Ukraine from the other side, even from the Belgorod Oblast. Do we reconquer or “liberate” Crimea? This would be very difficult, since there’s a narrow land bridge that connects the peninsula to the continent which has been used for centuries as a kind of natural military fortress. Trying to storm a geographic obstacle such as this, or a city like Mariupol, would involve the sacrifice of tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of soldiers in order to result in any kind of success. Not to mention the civilian casualties. When we talk about these wargame scenarios, we forget that the Ukrainian army is not made up of volunteers. It consists almost entirely of conscripts. An offensive of this sort would require the state to draft more soldiers, to lift the restrictions it’s imposed on conscription. The government refuses to admit how many are dying weekly or monthly in the meatgrinder. Having lived in a country with closed borders, and having barely escaped it, I’ve seen all sorts of people try to get out or otherwise evade the draft. So I’d like to dispel the illusion that there exists a mass willingness to die for the sake of this murky, undefined victory.

FRIENDS OF THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY: As you just said, you’ve now fled Ukraine yourself after witnessing the first months of the invasion. I imagine you still have many contacts there, and so probably have a better overview than we do of what things are like on the ground. What would you say is the mood in Ukraine after more than half a year of conflict? Has there been a shift in recent months? Here in Germany there is always this image of high morale. There are reports that all these thousands of

people are volunteering for military service. Has this enthusiasm diminished since the war began? Moreover, which class segments support the war effort? For what reasons? Are they purely nationalistic? Is the fear of the Russian regime so great? Or is there also a monetary incentive to enlist as a soldier? That is to say, are there people from the poorer segments of Ukrainian society now going to the Donbas region who see their chance to earn a comparatively “good” wage? Or at least an alternative to being unemployed? Lots of lefties here said early on they were going to defend Kyiv or whatnot. Are these people going to the Donbas region now and riding around in tanks? Or is it different segments of the class?

ANDREW: It’s really hard to get a complete picture of this, so I’ll try to focus on just a couple things. The picture is far from the one painted by the Ukrainian, and especially the Western, media. Belligerence has definitely receded over the past few months. There have been no more mass waves of volunteering for the army since roughly March. Generally, the closer you and your family members are to the army the less nationalist you are. Once you see the harassment during the drills, once you see the soldiers’ lack of equipment, once you hear scary stories about the officers and their lack of training, or about crazy orders to take some town in just a few days with barely any weapons and so on, you are unlikely to believe the optimistic stories Zelensky feeds you daily about rapidly retaking “our lost lands”... Yes, as you mentioned, a large number initially volunteered for the territorial defense units, which are essentially local militias. But the excitement has faded among those who



were redirected to the actual frontlines in Donbas, in the south of Ukraine. People who'd been working around Kyiv checking documents, patrolling the streets, standing at checkpoints with little training and minimal weaponry were sent to the frontlines. Maybe some rode tanks, sure, if they were given any tanks at all.

So there is definitely not as much excitement around the war anymore. Exposure to the realities of the war is of course dependent on class. You are much more likely to be conscripted into the army if you don't have the money for a bribe.³ Before the war you could pay maybe a thousand dollars to get yourself off the lists of military conscription officers. Today it's probably much, much more than that. And if you didn't have the money before, then you probably don't have it right now either. If you were a dropout or didn't go to university at all, you'd be more likely to be conscripted as well. Furthermore, if you want to get formal employment documents you're forced to go through the draft offices. So not being willing to go into the army might also keep you on the informal side of the economy; it might keep you in poverty, in other words, with fewer options than you would have otherwise. Another thing that ought to be mentioned is that Ukrainian universities are slightly more popular than Western universities. There are still quite a few leftovers of the Soviet system where education is either cheap or completely free, paid for by the state. But nearly every single university in Ukraine requires that you pass a military preparedness course, so you are basically on the books as having prior experience under arms already.

³After martial law was declared, Ukraine passed a law preventing males aged 18–60 from leaving the country's borders.

Regarding social or class struggle currently in Ukraine, there aren't any particularly visible examples to highlight here, sadly. But there is quite a lot of resistance, which is of course not going to make headlines or be covered in the *New York Times*. Unfortunately, it's almost all isolated. A ton of Ukrainians are individually trying to hide away, unknown, from the military conscription officers, the police, the draft. People try to cross the border using documents of dubious legality. Some pay to get registered as a caretaker for a disabled person, which allows you to leave the country. Others attempt to obtain documents saying they have some sort of illness. Still others apply to foreign universities to get out of Ukraine, a practice which has been made illegal only in the last few weeks. But in terms of collective action, there has been less success. Ever since a state of emergency was proclaimed during the February invasion the police have suppressed almost all protest that's not completely peaceful or in line with the positions of the Ukrainian government. Moreover, they've used conscription notices given out to men on the streets as a tool to suppress demonstrations. If you are a male and show up to a demo you'll simply be handed a notice by a policeman. You are then mandated to show up at the draft office the next day or the next week. Obviously, that limits the number of people who are willing to show up to a street protest. Public demonstrations have therefore mostly been carried out by women lately, primarily as a promotional bid to attract international attention. They've not gathered more than a hundred people or so at a time.⁴ With

⁴Note by Andrew, 13 December 2022: It should be mentioned that since this interview was recorded, the sailors, mostly concentrated in Odessa,

regard to workplace actions, labor rights have been greatly curtailed over the last few months. And it's not like there is a burgeoning workers' movement in Ukraine. There've only been a few strikes, mostly in the few industrial areas left in Ukraine around Lviv or Kryvyi Rih where the miners have declared several walkouts and stoppages. But even these are mostly seen as defending the state against corrupt local oligarchs or officials, so they don't occasion much hope.

