

Ukraine's Horror and Beyond: The New Imperialist Struggle

Saturday 26 March 2022, by [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2022).

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On the night of September 11, 2001 I anxiously called a friend and comrade who, at the time, was a flight attendant working out of Boston's Logan Airport. I wanted of course to make sure he was okay, to find out what was going on, and what might happen next.

The comrade responded with the best, most concise Marxist analysis of the U.S. and global situation: "It's a whole new world of shit."

We know the horrors that followed (and if you need a reminder or refresher, look at Spencer Ackerman's stunning new book *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump*).

Right now feels something like 9/11 and its nightmare aftermath, only maybe much worse. The carnage from Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a barbarism which hasn't yet reached anywhere its full depths.

Beyond that, it looks like the beginning of a new global struggle, "at a time when the states, with their swollen military apparatus as a consequence of imperialist rivalry, had become monstrous military beasts devouring the lives of millions of people, in order to decide whether...this or that finance capital — should rule the world." (Lenin, *The State and Revolution*)

This obviously isn't 1917, when Lenin wrote of the rival "finance capitals" of France and Germany. Today the main antagonists are the United States and China, with their respective partners, and the Russian state which, when its present disastrous war grinds to an end, will have fallen from third to a ruined fifth-rate imperial status.

Before we get there, we need to see the full present unfolding horror as it really is. To be sure, the lives of Ukrainians killed or fleeing as refugees are worth no less, and no more, than those of so many others in Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia, the Middle East and North Africa, and elsewhere. In Ukraine as in these other cases, we see the destruction of countries and their peoples in real time. What stands out are the global implications that we're only beginning to think about.

Without repeating many points in Solidarity's position on the war [[1](#)], we on the socialist and anti-imperialist left have to begin by grasping two central points simultaneously.

1. For the U.S. public, it's essential to explain how NATO's expansion to Eastern Europe after the Soviet Union dissolved was a continuing provocation, driven by U.S. imperial triumphal ideology — the "rules-based international order" meaning that "we make the rules and we give the orders."

Intelligent observers including none other than George Kennan, the architect of western Cold War “containment” of the Soviet Union, warned back in the 1990s that nothing good would come of it. William Burns, who’s the CIA director today, also knew it when he served as a top U.S. diplomat in Russia.

2. For the left, it’s critical to understand that Ukraine is fighting a fully legitimate war of national defense. Russian President-for-life Putin’s invasion of Ukraine now is based on monstrous lies. Ukraine was NOT about to join NATO now or in the foreseeable future — that would have split the western alliance, and Germany wouldn’t have allowed it. Russian-speaking Ukrainians are NOT facing some “genocide.” In fact, the most Russian-speaking areas are precisely the eastern Ukrainian cities that Russia is destroying. This invasion is the product of Putin’s hatred of Ukraine’s independence and its people’s refusal to accept Russian domination.

Failing to recognize the first point means falling for the imperialist trap with its hypocrisy-drenched narrative of “defending liberal values and democracy.” But for the left, calling Russia’s invasion a “defensive” action amounts to social-patriotism (“socialism in words, chauvinism in deeds”) for Putin.

A little more background is helpful. Especially after 2008, the United States and NATO did a great disservice to Ukraine by indicating that NATO’s “open door” would someday extend to membership for Ukraine (and Georgia). This could never happen — no Russian government, not just Putin’s mafia-capitalist regime, could accept such a large and crucially important country on its border joining a hostile military alliance.

Furthermore, the West’s encouragement of “shock therapy” privatization — implemented according to the dominant ideology of the early 1990s, with horrific results everywhere including the post-Soviet states — put those countries’ assets on fire sale and facilitated the rise of the oligarchs and spectacular corruption that have dominated Russia’s capitalism until today (and Ukraine’s too).

None of this, nor the vicious eight-year conflict in eastern Ukraine following Russian annexation of Crimea and the fake Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” explain why Putin, just now, launched this criminal annexationist invasion — and catastrophic blunder, a war that Russian can’t “win” no matter how much destruction and death it brings to Ukraine’s population centers, and which will leave Russia itself so much poorer and weaker.

We also need to acknowledge that in the world at this moment, there is one antiwar movement worthy of the name — thousands of people in Russian cities, coming out on the streets and suffering police-state violence, to oppose the invasion of Ukraine.

So why did this happen, and where is it going?

Evidently Putin believed his own fantasies that Ukraine “isn’t a real country” and Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” and that Ukraine, at least the eastern half, would be quickly overcome. Apparently he also saw (i) the Biden administration failing and demoralized by the Afghanistan disaster, (ii) U.S. politics fractured after the January 6, 2021 riot and the failure of Biden’s legislative agenda, (iii) NATO divided and weak, and (iv) the highest-rated U.S. TV anchor, Tucker Carlson on Fox News, openly sympathetic to Russia, along with the white Christian nationalist sector of the Republican Party.

Putin had also successfully annexed Crimea in 2014, prevented the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian regime and most recently intervened in Belarus and Kazakhstan, effectively making those

governments into Russian dependencies.

All this seems to have produced a fatal miscalculation. We can't know whether Russia's generals warned Putin that they were walking into a trap. Maybe that information will come out sometime later. Even if Russia eventually manages to level and conquer much of Ukraine, Russia is already a big loser.

We also know that like it or not, the big winner already is NATO. There had been talk of "neutrality" for Ukraine, even if Ukrainians hadn't necessarily been asked for their opinion. Instead of the suggested "Finlandization" of Ukraine, today we'll see the "NATO-ization" of Finland — which may or may not formally join, but is already in closer collaboration. And that's true of Sweden too. This is not a good thing — in fact, it plants the seeds of future disasters — but it's increasingly popular in both of those places, whatever we may think.

