

Class contradictions and the war in Ukraine

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Serious socio-economic contradictions laid the ground for the current war. Often, the war is reduced to one of 'competing nationalisms', flattening the class contradictions that gave rise to destructive nationalisms. For a more progressive vision of national development, there needs to be a clear program for resolving these social contradictions. First of all, they need to be understood, rather than the usual practice of presenting one side as representing Good and the other Evil.

On the **'maidan' camp**, the generalized unemployment and resulting labor migration that characterized western and central Ukraine throughout the post-soviet period.

- Until 2014, when Ukraine remained highly economically inter-dependent with Russia, millions of people in western and central Ukraine saw little to no economic benefit. Their options were unemployment, informal employment for 200 or 300 dollars a month if they were lucky, or labour migration, often to the EU. As a result, a large amount of the population in western and central Ukraine became attracted to the slogan of EU-integration and anti-Russian sentiment.
- If my only source of revenue is from working in Poland or Germany, and whenever I cross the border to Poland, I can get a wage several times higher than anywhere in Ukraine, why not 'join the EU' (no matter that it was never instant EU membership that was proposed, that the actual terms proposed by the EU worsened the economic situation in Ukraine)?
- And if the relatively pro-Russian central government did little or nothing to improve the economic situation in my home region, while eastern and southern Ukraine dominated the political system and received income from Russian trade and investment, why not decide that Russia is the cause of all problems? In 2013, [the Donetsk region was the second richest part of Ukraine, with average wages 35% higher than western Ukrainian regions such as Ternopolska](#), and the [pension of Donetsk miners](#), received earlier than other professions, (miners are closely identified with regional identity) was 35% higher than the Ukrainian average wage.
- This economic context was happily used by agents of the EU and USA, who wanted to transform Ukraine into an anti-Russian project and an exploitable periphery due to their own geo-economic goals.

For the **'anti-maidan'** camp, the economic program of maidan was one of unemployment and social catastrophe.

- First, much of eastern and southern Ukraine depends on trade with Russia. There are (were) various technologically advanced factories surviving from the soviet period which could only exist through trading with their former soviet counterparts in Russia. This was particularly true for sectors such as helicopter construction, machine building and wagon construction.
- Second, transport sectors such as the famous ports of Odessa or Nikolaiv, or the railway system, depended on Russian and Belarussian production that went through Ukraine to be exported on the black sea, or Russian tourists that visited Odessa. An anecdote - a member of my extended family works at the Odessa port. Before 2014, she earned around \$700 a month, a quite respectable salary. Now she earns \$250, because of the greatly decreased amount of

ships entering the port.

- **The EU association agreement could** only deindustrialize the east and south. It didn't matter so much for the east and center, essentially bereft as they are of industry. What little EU investments have taken place since 2014 tend to be focused there, since that is where the lowest wage workers are. But much of the east and south is comprised of soviet 'monofactory' towns, where hundreds of thousands of people depend either primarily or secondarily on 1 enormous soviet factory or mine. The EU association agreement involved the liberalization of trade with the economically advanced nations of Europe, and as a result has naturally steadily driven many such towns to ruin. As an example, many miners in the city of [Kriviy Rih earned \\$1200 before 2014, and in 2021 are lucky to earn \\$300](#). In 2021, the minister of energy told workers at a nuclear power plant (another sector highly integrated into trade with Russia and Belarus) to ['go and work in Poland, since Adam Smith's bible of economics tells us that if a country is better at agriculture than refining uranium, it should focus on agriculture'](#).
- The EU association agreement, various WTO agreements regarding state subsidies for industry that the post-maidan government foolishly entered, and the IMF credit whose condition is slashing state economic intervention, all meant that no assistance to the old industry of the south-east was possible.
- Given the various ecological and consumer standards of the EU, not to mention their more productive industry, the industry of the south-east could not survive without immense state-led modernization. [Yanukovich's prime minister calculated in 2013 that around \\$164 billion USD would be necessary just on that account](#), a figure that today, some [Ukrainian commentators](#) think was on the mark. Naturally, the EU did nothing of the sort, nor, after years of the Ukrainian government asking for it, has it agreed to any simplified conditions of entry into the EU market for Ukrainian industrial exports.
- Much of the industry of the south-east depended on some kind of state assistance or protection from the foreign market, which was all forbidden after 2014, as well as simply impossible since the budget became much smaller and oriented towards the military, police, and paying off the IMF and other international creditors.