FRIENDS OF THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY: Some people claim this conflict is a proxy war. While this is certainly true (at least to some extent) regarding the role of the Western countries, it's not clear that this is the case at all when it comes to the other side. Russia isn't using an intermediary but is sending its own soldiers. Furthermore, there are strong indications that its leaders are driven by a revanchist ideology aiming to "gather the lands" of the old empire. Senior Russian government officials—including Putin himself—have issued statements that declare Ukraine to be an artificial, unnatural entity undeserving of sovereignty or an independent culture. Some publications even call for the "de-Ukrainization" of the country, meaning to eradicate its cultural identity. All of this suggests deeper ideological stakes than can be grasped by the simple proxy war narrative. What is your view of this narrative, and what consequences would you infer from the question of taking sides in the conflict? The view that this is an inter-imperialist conflict implies a strictly neutral position. However, such a position might be seen as cynical. Can we dismiss Ukrainians' right to defend themselves against wanton Russian aggression so easily?

ANDREW: In response to your last question, the accusation of "neutrality"—that one is denying the Ukrainian people their right to self-defense—honestly strikes me as uninterested in meaningful radical politics. Those who typically accuse you of these things prefer to yell empty slogans of solidarity rather than think about what it would take to form a truly emancipatory movement. Such slogans are empty because the power of the ultraleft (and that of the left, too) is nonexistent, especially in Russia and Ukraine. Our task should be to determine what the conditions of liberation might be, and identify those class fractions which have the potential to push into the real world. Questions like: "As a revolutionary defeatist, are you asking that Ukrainians simply walk into certain death?" For me, such questions appear just as stupid and misguided as the retort: "As a communist, are you asking me to give up my job and all the riches of European civilization? Are you asking me to walk into a police line on my own?" With both lines of inquiry,

conducted several protests because the closure of borders has put them out of work. Zelensky has pushed through an amendment allowing them to leave the country in order to work on international ships, but it only works in theory. Protestors report that the system doesn't work in practice at all: they were still required to pay a bribe or were harassed on the border. Once the law was passed and the stories about Zelensky saving the working class were published, however, little attention was devoted to the still unsolved issue, and the protests were once again broken up with conscription notices handed out.

there's the problem of composition underlying them. This issue is unresolved, and can only be resolved historically. But our task as communists is not to dismiss the prospect of communism as silly or utopian; it is to expose the illusory grounds of these accusations.

So to begin with, revolutionary defeatism does not call for Ukrainians to give up their weapons and surrender. Rather, it aims to discern those elements of resistance that could break the genocidal Russian nationalist machine. And elements can indeed be seen among draft evaders and strikers in Ukraine, Russia, and the Donbas. It doesn't really matter whether these antiwar actions are undertaken consciously or not; they still contribute to a sense of dissatisfaction with the prevailing state of affairs. Just as fossil fuels have once again proved necessary for the preservation and distribution of private property—for transportation, logistics, food, heating one's house, etc.—the war machine in Russia and Ukraine feeds on suffering behind the frontlines. The specificities of this war demand that we rethink certain positions and old strategies. Both of the warring nations presently have more police than military forces, or are roughly equal if you count all the policemen in the National Guard not engaged in warfare (the border patrols and so on). There are more of them behind the frontlines ensuring that everybody toes the line of supposedly natural patriotism. Coming up with ways to halt this suffering of endless capital accumulation would entail overpowering and undercutting the police forces, rather than simply fighting them in street skirmishes.

I think this would lead to a ton of questions about the viability of conventional warfare, which is so dependent on financial streams and the fragile flow of fossil fuels and weapons shipments. To me it's difficult to imagine any kind of movement that doesn't try to integrate the different theaters of the war, the frontlines and the home front, in a liberating way. One must combat the illusions that frontlines often breed. Any organization that wants to threaten the status quo in Ukraine would have to come up with ways to expand and defend themselves against the police and various nationalists. If we, as communists, accept the possibility of a social movement arising in Ukraine, we should accept the possibility of a similar movement arising in Russia to disrupt its war machine. Especially now, as draftees are going to constitute a larger part of the Russian army. We should look beyond national borders as well, as I don't think all the potentialities for a movement are contained solely within Ukraine, especially with the country's budget now dependent on monthly tranches and loans. For example, a movement might begin somewhere in the Third World which then influences actions in Europe, Russia, and Ukraine. They could then develop simultaneously, inspiring one another in their revolutionary gestures or forms. And this would finally lead soldiers on the frontlines to give up their arms and fraternize.

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Berlin, Germany*

WAR AS SPECTACLE

IN EVERY BATTLE, THE EYES ARE THE FIRST TO
BE CONQUERED.—TACITUS, GERMANIA

BY RICARDO NORONHA

1

The expression “fog of war” has been thrown around with great ease to describe the difficulty of understanding what is unfolding upon the scorched battlefields of Ukraine. Borrowed from Carl von Clausewitz, the expression (a paraphrase, actually) gestures towards a broader argument concerning the chaos that surrounds military operations: “War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. A sensitive and discriminating judgment is called for; a skilled intelligence to scent out the truth.”¹

Erudite as it may sound, it is very doubtful whether this notion is adequate to describe what has been happening in Ukraine. As any reader of Clausewitz will point out, the uncertainty to which he was referring concerned military officers forced to make decisions based on the more-than-imperfect information they had at their disposal. This was a decisive factor at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, when it was possible to defeat a large army simply by outmaneuvering it, as the French did to the Austrians in the battle of Ulm, surprising them through the speed of their pace and the choice of an unexpected route. Other examples abound throughout military history, from classical antiquity all the way to the Second World War.

