

Marxism and Ukraine's struggle for independence and self-determination

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Independence and self-determination have been a guiding socialist principle for more than 100 years. It marks a fundamental dividing line between Marxism and various schools of imperialist thought, including the realist, neoconservatives, and liberal interventionists. Perhaps its most important contribution was uniting working-class movements in the north with anti-colonial struggles in the south. Understanding these long-held principles is essential in the discussion regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels recognized colonialism derived from capitalism's need for continual expansion. But it was through their extensive work on Ireland in which they came to understand the link between national independence and working-class emancipation. Corresponding with Engels, Marx ([1867] 1972, as quoted in Lim 1992, 173) wrote,

It is in the direct and absolute interest of the English working class to get rid of their present connection with Ireland ... For a long time I believed that it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working-class ascendancy ... Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland.

Later he wrote the independence of Ireland was "not as a matter of sympathy but as a demand made in the interests of the English proletariat." (Marx [1867] 1972, as quoted in Lim 1992, 173) In other words, it was necessary for English workers to support independence for Ireland in order to rid themselves of great nation chauvinism and their alliance with British capital in the suppression of the Irish people.

Writing on the connection between Marx and Engels and Vladimir Lenin's work on imperialism, Jie-Hyun Lim (1992, 163) points out:

The Irish national question is located on a turning point in the evolution of Marx's and Engels' thought with respect to national and colonial issues. Discussing the Irish national question, Marx and Engels succeeded in escaping from their earlier Eurocentric view... It presaged Lenin's theory of national self-determination, which formalizes the dialectical relationship between nationalism and proletarian internationalism in the era of imperialism. The Irish question thus involves a matter of principle in the Marxist theory of nationalism, bridging the gap between the founders of Marxism in the classical era of capitalism and Lenin in the era of imperialism.

During World War I, Lenin began to address the question of annexations by imperialist powers. At that time his main concern was in Europe, and in an essay in 1916 he wrote on the importance of self-determination for Ireland, Finland, Ukraine, Byelorussia, and noted Portugal's freedom from Spain and Norway's independence from Sweden. Lenin was insistent on the right of secession. As he

stated, “By transforming capitalism into socialism the proletariat creates the *possibility* of abolishing national oppression; the possibility becomes *reality* “only” — ‘only’! — with the establishment of full democracy in all spheres, including the delineation of state frontiers in accordance with the ‘sympathies’ of the population, including complete freedom to secede.” (Lenin 1974, 320-360, emphasis in the original)

Opposition to imperialism led Lenin and the Bolsheviks to be the first political party to establish the right to national self-determination — a policy they put into practice by recognizing the independence of Finland in 1917. Finland came under Russian rule in 1812, but with the overthrow of the Tsar, political parties demanded independence. The call for independence was opposed by the Cadet Party, the bourgeois party that briefly headed the Russian government. But leading the new Soviet government, Lenin affirmed “the *right* of Finland, as of all the other underprivileged nations, to secede *from* Russia ... If we are really against annexations, we should say: give Finland the *right* of secession!” (Lenin 1964, 335–338, emphasis in the original) When Finland’s parliament declared independence on December 6, 1917 the Bolshevik Party ratified Finland’s freedom a few days later. The highest Soviet body, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (ARCEC 1917), endorsed the Finnish declaration, which read:

The people of Finland have by this step taken their fate in their own hands; a step both justified and demanded by present conditions. The people of Finland feel deeply that they cannot fulfill their national and international duty without complete sovereignty. The century-old desire for freedom awaits fulfillment now; Finland’s people step forward as a free nation among the other nations in the world.

Other nations that had come under Tsarist colonial rule were brought into the Soviet Union under a union of federated states, including Ukraine. Russia’s relationship with its former colonial territories under Soviet rule had both positive and negative consequences. But the Bolshevik stance on self-determination became the policy of the Comintern and was adopted by Communist parties throughout the world. Established as a socialist principle, support for independence and self-determination for colonized nations became the counter-weight to Western imperialism. As direct colonial control was overthrown by the tide of revolutions that swept the world after World War II, support for national liberation became a key dividing line between the socialist bloc and the West.