These social contradictions were a crucial condition - a necessary condition, but not the only one - for the well-known confrontation that emerged in 2013-2014. It would be a mistake to say that its military aspect began in Donbass - it could be just as well said that it began in late 2013 when western Ukrainian 'semi-proletarians' (people stuck in the informal or agricultural sector at home and forced to work as migrants abroad) stormed police stations and took their weapons with them to fight at maidan in the capital. When the same process was repeated in the Donbass, but by anti-maidan, the difference was that the maidan forces now had state power, and were determined to use military force to defend it.

This is why while the leadership of both camps are broadly speaking bourgeois or petit-bourgeois (the latter usually 'political activists' of the NGO or paramilitary type), they have enjoyed at various points a certain mass support in their regions.

The war has never really been simply about some kind of primal desire to destroy the opponent's culture or nation. 'Anti-russian' or 'anti-Ukrainian' slogans simply found a response due to the aforementioned social contradictions, where each side perceived the other side of the country as seeking to destroy or keep at a low standard its economic position.

As the war progressed, such nationalist rhetoric and its intensification has served two functions:

- To express anger due to the death of one's close ones or co-citizens in the war, without critiquing one's own government for its role (an act with threatening consequences on either side).

- To elevate the war into a primordial conflict without rational causes since the opponent is purely evil. If that is true, then clearly no peaceful compromise to end the war is possible. This is in the interests of various paramilitary or paramilitary groups, nationalist politicians, and [smuggling operations across the militarized border and 'grey zone'](#), all of which benefit from the continuation of the war. Although outside the bounds of this article, it is also no coincidence that certain foreign powers enjoy financing groups with an ethno-nationalist perspective in order to prolong the conflict and thereby weaken enemy states engaged in it.

Moving back to the present. The transformation of Ukraine into a pro-Russian regime or the creation of new 'people's republics' through the Russian military campaign would result in unsatisfactory economic outcomes for the masses of the population:

- The fundamental problem is that the Russian economy is not particularly superior to the Ukrainian one. The higher GDP per capita of the former is largely due to oil and gas money, which is concentrated in Moscow and St Petersburg, along with some other regional capitals. Most cities and rural regions are not significantly distinguishable from their Ukrainian analogues. According to official statistics, the [average salary in regional cities like Rostov](#) (\$540) close to the Ukrainian border was about \$200 dollars higher than the analogous [Kharkiv region \(\\$350\) in Ukraine](#). But wages in Poland are often \$500-\$1000 higher than Ukrainian. Meanwhile, the Russian economy has been worsening in recent years due to sanctions, bad energy prices on the world market, and the steady disintegration of the old soviet industrial complex, which capitalists have no interest in modernizing. While its 'sanctions' are against Russia, otherwise this list of economic problems is the same for Ukraine.
- So-called 'EU-integration' at least offers the hope, no matter how illusory, of 'becoming like Germany', or at least Poland. Integration into Russia essentially means more of the same. For many people, in the absence of any progressive alternative, the hope of something better is better than stagnation, even if this 'euro-integration' actually worsens the economic situation.
- After this war ends, Ukraine will be economically devastated. It is one thing to 'rebuild' (with shopping malls and mosques) the Chechen city of Grozny after invading it. But Ukraine is a country of 40 million. In conditions of crippling sanctions, an already weak domestic economy which receives few enough investments, and an enormous task of economic reconstruction, it is very hard to imagine Russia being able to even rebuild Ukraine to its already-low 2021 economic level.