Modern warfare, however, with radio communication and satellite images at the disposal of military planners, along with drone and aviation footage, has rendered outmaneuvering of the above-mentioned type rather more

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* [1832], translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 101.

difficult. Ruses are certainly common at a tactical level, just as it is possible to hide movement of troops and material from the enemy, up to a certain point. But largescale maneuvers, capable of deciding upon the outcome of a conflict, can no longer be kept entirely in the dark. As such, while uncertainty still plays an important role, the combination between effective logistics and what is usually called “morale” has become the decisive factor in a war between two well-matched fighting forces. From an inherent feature of the battlefield, the fog of war has become a human-made smokescreen, a floating surface upon which it is possible to project whatever images are required to shape the perception of events and either augment or diminish the resolve of combatants and non-combatants alike.

It comes as little surprise that terms like “psyop,” or its Russian equivalent, *маскировка*, have become ubiquitous in military parlance. “Propaganda,” “disinformation,” and “counterintelligence” are now, for all practical purposes, interchangeable terms, as the goal of maintaining a solid home front, while disrupting that of the enemy, takes precedence over most other considerations. Control over the narrative is part of the broader effort to shape the battlefield, not the least because, as Clausewitz also cared to point out, in addition to being a physical struggle, war is also a mental contest between conflicting wills.

2

None of this is, of course, entirely new. One needs only to recall the propaganda disseminated by the British War Office during the First World War, when countless reports of massacres, atrocities, rapes, and pillages conducted by

the German imperial army were deliberately exaggerated, if not entirely made up, in order to stir the indignation of the public and solidify its belligerent mood.² Demonizing the enemy has long been associated with the conduct of war, not least because it is easier to kill someone deemed to be unhuman. There are, however, specific features of our time that render this practice far more dangerous and problematic than in the past. While these have been the subject of numerous theoretical analyses, it might be useful to point out their role in the context of this war.

For one, the growing screenization of our personal and collective life has rendered images considerably more powerful, and the technical resources required to cut, edit, and manipulate footage of any kind, along with the channels available to diffuse a given “evidence” or an “indisputable fact,” have significantly increased. On the other hand, the distinction between entertainment, opinion and reporting has become more tenuous, forcing us to constantly filter and interpret what is presented as reliable and verified information. In this regard, the nightmarish symphony of deeds producing reports and reports causing deeds has only enhanced its volume since the First World War.

Additional elements contribute to make the boundaries between fiction and reality increasingly volatile. Unedited footage of combat captured by helmet cameras, for example, has become almost indistinguishable from the first-person shooter format of videogames like *Call of Duty*. Indeed, what for a few months were believed to be images of air combat, between a Ukrainian top gun (dubbed the “Ghost of Kyiv”) and numerous Russian fighters, was later revealed to have been taken from the 2013 PC game, *Digital Combat Simulator: World*.³ And the fact that Ukraine’s President, Vladimir Zelensky, was once the main protagonist of a television series in which he played the role of Ukraine’s President only adds to the feeling of having become immersed in a reality show. It would certainly be a far stretch to claim that the war in Ukraine is not taking place, but, as Paul Patton pointed out, something entirely novel has emerged in the last few decades:

Just as it marked a new level of military control over the public representation of combat operations, so the Gulf War displayed a new level of military deployment of simulation technology. Technological simulacra neither displace nor deter the violent reality of war; they have become an integral part of its Operational procedures... The Gulf War thus witnessed the birth of a new kind of military-apparatus which incorporates the power to control the production and circulation of images, as well as the power to direct the actions of bodies and machines. It involved a new kind of event and a new kind of power, which is at once both real and simulacra.⁴

²Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-Time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations During the Great War* (London: Garland Publishing Company, 1928).

³Kate S. Petersen, “Fighter Jet Clip from Video Game, Not Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *USA Today*, 7 March 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2022/03/07/fact-check-viral-clip-video-game-footage-not-ukraine/9392566002/>

⁴Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* [1991], translated by Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4-6.

Since media coverage has become the continuation of war through other means, public opinion was sucked into the battlefield, suffering a perpetual barrage of information, that has only increased with each new military conflict. One must therefore be particularly careful when handling the flow of news that arrives from Ukraine, combining a high degree of skepticism with a fine-grained assessment of whatever information is available. This applies to the civil war that rages in the Donbass since 2014, but also to the Russian occupation of Crimea and later invasion of other parts of Ukraine, as well as to the conduct of both the Russian and the Ukrainian military, along with the role of foreign combatants, far-right organizations, private contractors and NATO officials.

News that a hospital was attacked by artillery,⁵ that a nuclear power plant was bombed,⁶ or that a train station was hit by a missile, certainly tell us all that we need to know about the destructiveness of modern warfare and the unbearable suffering it causes. But identifying those responsible for each of those war crimes is an infinitely more complex task, unless we simply adhere to the notion that one side of the conflict is inherently inhuman and the other is not. The fact that we have been deprived of the instruments that would enable us to understand how this war is being lived and perceived inside Russia, but also in Donetsk and Luhansk, certainly contributes to reinforce that notion. The problem is not so much that the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or *The Guardian* invite their readers to believe that the single decent position to take is to stand with Ukraine against Putin’s aggression. It is rather that, by reducing the war to a struggle between good and evil, they cast a blind eye in the direction of the former, whose eventual abuses against prisoners of war, or “collaborators,” can be dismissed as “Russian propaganda,” without ever taking the trouble of investigating them. The same applies to the missiles that periodically fall on Donetsk, with a heavy toll on its civilian population. This tendency to infantilize the public drastically impoverishes the interpretation of events (namely their causes), as pointed out by Susan Sontag on the wake of 9/11:

The unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy. Those in public office have let us know that they consider their task to be a manipulative one: confidence-building and grief management. Politics, the politics of a democracy—which entails disagreement, which promotes candor—has been replaced by psychotherapy. Let’s by all means grieve together. But let’s not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen.⁷

⁵Katie Polglase, Gianluca Mezzofiore, & Livvy Doherty, “Anatomy of the Mariupol Hospital Attack,” *CNN*, 17 March 2022. See here: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/europe/mariupol-maternity-hospital-attack/index.html>

⁶See Jennifer Rankin in *The Guardian*, 20 November 2022, available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/20/shelling-of-zaporizhzhia-is-playing-with-fire-says-un-nuclear-chief-ukraine>

⁷Susan Sontag, “Tuesday and After,” *The New Yorker*, 24 September 2001. See here: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town>

In short, wars being the messy and chaotic business that they are, we must not forget that we stand at the receiving end of media circuits through which the raw avalanche of events is perpetually siphoned, converting the rugged complexity of reality into a set of simple, plain facts, carefully selected in obedience to a previously written script. Taking the information that arrives from the battlefield with a pinch of salt is the only way to avoid being pulled in by the centrifugal force of the powerful narratives at play.

3

Taking a clearcut position on the conflict becomes even more difficult when we look at the political composition of either side. Rallied to defend Ukrainian national sovereignty, anarchists and social-democrats now stand shoulder to shoulder with a large cohort of NATO-sponsored journalists, neoliberal think tanks, European Union officials, neonazis, and CIA operatives. They face an equally exotic coalition of Russian monarchists, pan-Slavic fascists, Eurasian pagan cultists, Red Army LARPerS, Western Dengists, Third-Worldists, anti-vaxxers, and fundamentalist Orthodox Christians. The fact that people on either side are prone to point out the unsavory character of their antagonists, while at the same time keeping silent about their own strange bedfellows, is quite revealing. While historical analogies have been thrown around in all directions, they are generally of little use, since we have never faced a situation in which a nation-state holding the world's largest nuclear arsenal invaded a nation-state that was backed by other nation-states holding large nuclear arsenals. Likewise, even though both sides can mobilize the memory of past events—be it the great Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933, the Spanish Civil War, the partition of Poland under the Molotov-Von Ribbentrop Pact, the invasion of the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa or the death camps of the SS—to assert the nobility of their cause, such claims remain extremely fragile when subjected to rigorous historical scrutiny. Our time has generated its own type of monstrosities.

What, then, makes this conflict so different from countless others that swarm across the globe and rarely, if ever, are subject to such intense media coverage and public outcry? Why is it so easy to present the invasion of Ukraine by Russia as an existential threat to freedom and democracy on the global stage? Why are we being constantly urged to stand firmly behind the war effort and never, for a minute, question the idea that our security is at stake? How is it that we find ourselves debating whether reading the works of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, or Tolstoy makes us complicit with the invasion of Ukraine?⁸ The answer to all these questions seems to lie somewhere within Russia.

Much has been written about the “political technology” employed by Putin’s master of propaganda, Vladislav

⁸ Mikhail Shishkin, “Don’t Blame Dostoyevsky,” *The Atlantic*, 24 July 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/russian-literature-books-ukraine-war-dostoyevsky-nabokov/670928/>

Surkov,⁹ credited with having transformed Russia into a “postmodernist theater,”¹⁰ where anything seems possible and, therefore, nothing can be entirely true. But it remains extremely doubtful whether the manipulation and disinformation carried out at the behest of the Kremlin is remarkably different from what is common practice around the Western hemisphere. Surkov has, at best, skillfully learned how to handle the old playbook on how to best manage a political regime that must appear to be nominally democratic, while keeping all important decisions away from democratic deliberation, that which Guy Debord called the “integrated spectacle.”¹¹ The same goes for Russia’s geopolitical ambitions, namely the creation of an undisputed sphere of influence, covering most of what used to be the Soviet Union. Cynical as it may be, that is the game usually played by superpowers, as we have recently been reminded by a cynical (or, as the official label goes, “realist”) analyst of international relations. One needs not to sympathize with the logic behind John Mearsheimer’s reasoning to acknowledge the sad truth behind it: in international affairs, might makes right.

Although the evidence piles up that the Russian government behaves much in the same fashion, or according to the same logic, of any other government capable of mobilizing vast resources to accomplish its goals, we are repeatedly invited to look at it as if it were a dangerous outlier, the epitome of evil, when not the living image of Mordor, populated by a horde of orcs under the iron hand of Vladimir Sauron.¹² When we look at the plans laid out by the Ukrainian government to achieve victory in this war,¹³ or at the strikingly unrealistic claims of some on the Ukrainian left,¹⁴ we constantly stumble upon different versions of this children’s tale. While there is little doubt that Putin governs Russia with an iron hand and does not shy away from military aggression to pursue its foreign policy agenda, it is rather more doubtful that he does so without any kind of strategic reasoning or that he is unaware that executing civilians, hitting powerplants and bombing hospitals makes the achievement of his goals infinitely more difficult. As for the breach of international law that this invasion so blatantly constitutes, it can hardly be said that it stands

⁹ Sanshiro Hosaka, “Welcome to Surkov’s Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War,” *Nationalities Papers* (Volume XLVII, № 5: Special Issue on the Donbas Conflict, September 2019), 750-773.

