

# Nationalism, fascism and the rise of capitalism in Ukraine: Some Tentative Conclusions

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- **The connection between Russian oppression and Stalinism**
- **The connection between Ukrainian nationalism and anti-communism**
- **The present basis of support for Ukrainian fascist groups**
- **How that could all change**

Since I was recently in Ukraine, I was asked by a respected friend and fellow worker to write about my impressions of the issue of fascism in Ukraine. To me, it's a very complex issue and it involves the whole issue of the old Soviet regime, the restoration of capitalism in that part of the world in general and the whole issue of national rights for Ukraine.

I am very, very far from an expert on any of this, but I have read a little bit. That reading includes Yulia Yurchenko's excellent book *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital*, which reads kind of like a combination of *Das Capital* plus the *Communist Manifesto* brought up to date and with a focus on Ukraine, but placed in a world context. My experience in Ukraine was extremely limited and only allowed me to just scratch the surface, but I tried my best to keep my eyes and ears open. So with that understanding, here's how the issues appear to me:

Ukraine means "borderland", and that's what Ukraine is - a borderland between many of the European powers. Combined with the fact that much of it is a flat, broad plain, this meant that it was invaded over and over again, so its peoples are composed of many different ethnic groups. The country or major parts of it were passed back and forth like the booty in a war. Over the last 100+ years, though, Russia has been the dominating power and threat. There was, for example, the "Holodomor" or mass starvation of 1932-3 in which 13% of the Ukrainian population starved to death. This national disaster was caused by the criminal policies of Stalin.

This and similar memories is seared into the minds of Ukrainian national culture, and it means that national oppression is equated with both Russia and what passed for socialism. My impression is that to many Ukrainians, they are one and the same.

## 1989 Donbas miners strike

In the late 1980s there was a mass strike movement of miners in the Donbas region. (The following quotes and statistics are from Yurchenko's book.) In 1989, 173 out of 226 miners - a half million in all - went on strike. They elected strike committees that became semi-permanent institutions. These were embryonic workers councils in the making, but the workers didn't know where to go with them. The miners called for educational programs, but that layer of society with access to history and a wider understanding of the world - the petit bourgeois intellectuals - were intent on Ukrainian nationalism and ignored these strike committees. So, the miners' intent on fighting the "Soviet

system” found but one alternative: a first step back to capitalism through “enterprise autonomy”.

The miners strike could have been a first step towards the working class taking power. But the only option that seemed on the table was some sort of “kinder and gentler” capitalism. Something along the lines of what existed in Sweden or Germany – a well ordered society in which clear laws existed and were observed by all. A society with a “free” press and “fair” elections. A society that was able to provide the economic basics and had a wide level of social benefits.

The result of the collapse of the miners strike was a forewarning of what was to come. Throughout the Donbas, crime took off as criminal gangs multiplied. Increased drug addiction, the collapse of family life – all the ties that hold a society together even under capitalism frayed to the breaking point.

## **Return to capitalism**

The middle class nationalist intelligentsia and the gangster capitalists combined. This along with the fact of the long standing oppression by Russia led to over 90% of voters voted for independence from Russia in the 1991 referendum. This was not only a vote for political independence, it also implied a view of moving towards capitalism as it was seen in Western Europe – capitalism with a kind and “democratic” face, capitalism with clean and “democratic” elections, lack of corruption and social programs to provide health care, pensions, etc.

With or without independence from Russia, though, a return to capitalism was inevitable at that point. The point is that independence also meant some form of democratic rule to those who voted in its favor.

What kind of capitalism they were going to get was indicated by the fact that in 1993 inflation reached 10,000%, by 1996 the GDP had shrunk to its lowest level in the history of Ukraine and by the following year the productive (as opposed to the speculative) component of GDP was at a mere 47.8%.

The “nomenklatura” (the old Soviet era bureaucracy) combined with outright criminal gangs to hive off the state owned industries. Gangsterism reined supreme. Each oligarch ruled over his turf like drug gang leaders do. They developed their own regional-based political parties. They fought amongst themselves as much as they did against their class enemy, the working class. This capitalist class in the making was a “criminal-political nexus”.