Given all this, it is interesting to compare the current war with **the creation of Soviet Ukraine** in 1917-1921.

- In the war between the nationalist, pro-German Ukrainian Rada government and the Bolsheviks, the former considered the Bolsheviks to be an army of invading Russians. Given that, when they entered Ukraine, the bulk of their forces were Russian soldiers, combined with Russian speaking soldiers from the factories of Donbass, such an impression had merit, though more and more local Ukrainian forces joined the Red Army as the war continued.
- However, the 'Russian' side eventually won. Why? Because it offered a progressive vision of socio-economic development to the Ukrainian masses. The Ukrainian peasantry (most of the Ukrainian population at that time) wanted progressive land reform, and the Rada government was unwilling to implement it, while the Bolsheviks were. Volodymyr Vynnychenko, the Prime Minister of the short-lived Rada government, wrote these reflections about the fall of the Rada government:

'shrapnel from cannons firing from the other side of the Dnipro showered the roof of the

Tsentral'na Rada's building. **Those cannons were our own, not ones brought from Moscow. They belonged to our Ukrainian military formations. Most of the Bolshevik army was made up of our own soldiers.** Those very same Doroshenko and Sahaidachny regiments who had held their ground in Kyiv were now pulling our hair and kicking us in the spine.'

'At that time right after the Tsentral'na Rada's departure from Kyiv [the Bolsheviks had taken it], whoever spent some time among the people and especially the soldiers could not but notice a particularly strong antipathy of the popular masses towards the Rada. By then I didn't believe any more in any particularly strong attachment of the people to the Tsentral'na Rada. But I never imagined there could be such hatred. Especially among the soldiers. And even more so among those who could not even speak in Russian, but only in Ukrainian ... With such contempt, fury and mockery they spoke of the Tsentral'na Rada, its General Secretaries, its politics. But what was so hard and awful to hear was how they all ridiculed everything Ukrainian: the language, songs, schools, newspapers and books ... It was like a son who was infuriated with his mother, whom he led out onto the square, tore off her clothes, beat her around the face, threw her in the mud and left her there naked, beaten, exposed to ridicule, humiliation and public shame. And he did this with such savagery, such smirking cynicism and fury as though in this way he was getting to feel his own pain for his mother's shame, he was reminding himself of that once great and passionate love which had now been insulted and subjected to mockery. And it was us, the Ukrainian democracy, the Ukrainian Tsentral'na Rada who had evoked and awakened this son's great love to his mother-nation. We, with our politics of the village girl wearing a gentlewoman's delicate gloves, **we had caused him to lose faith in the national cause because we were the ones who defended this cause the most and provided it with leadership, and at the same time we ended up defending the social order of the generals.** The situation was like this not just in one or two instances, but the same everywhere from one end of Ukraine to the other.' [1]

- We can contrast this with the current situation, where the Ukrainian population has little interest in supporting Russia's military forces. Then as now, support for the Russian forces could have deadly results if you were caught by the government. But Russia today offers no progressive model of socio-economic development, and hence it is unsurprising that its forces do not receive significant mass support.

The lack of any progressive socio-economic model of development means that militaristic nationalism becomes hegemonic.

- In conditions of war and bombing, people naturally blame the side bombing them, and support nationalist rhetoric that 'it is necessary to fight to the end and make no compromises, since you can't compromise with the evil enemy.'
- This can lead to the enemy taking more territory as a bargaining chip through which to force its opponent to agree to its demands - which in turn further convinces the other side that the enemy is irrationally evil/expansionist and cannot be compromised with. Which in turn often intensifies this destructive cycle, with negative consequences for statehood and territorial integrity, regarding which so much is said nowadays.

Events in Ukraine

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Footnotes

[1] cited in *The Workers Movement and the National Question in Ukraine*, Marko Bojcun, 2020, pages 307, 308