¹⁰ Peter Pomerantsev, “Putin’s Rasputin,” *London Review of Books* (Volume XXXIII, № 20: 20 October 2011). Accessible here: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n20/peter-pomerantsev/putin-s-rasputin>

¹¹ Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* [1988], translated by Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 2010), 8-15.

¹² Damien Leloup, “Ukrainian and Russian Tolkien Fans Battle Over the Legacy of ‘The Lord of the Rings,’” *Le Monde*, 23 April 2022. See here: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2022/04/23/ukrainian-and-russian-tolkien-fans-battle-over-the-legacy-of-the-lord-of-the-rings_5981383_13.html

¹³ Dmytro Kuleba, “How Ukraine Will Win: Kyiv’s Theory of Victory,” *Foreign Affairs*, 17 June 2022. Accessible here: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-06-17/how-ukraine-will-win>

¹⁴ Volodymyr Artiukh & Taras Fedirko, “No, the West Didn’t Halt Ukraine’s Peace Talks With Russia,” *Novara Media*, 17 October 2022. Accessible here: <https://novaramedia.com/2022/10/17/no-the-west-didnt-halt-ukraines-peace-talks-with-russia/>.

PERSON OF THE YEAR

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY & THE SPIRIT OF UKRAINE

TIME



out amidst the chaotic scenario of the now twenty-years-long war on terror. For one to believe that a Russian military defeat would bring us closer to a rules-based international order, it would be necessary to forget all that has happened since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The propensity to depict Russia through a set of Orientalist tropes fulfills an obvious purpose. By portraying it as an evil empire driven by genocidal intentions, rather than a capitalist social formation driven by the pursuit of profit and accumulation, it becomes possible to downplay the complex contradictions that cut across it, depriving us of the ability to understand both the motivations of its ruling class and the practical problems it is faced with. The discussion then becomes inevitably limited to moral and ethical imperatives, by which the collective responsibilities of a phantasmagorical “West” take precedence over any other consideration. That is why the rigorous historical analysis offered by scholars who are familiar with the recent history of both Ukraine and Russia,¹⁵ sound so outlandish when read against the backdrop of the dominant narrative. Bringing into the fore notions such as “the post-Soviet crisis of hegemony” or pointing out that “double standards have become a part of the structure of international politics since 1989,” would probably make people question the merits of sending ever larger amounts of money and advanced weapons to Ukraine. Likewise, going in too deep into the internal structure of power of Putin’s regime or analyzing Russia’s military-industrial complex, would reveal the extent to which it resembles those of its counterparts in the “West.” Nothing is more evident in this regard than the wide abuse to which the term “whataboutism” has been subjected, as if drawing comparisons and keeping in mind the historical record had become synonymous of complicity. Asking any number of obvious questions would, of course, make us pause to think whether the invasion of Ukraine is more criminal than any of those conducted by the Pentagon in the short course of this century. And that is precisely why it has become so important to ensure a relentless flow of unassailable facts that all point in the same direction, depriving us of detail or context, all the better to offer us the moral solace of being on the right side of history.

4

Numerous reports of atrocities committed by Russian military personnel have emerged ever since the war began, to which pro-Russian channels on Telegram (and, one might imagine, Russian media outlets to which we do not have access) have responded by denouncing atrocities committed by Ukrainian military personnel against both civilians in the Donbass region and Russian prisoners of war. Sadly

¹⁵ See Volodymyr Ishchenko, “Towards the Abyss,” *New Left Review* (№ 133-134: January/April 2022). See also Richard Sakwa, “Putin’s Revolt Against Liberal Modernity,” *The Loop*, 13 April 2022. Accessible here: <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/russian-alienation-and-putins-revolt-against-liberal-modernity/>.

executions, rapes, torture, pillage, and wanton destruction are common occurrences in war settings, and the historical record is laden with examples of savagery and inhumane treatment, regardless of the rules of engagement adopted by any given army. The fact that a civil war has been raging since 2014—with militias, volunteers, mercenaries, and regular army units all confronting each other on the battlefield—makes it even more likely that atrocities were indeed committed during this conflict. Old feuds tend to be bitter and bloody.

The challenge, when it comes to the war in Ukraine, is to assert whether the atrocities that have been reported are: 1) a direct consequence of orders handed out by the upper echelons, if not a deliberate strategy to undermine the morale of the opponent; 2) the result of individual actions undertaken in the heat of battle; 3) manifestations of an ideologically driven inclination to ignore the humanity of those on the other side. In short, we are confronted with the difficult task of asserting causality and establishing responsibility for the actions that led to the death of unarmed civilians.

This is a rather delicate exercise that demands a careful handling of the available data and the admission that, even after all of it has been processed, it is still possible that a solid conclusion is beyond our reach. Establishing the truth about what happened in Bucha, for instance, is no easy task. The same goes for the missile that hit the train station at Kramatorsk, killing sixty civilians, or for the bombardment of the nuclear power plant at Zaporizhzhia. Forensic evidence, video and satellite footage, testimonies of witnesses, but also recordings of mobile communication, arms inventories, complex calculations of flight trajectories, are often required in order to establish the who, how and why of many of these killings. This demands the mobilization of vast resources and the conduct of minute investigation by independent parties, which have all been lacking, leaving us with the choice to believe in either one of the belligerent sides.