## **Capitalism in Western Europe and U.S.**

At that time Western Europe was headed down the neoliberal road, reducing all social benefits and even the social democrats were collaborating in taking that direction. Due to this, far right nationalist and even outright fascist forces were bound to develop in those countries. So what chance did capitalism stand in Ukraine?

As for “democracy”, we have to realize one thing: It is a luxury for the capitalist class to rule through democratic norms. True, it’s the safest and least expensive means of their rule, but it is only possible when the capitalist class can offer at least the hope of a decent life to the majority of the working class. That is why it is being steadily eroded in Western Europe and the United States. In the US, where the working class is in crisis, the main resistance to that erosion comes from all the institutions that base themselves on capitalist democracy. That includes most of the capitalist media and almost all governmental institutions – for example the bureaucracies that control elections, different regulatory bodies, and even the US military. Even here, though, we see the erosion as for example within the police, where a large sector are committed racists and even fascists. And the US

military has always had its “Dr. Strangelove” wing which is exemplified today by the likes of Michael Flynn and the convicted war criminal (pardoned by Trump) Eddie Gallagher. For all its extreme failings and its decline, the US unions also still stand as something of a bulwark to the developing anti-democratic trend that is being led by the Republicans.

### **Political basis for capitalist rule in former East Bloc**

But what did Ukraine (or Russia or any of those countries) have? The previous state institutions were based on repression. There was no tradition of “free” press. And the unions were simply the old state-controlled unions, more like company unions than real worker organizations of any sort.

As for socialism: In the West – the US for example – socialists always were in the forefront of any workers’ movement. All the best, the most serious and dedicated union leaders were socialists of some sort – the famous ones like Eugene Debs, Big Bill Hayward, P.J. McGuire, and those whom history has largely forgotten like Benjamin Fletcher and R.T. Sims. (These names are largely forgotten due to racism.)

But the working class of Ukraine lacked the mass workers’ organizations – the unions. And as for socialism – it was and is almost unanimously associated with national oppression and the monster to the east.

Western capital played its role. Again, according to Yurchenko, it flooded Ukraine with speculative finance capital. She writes: “A large proportion of the economic growth of Ukraine’s economy in the pre-crisis years was growth on paper, based on fictitious foundations of credit finance and mirage liquidity. Investment from abroad that flooded the country in the last few years, before the Lehman Brothers collapse, has been the last wave of Ponzi-type financialisation. Ukraine’s banking sector growth since 2000 and especially during 2005–2008 was not a sign of the country’s improving economic performance but rather a sign of growing dependency and integration with the global financial architecture. It was an expression of the last wave of financialisation that began in the USA and then spread over to Europe–first Western and later farther to the East..... Ukraine cumulatively borrowed \$44 billion and over 15.6 billion euros with the largest lenders being the IMF, the World Bank and the European Commission.”

All that money had to be repaid... by the working class.

### **Maidan**

In 2014, masses of Ukrainian youth rose up against the corrupt and pro-Russian president Yanukovich. Some on the “left” claim that it was a right wing-led coup that drove Yanukovich out of office. An independent study revealed that 70% of the protesters mentioned police brutality as a reason for being out in the streets; 53.3% mentioned Yanukovich’s refusal to sign the EU-Ukraine agreement; 50% said it was a desire to change life in Ukraine. Only 5% mentioned following a call of one of the right wing parties.

As with the years that led up to Maidan, the years that followed were filled with power struggles between different regional and gangster capitalist based parties, of which Yanukovich’s “Party of the Regions” was only one. It was the one most closely linked to Russia.

### **Ukrainian fascism**

It was in this historical context that we have to understand Ukrainian fascism. Before commenting any further, it should be stressed that contrary to how most of those on the left raise it, fascism in Ukraine is no isolated phenomenon. There is a fascist component to almost all those former east bloc

countries, with the strongest fascist component being in Russia. There, Putin's Number One advisor is the fascist Aleksander Dugin. Almost every fascist group and prominent individual throughout Europe supports Putin. While she is not directly a fascist, France's Marine Le Pen is close to it. She has been directly financed by Putin. At a recent conference of the white supremacist America First in the US, the crowd was chanting "Putin, Putin, Putin". So any talk of fascism in Ukraine is hypocrisy at best if it doesn't point this out.