Military budgets throughout NATO will reach and exceed the two-percent of GDP target that the alliance had posited, but not achieved. Putin's war has also done what George W Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump couldn't accomplish. It has restored "American leadership" of the Western imperialist camp.

Horrors of War and Beyond

This can't obscure the reality of what Ukraine's people are enduring. No decent socialist can deny Ukraine's right of national defense against this unfolding horror, or the obligation to assist those who are fleeing. And precisely because Russia is failing to destroy Ukraine's army, it's turned to terror bombing and slaughter of the population, recruitment of mercenary "volunteers" from Syria who won't have sympathies for Ukrainian civilians, maybe even chemical warfare (for once, America's accusations on this score seem credible).

We have seen plenty such warfare against population centers in recent times. Putin himself has done it previously — the destruction of Grozny in Chechnya, and Aleppo and Idlib in Syria. Israel has done it to Beirut in Lebanon (1982 and 2006), to Jenin (2002) and multiple times to Gaza City in Palestine.

The United States has done it to Baghdad, Fallujah and eastern Mosul in Iraq, not to mention Raqqa in Syria. And hardly anybody recalls the U.S. bombing of Panama City in 1989-90 under George H.W. Bush, where the civilian death toll remains obscure. (That was called "Operation Just Cause" to remove a leader the United States didn't approve, a "special military operation" to borrow Putin's language today.)

There are other examples, each case distinctive but with the common denominator of civilian carnage, displacement and misery.

At minimum there will be several million civilian refugees from Ukraine. We cannot know now how many will be able to return, or when, or what they'll be going back to. The experience of Syria from 2011 to the present is a grim example of the possibility of permanent destruction and dispersion.

What's new in the present situation is the opening of not just a local or regional crisis, but the new struggle for global imperial supremacy. The potential immediate impacts range from the danger of massive radioactive releases from nuclear power plants in Ukraine; to world food shortages looming from the loss of Ukrainian wheat as well as Russian and Ukrainian fertilizer production; all the way to a potential direct NATO-Russian confrontation of nuclear-armed states.

The environmental and climate implications are appalling. Already, as Daniel Tanuro's article on the new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report sums up, we're careening toward disaster in this century. Ramping up fossil fuel production to supplant Russian oil and natural gas is exactly the wrong direction.

While emphasizing that Ukraine's war of self-defense is absolutely necessary, inevitable and democratic, we also need to recognize the dimension of inter-imperialist conflict. Those effective and sophisticated weapons coming into Ukraine from the United States, western Europe, Israel and Turkey will help to measure their battlefield effectiveness. Ukraine itself will become more dependent on the West not only militarily, but economically as it struggles to rebuild.

The full impact of economic and financial sanctions on Russia cannot be measured yet, but they won't be short-term. Following the very poor performance of Russia's tank convoys and its low soldier morale, indicating a need for military modernization, we have to assume that U.S./NATO sanctions will extend to an economic war to prevent Russia from accomplishing it — or from recovering its leverage as an energy exporter.

Whatever might happen with global oil and natural gas production and markets, Russia will likely be reduced to a poorer country with much greater dependence on China. We are only at the beginning of a global power reconfiguration, in which China's reaction and other variables aren't yet known.

Amidst the present nightmare, the socialist left doesn't have capacity to "intervene" but we have principles and arguments to put forward, especially to our population at home — which is rightly in sympathy with Ukraine, but largely unaware of "our side's" role leading up to this crisis:

1. We must be supporters of Ukraine's national independence, its legitimate war of self-defense against the Russian invasion, and its right to seek weapons from anywhere it can get them.
2. We salute the heroic antiwar demonstrators in Russia, and will do whatever is possible to amplify their voices. Their stand today is an investment in a decent future for the Russian people, refuting any claim that they are to be equated with the criminal regime.



Protests against war in Ukraine in Moscow, February 24, 2022. (Photo: Akymazaba, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

3. We are absolutely against NATO expansion, if only to reduce the danger of a third world war; and as socialist anti-imperialists we are principled opponents not only of NATO's enlargement but its existence, without any illusions that this will be a popular stance at present.
4. We call for full support of the Ukrainian refugees and their right to return home. We also call for the same right of Palestinians expelled from their homeland, and we demand the right of Central American, Haitian and other refugees and asylum seekers to live in the United States after decades of U.S. policies that have devastated their countries.

5. The global energy turmoil, and the unfolding climate catastrophe, require an emphasis on the most rapid transformation to renewable and sustainable energy. We demand that the U.S. government turn away from its ecocidal policy of turning to Saudi Arabia — a regime every bit as murderous and guilty of aggression in Yemen as Putin's in Ukraine — and other petrostates to ramp up fossil fuel production.

6. The sadistic U.S. economic blockade of Cuba must end. So must the sanctions against Venezuela, Nicaragua and Iran, regardless of the nature of those regimes. And the United States must immediately and unconditionally return to the multilateral Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA).

7. Ukraine's debts to international financial institutions must be immediately cancelled. The same applies to all countries of the Global South, whose debts are crushing their peoples and their futures. (On this critical issue see the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt.)

Our Solidarity position concluded that "solidarity with Ukraine and Russian antiwar voices, while resisting militarism at home, is a complex and urgent task." The defeat of the Russian invasion by the Ukrainian resistance and the end of this war is essential, but only the beginning.

David Finkel

March 14, 2022

P.S.

• <https://solidarity-us.org/ukraines-horror-and-beyond/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://solidarity-us.org/russia-out-of-ukraine-solidarity-with-ukraines-people-no-to-nato-now-or-ever/>