The difficulty of establishing the truth about such deaths has not prevented the Ukrainian government from speaking of “Russian atrocities” as a matter of fact, nor has it discouraged many of its supporters to smear those who call for additional investigation as “Putinists.” But the stakes in this war are simply too high for anyone to jump into conclusions without very hard facts to support them. This is all the more difficult as there is a well-documented tendency to present the actions of the Russian military as disproportionately destructive when compared with those of their Western counterparts:

Two very timely examples of such biased reporting were the battles for Aleppo in Syria (2012-2016) and for Mosul in Iraq (2016-2017), which were both characterized by extreme brutality on all sides and mass casualties among the civilian populations. A major difference, however, lay in the actors involved in the conflict: in one case, the West was fighting a terrorist group, in the other case, enemies of the West were fighting armed groups, many of which themselves constitute, or are linked to, terrorist groups. The reporting of the two

events varied greatly... The narrative of the “liberation” of Mosul—that came at approximately the same human cost as the “fall” of Aleppo—was widely embraced because the enemy, ISIS, was clearly identifiable as a brutal villain. On the other hand, the “rebels” of Aleppo—who were primarily responsible for the news framing of the battle—had the advantage that they were initially supported by the West and their internal makeup was so complex that many reporters homogenized them into one coherent group fighting a dictator and ignored the very real and influential presence of Islamist and even terrorist elements, an admission that might have thrown some doubt on the neutrality and truth value of their reports. No one would have conceived the idea of letting ISIS frame the battle for Mosul; yet the very same privilege was awarded to al-Nusra and other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Aleppo. Quite clearly, in both Aleppo and Mosul, the media chose to adopt one side of the narrative while flatly dismissing the other.¹⁶

Of course, the main problem with this kind of media coverage is that it provokes an avalanche effect. The more often we are told that Russians are devoid of any kind of ethical or moral standards, the more inclined we are to accept at face value any accusation that is laid at their feet. Is it possible that Russian soldiers are being offered Viagra to ensure they rape as many Ukrainian women as possible?¹⁷ Yes, it is possible. But it also sounds as something taken out of a psyops manual and thrown at a particularly gullible UN official, getting to the frontpage without anyone taking the trouble to check it. As it just so happens, we already heard the same story in 2011, regarding the supporters of Gaddafi in Libya,¹⁸ without ever seeing it confirmed.

Reports of atrocities have long been a catalyst for military intervention, at least since the Cold War ended. The fact that there are still passionate debates surrounding both what happened in Srebrenica and at the Trnopolje camp where the picture of Fikret Alic was taken, testifies to the difficulty of establishing the truth in that regard. But it is clear enough that such news bare consequences, and those consequences almost invariably lead to some kind of “military intervention” (or, if you prefer, “special military operation”) for which detailed plans seem to have long been drafted. Once the word spread that new-born Kuwaiti babies were being taken from incubators by Iraqi soldiers and left to die, or that the Serbians in Bosnia were massing up Muslim civilians to exterminate them, not only did the bombing of Iraq and Serbia appear morally justified, as any other kind of response would have seemed to be unacceptable. And even though it remains very hard to demonstrate that the bombing campaigns carried out by NATO have ever saved any lives, the fact that they caused the death of numerous civilian innocents is more than docu-

¹⁶Johannes Scherling, “A Tale of Two Cities: A Comparative Study of media narratives of the battles for Aleppo and Mosul,” *Media, War & Conflict*, (Volume XIV, No 2: 2021), 192.

¹⁷Philip Wang, Tim Lister, Josh Pennington, and Heather Chen, “Russia Using Rape as ‘Military Strategy’ in Ukraine: UN Envoy,” *CNN*, 15 October 2022.

¹⁸Stephanie Nebehay, “Rape Used as Weapon of War in Libya and Elsewhere: UN,” *Reuters*, 10 June 2011. Available here: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-rape/rape-used-as-weapon-of-war-in-libya-and-elsewhere-u-n-idUSTRE75945020110610>

mented. In fact, as news travelled across the world that more than eight-thousand Muslim men and boys had been executed by Serbian paramilitary in Srebrenica, a massacre of Serbs was being carried out by Croatian forces in Krajina, amidst generalized international silence. Like so many other things, the truth concerning atrocities seems to only take its flight when the shades of night are gathering. It is perhaps appropriate to recall what the head of the United Nations delegation in Bosnia wrote in the preface to a carefully documented book:

Post-mortem studies of events in the former Yugoslavia, including those by the United Nations, have cited the international community’s inability to recognize “evil” as the main reason for its inability to end the wars of the 1990s in the Balkans. If such self-delusion were not so tragic, it would be comic. Wars have never been fought to destroy evil, no matter what religious zealots may assert. Wars have been fought for economic, political, strategic, and social reasons. The wars of the 1990s in the Balkans were no different. It was geopolitics, not original sin, that drove NATO’s ambitions... To pretend that the events in Srebrenica were a microcosm of any sort is to take an oversimplified, fast-food view of history. One isolated event does not explain a process as complicated as war. History is not a collection of sound bites.¹⁹

Ever since nations warred, they have sought to embezzle their actions, making them appear justified by some kind of noble purpose, or, at the very least, an acceptable justification. In his great *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Greek author Thucydides described the attempt of the Athenians to present their hegemony over other city-states as *πρόσχημα* [proschema, literally meaning “screen”]. What separates our time from that of Thucydides is that the manipulation of the collective perception of events has become a highly specialized craft, that some people have become extremely apt at, while others, who have much to gain from the results of said manipulation, dispose of a vast array of instruments to ensure that this goes unnoticed.

In an age in which the superiority of the West is no longer capable of rallying the support of the home front for overseas adventures nor colonial expansion, it is only fitting that a moral argument jumps in, to ensure the public that bombing is carried out to attain peace and destructions is required to make the world safer. For this to work, it is crucial that we pretend to ignore that that actions undertaken with the purported aim of stopping the death of innocent people have ended up causing the death of equally innocent people. That is why recalling what happened to civilians in Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria has been so vehemently labeled as “whataboutism” by those who aspire to promote a regime change in Russia. Such an inconvenient truth needs to be obliterated if the war for freedom and democracy is to proceed. Ask not how it will end but be ready to watch the clocks stop at 1:17.