Nor is the Zelensky government a fascist or even fascist friendly one. In fact, Zelensky recently dismissed his interior minister Avakov, who was giving protection to the fascist-led Azov Battalion. And in the 2021 elections, the fascists received something like 3% of the vote and didn't get a single delegate elected (as opposed to in the US).

However, this can be somewhat deceptive. According to what I was told when I was there, support for Azov is quite widespread as are right wing sentiments... of a sort. I was told that one can give the Nazi salute without being arrested, but one can be arrested for singing the Internationale. But we must see the complexity of this sentiment:

Ukraine nationalism is totally integrated with the view that national oppression of Ukraine is integrally linked with the old Soviet Union. This is the basis of the anti-communism. Anti-communism and Ukrainian nationalism are one and the same in the minds of many Ukrainians. Those who want to resist the Russian invasion would be looking for the force most determined and most able to do so. For many, that would be Azov. It is similar to those Syrians who wanted to resist the fascistic Assad dictatorship joining with the Muslim fundamentalists. They were not necessarily fundamentalists; they just wanted arms to fight Assad.

It is worth quoting Yurchenko at length: "The Ukrainian nation as an imagined community was weak when the country became independent... until the insurrection of 2013-2014.... It became popular to view the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the latter's active support for separatist forces as factors that forced the birth of the Ukrainian nation that had been in the making since the early 1990s.... The Ukrainian is now locked into defining themselves in opposition to the Russian 'Other'... [which] is chained to the communist Soviet." (From pp. 20-21)

This view has nothing in common with that of Putin, who denies the very right of Ukraine to exist, and does so in order to justify a brutal imperialist invasion. Yurchenko bitterly opposes the invasion and has no patience for those "socialists" who deny Ukraine's right to obtain arms from any source available, including the NATO nations. But what her explanation does do is explain two things: First is the link between Ukrainian nationalism and anti-communism; and second and related to this is the relatively weak basis for Ukrainian nationalism as compared to, for example German or Italian nationalism.

The basis of any national sentiment is a shared historical experience, a common language and culture, and more or less clear borders, among other things. What is happening in Ukraine - what has happened - is only the most extreme example of a global process. In 2004, the *Guardian* newspaper carried an extremely interesting article called *The Demise of the Nation State*. The author, Das Gupta, explained that all these factors that hold a nation together are under assault by global capital as well as other forces. But workers know no form of rule under capitalism other than the nation states. In fact, there is no other form of rule. It is exactly these processes that are driving a yearning for the "good old days", meaning increased nationalism. The author didn't comment on the absence of a mass, working class based socialist movement as an alternative, but that factor is certainly there globally and doubly so in Ukraine.

So what we see in Ukraine is a concentrated image of the future that capitalism holds for all.

More specifically, in relation to Ukraine, if Putin's invasion succeeds even in part, if he succeeds in gaining military control over the Black Sea coast, possibly even all the way down to Odessa, this will lead to years of low scale war. It won't be entirely different from what is happening in the West Bank and Gaza today. In the absence of a clear headed – which is to say socialist – wing of the working class developing, then hatred of Russia and in fact all Russian people could develop. This could include a movement against ethnic Russians in Ukraine, maybe even including physical attacks. In that case, then genuine fascist ideology could start to really develop.

To continue the previous analogy: In Israel today, Zionist fascism (as opposed to simple colonial/racist thinking) is developing, especially among the settlers in the West Bank. In the case of the war in Ukraine, Putin would likely have to bring in a “new” and more loyal population into his newly conquered territory. These would have a fascist ideology. Not only that, but the chauvinism that Putin bases himself on in Russia would also lead to an increase in outright fascism in the mother country. In fact, it's possible that Putin's rule could become an outright fascist one.

On the other hand, if Putin's invasion fails, if his forces are even just driven out of the regions they already have conquered and Luhansk and Donetsk remain as puppet “states” for Putin, it seems likely to me that that would be considered a huge victory for Ukraine. In that case, within Russia a mood similar to the post-Vietnam mood in the US could start to develop. That would be a radical left challenge to the Putin regime, including mass disaffection within the military. More important is what could start to develop in Ukraine. It seems most likely to me that there would be an initial outpouring of national pride. “We beat the Russian bear!” would be the mood. But then a new mood could start to develop among workers: “We went through all this sacrifice, now we want ours.” In other words, a renewed class struggle. Under these circumstances, an opening could develop for genuine socialism.

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