21 November 2022
Lisbon, Portugal

¹⁹Phillip Corwin, “Foreword” to Edward S. Herman (ed.), *The Srebrenica Massacre. Evidence, Context, Politics* (Chicago: Alfabet soup, 2011), 11.

TWO SHORT TEXTS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

DEATH AND EXTINCTION; NOTHING IS RESOLVED

BY JACQUES CAMATTE
TRANSLATED BY JACOB BELLONE

Death and extinction: Regarding the invasion of Ukraine¹

At the moment of the invasion of Ukraine this was revealed to me: does the dynamic of death mask the prospect of extinction [*le devenir à l'extinction*]? Or does the prospect of extinction precisely condition a rise of killing, of war in its old form (not cyberwarfare), clearly visible and colliding with the struggle for survival? This in fact is posed in all armed conflicts today, and didn't start yesterday.

Which fundamentally poses the importance of the threat from both sides, but especially the Russian side and what follows: the unleashing of hostility [*l'inimitié*]. Ukrainians reacted to the Russian attack by vigorously defending themselves. Though this is logical and amply justified, it was accompanied by an outburst of hatred. Not only on their part, but also from those called Westerners and those who support them. Thus the defense of the Ukrainians and the demonization of the Russians has been the principal preoccupation of the media—masking and occulting the question of Covid-19 (curiously enough, it's suddenly no longer considered dangerous and measures against it will soon be repealed), as well as the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (which highlights the great danger of global warming, and thus the risk of extinction).

The Russians have felt threatened for a long time, particularly since the end of the Soviet Union. It's important to recall that at the time they liquidated the Warsaw Pact and even proposed to join NATO, to once again become allies as they had been in the war against [Nazi] Germany.

¹ Originally published in French as «Mort et Extinction: À propos de l'invasion de l'Ukraine» on Camatte's website *Revue Invariance*. Available here: <https://revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/mortextinction.html>

“Pan-European security is a dream,”² was their response. The reality is hostility; the US needed an enemy. Having an enemy allows one to put up one's guard against a perceived threat, and to give it a certain shape. This has been growing through the present day.³

In fact we should go back further in time to identify the origin of this hostility: the October Revolution of 1917, which engendered a great threat. This appeared to have a real basis for a short period but was maintained, in a mitigated way, even after the end of the revolutionary phase. As was the hostility against the proletariat linked to it, until the end of the last century (the moment of the proletariat's disappearance, when it was replaced by social strata that are dominated and exploited to varying degrees). Today, in a more or less unconscious way, the Russians are reproached for having made the revolution.

² In English in the original.

³ Numerous documents proving the validity of this affirmation are available on the internet.

We should also point out Ukraine's Nazi past which was a threat to the USSR, to present day Russia, but it has also been a force against Nazi Germany. Recall as well: “In effect the crisis which led to the dissolution of the USSR is not a local phenomenon concerning only these countries these countries but global phenomenon: the end of the opposition between labor and capital and the evanescence of the land phenomenon; the full advent of the elimination of the limits to the becoming of capital and the realization of a non-antagonistic, non-dialectical development. More exactly there is dissolution of the conflict in its generalization within the community-society of capital. This deeply shocks the minds of men accustomed to thinking only in terms of conflicts and polarization between two camps. The stage currently reached by capital imposes on men and women having to live without enemies, which undermines all their representations and causes the current disarray which risks being only transitory because the enemies are transformed into competitors, into real capitalist actors. It takes some time to eliminate the old representations” (written in 1991) *Epilogue to the Communist Party Manifesto of 1848*. Available here: <https://revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/epilogue1848.html>

We have repeatedly asserted that the human species is continually trying to conjure a threat. This conjuring takes place at the level of individual nations, whose various conflicts fill the pages of history. Death appears as the means of escaping the threat.⁴ This is an explanation of the Russian intervention in Ukraine, but not a justification. Furthermore, the more one fights against a threat the more one strengthens it, as the case of Russia shows so far and will continue to show into the future.

This dynamic—which provokes war destructive to men, women, and also nature (which is often obscured)—increases the risk of extinction because it exalts hostility, the essential cause of global warming, linked to its destruction. It encounters no obstacle because it is sustained by the autonomization of the capital-form, which was able to impose itself thanks to the disappearance of the proletariat. The dynamic is expressed through the need for constant innovation, inducing the obsolescence of what was produced as well as of non-innovative or insufficiently innovative producers, generating a threat accompanied by the hostility of socioeconomic reality. All of this complements the superfluity of human beings, helping to create conditions of life of which it could be asked: “Is not death more desirable than life that is a mere preventive measure against death?” (Marx).⁵ In fact, even death cannot solve it. For it cannot abolish the encroaching extinction. Humanity can only escape it by abandoning hostility as a mode and principle of life.

10 March 2022

Nothing is resolved⁶

The persistence of hostility, also arising in the neolithic period, appears more and more as a means, as an operator, of life outside nature. A mediation to overcome all discontinuity. Consequently we maintain the risk of extinction and even increase the chance of its actualization.

More concretely, let me give an example of the phenomenon in progress. The war between Russia and the US through the intermediary of Ukraine is the result of a number of unresolved phenomena. It’s an illustration that the more we oppose something, the more we strengthen that which we oppose.

The encirclement of the European part of Russia has increased due to the entry of Eastern European countries into NATO, that is to say into the lap of the US, prolonging what happened in 1945: Europe becoming an American colony, as indicated by Amadeo Bordiga. In 1949, in his article “Aggression Against Europe,” he specified what had happened since 1917 (which had been [America’s] first aggression against Europe):

⁴ Cf. the Francoist slogan: “Long live death!”

⁵ Karl Marx, “Debates on Freedom of the Press” [1842], translated by Clemens Dutt, *Collected Works, Volume 1* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1975), 163.

⁶ Originally published in French under the title «Rien n’est résolu» on Camatte’s website *Revue Invariance*. Available here: <https://revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/rienresolu.html>

This does not take away the right to analyze this [the speculative next war, led by America—J.C.], and to analyze it as the most resounding enterprise of aggression, oppression, and subjugation in all of history. And it’s not just a question of a possible and hypothetical war because it is already happening. This state of affairs is the direct continuation of [America’s] interventions in the European wars of 1917 and 1942, and in fact represents the pinnacle of an immense and destructive concentration of military force. It is the supreme center of domination for the defense of the present class regime, the capitalist regime, and the realization of optimal conditions for strangling the workers’ revolution in any country.

Such a process could develop even without a war in the full sense of the term between the US and Russia. Especially if the allegiance of the latter could be secured not by military means, which would involve a proper campaign of destruction and occupation, but rather thanks to the pressure of the preponderant economic forces of the largest economic organization of the world. Tomorrow, perhaps, it would be the one Anglo-American state we are talking about, secured via a compromise by which the Russian ruling clique is bought at a high price. Stalin already indicated the amount at two billion dollars.

[...]

The living space of the American conquerors is a strip of territory that circles the Earth.⁷

Having become an American colony, Europe loses its culture, its civilization by the intervention the hegemony of Hollywood allowing it to achieve ideological mastery and a dynamic of looking after to dominate.⁸ It was, as many have experienced, “Americanized.”

Thanks to the war in Ukraine, the European colony has grown. In the last part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first Europe tried, through the realization of a political and then an economic union, to emancipate itself from the tutelage of the US. The need to unite against Russia, and to solve the problem of Europe’s supplies of raw materials (which can no longer come from this country, because of the embargo), have reestablished a great dependence [on the US].

Additionally, the EU must be weakened again because countries with different economic developments have entered into it. This entails the necessity of another mediation, which can only be American.

The desire of the US to enlarge its colony is in line with the dynamic of reigning and looking after. In fact, to ensure its domination of the colonized population, any conceptions incompatible with American democracy must be taken care of. In other words, it’s still the dynamic of “it’s for your own good” which operates and represses. But this basically implies an economic power which is in fact powerfully eroded due to lack of energy resources that the intervention in Ukraine aimed to overcome and therefore nothing is resolved.

What is Russia playing at? The effective non-establishment of the capitalist mode of production. Remember

⁷ Amadeo Bordiga, “Aggressione all’Europa,” *Prometeo* № 13, 1949. Available at the following link: https://www.quinterna.org/archivio/1945_1951/aggressione_europa.htm

⁸ See the Blum-Byrnes agreements on cinema.



that Marx and the populists⁹ had insisted on the necessity not of a development of capitalism in Russia but of a leap over it thanks to a grafting of the technical achievements of the West onto the *Obshchina* which was not applied by the Bolsheviks who, to facilitate the development of capital, advocated the destruction of these communities causing a great disaster with the inability to produce enough wheat to feed the population. The same economic politics was applied in Ukraine provoking a vast uprising of Makhno supporters wishing to save the communities. They had to fight against the Whites—the tsarists, supporters of the old order—and against the Reds, the Bolsheviks. As much for the Russians as for the Ukrainians, then, the failure of the revolution and above all the non-realization of what Marx and the populists had advocated is the cause of the evils they have suffered, and suffer still.

So the failure of the revolution was not accompanied by the development of capitalism and democracy. Of all the proponents of the theory of state capitalism in characterizing the situation in Russia at the end of the 1950s, Bordiga also opposed—both in *Property and Capital* and *The Economic and Social Structure of Russia Today*—the [standard] explanation of the development of gangs, rackets, and mafias (as we say today) dominating the state. These kinds of despotic communities, avatars of the old order, have their existence guaranteed by the central power as has been the case historically with the tsars with regard to the latter.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russians could not achieve full capitalism and democracy as

⁹ I.e., the *narodniki*.

demanding by Gorbachev because of the refusal of the Americans. Meanwhile, the threat of the encirclement of Russia only grew. This leads us to the current situation, that is to say the Russia-US conflict through the intermediary of Ukraine. What is most serious, dangerous in this situation is the destruction of nature and the increase in the risk of extinction. Indeed, to work around [*pailler*] the US sanctions depriving Europe of Russian gas, Europeans resort to oil and gas extracted from shale oil in the US which is a disaster for nature without counting the pollution generated by their trans-oceanic transport. In addition, this leads to an increase in extraction in various countries like Venezuela or Israel, accelerating the tendency towards the depletion of energy resources.

In terms of geopolitical rivalries we see that ultimately the struggle led by each side reinforces the other. Thus the pressure exercised by the US on Russia has led the leaders of this country to impose the ruble during monetary transactions, a ruble guaranteed by gold or natural resources, which leads to the de-dollarization of the world economy. This is also reinforced by other causes. We are thereby moving towards the construction of another world order more compatible the autonomization of the capital-form (particularly desired by China) and nothing will be resolved.¹⁰

23 July 2022

¹⁰ This is attested by numerous documents accessible to any reader, as well as all the economic data that we have reported. We only insist on their significance in order to affirm that nothing is resolved.

NEXT ISSUE

COMING SOON

INSURGENT NOTES