Considering Russia’s current invasion of Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s expressed contempt for Lenin, an inspection of Lenin’s view on Ukraine is important to review. Writing in *Pravda* in 1917 he stated:

No democrat, let alone a socialist, will venture to deny the complete legitimacy of Ukraine’s demands. And no democrat can deny Ukraine’s *right* to freely secede from Russia. Only unqualified recognition of this right makes it possible to advocate a free union of Ukrainians and the Great Russians, a *voluntary* association of the two peoples in one. Only unqualified recognition of this right can actually break completely and irrevocably with the accursed tsarist past ... Russia’s revolutionary democrats, if they want to be truly revolutionary and truly democratic, must break with that past, must regain for themselves, for the workers and peasants of Russia, the brotherly trust of the Ukrainian workers and peasants. This cannot be done without the full recognition of Ukraine’s rights, including the *right* to free secession. (Lenin [1917] 1977, italics in the original)

Lenin makes clear that anything less than a voluntary association between Russia and Ukraine would be a direct link to Russia’s colonial Tsarist empire; and that unity of the Russian and Ukrainian working class rested on full recognition of Ukraine’s right of secession. The current

Russian invasion violates every socialist principle articulated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, seeking a forced integration based on violence and war.

Lenin was also critical of great Russian chauvinism over the incorporation of the Caucasus into the Soviet Union, accusing Joseph Stalin, Felix Dzerzhinsky and Sergo Ordzhonikidze of being Russian bullies towards the Bolsheviks and other socialists from this colonial region. There was a strong strain of Georgian nationalism, termed a “nationalist-socialist” deviation and viewed as a serious threat by the three Bolshevik leaders responsible for the territory. This led to some violent suppression of local forces. But Lenin, who supported voluntary unity within a federated state, was insistent on marking the difference between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation. He elevated the contradiction by saying, “Here we have an important question of principle: how is internationalism to be understood.” (Lenin 1922)

Lenin argued that because

nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence ... it is necessary to compensate the non-Russian for the lack of trust, for the suspicion and the insults to which the government of the ‘dominant’ nation subjected them in the past ... That is why internationalism on the part of the oppressors of ‘great’ nations ... must consist not only in the observance of formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation ... Anybody who does not understand this has not grasped the real proletarian attitude to the national question. (Lenin 1922)

Lenin aimed particular criticism at Stalin stating that, “Stalin’s haste and his infatuation with pure administration, together with his spite against the notorious ‘nationalist-socialism’ played a fatal role here.” And that Stalin “carelessly flings about accusations of ‘nationalist-socialism’ (whereas he himself is a real and true ‘nationalist-socialist’ and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully), violates, in substance the interests of proletarian class solidarity.” (Lenin 1922) Lenin’s concern was for voluntary association and the freedom to secede. As he argued, if not upheld, the principle “by which we justify ourselves will be a mere scrap of paper, unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that really Russian man, the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant,” and that Soviet workers would be “drown in a tide of chauvinistic Great-Russian ruffraff like a fly in milk.” (Lenin 1922) What became known as the “Georgian Affair” delayed the creation of the Soviet Union for nine months, but Ordzhonikidze continued on in his leadership role in the Caucasus until 1926.

It was Lenin’s defense of independence and self-determination and his stand against Great-Russian chauvinism that led Putin to condemn the “odious and utopian fantasies inspired by the revolution, which are absolutely destructive for a normal state.” Putin’s normal state includes Ukraine which “Lenin and his associates (created) in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia — by separating, severing what is historically Russian land.” (Tuğal 2022) In other words, Ukraine has no right to an independent existence.

The Russian empire was never an overseas empire like that of Britain or France, but a land-based territorial expansion. As Lenin pointed out, “Russia set a world record for the oppression of nations with an imperialism that is much more crude, medieval, economically backward and militarily bureaucratic.” (Lenin 1974) These historically colonized regions are what Putin, acting as a “Great-Russian bully,” sees as part of Russia’s “normal state.”

Independence and self-determination for the Global South

For Communists, this position on independence and self-determination was key to uniting oppressed colonial people with the Western working class. As young revolutionaries in Paris, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and Ho Chi Minh became attracted to the Communist cause, in part, because of the Soviet position on colonial countries. Under Lenin's leadership, the Comintern had made anti-colonialism a condition of membership.

Ho wrote in his 1924 report to the Comintern,

According to Lenin, the victory of the revolution in Western Europe depended on its close contact with the liberation movement against imperialism in enslaved colonies and with the national question, both of which form a part of the common problem of the proletarian revolution... (Ho 1924)

But Ho was angered by the lack of support given to colonial people by Western Communist parties, and much of his report focused on this problem. As he stated,

As for our Communist Parties in Great Britain, Holland, Belgium and other countries — what have they done to cope with the colonial invasions perpetrated by the bourgeois class of their countries? What have they done from the day they accepted Lenin's political programme to educate the working class of their countries in the spirit of just internationalism, and that of close contact with the working masses in the colonies? What our Parties have done in this domain is almost worthless. As for me, I was born in a French colony, and am a member of the French Communist Party, and I am very sorry to say that our Communist Party has done hardly anything for the colonies. (Ho 1924)

Thirty years later the struggle for Vietnamese independence ignited anti-imperialist movements in Europe and the US, in effect uniting sections of the Western working class with the anti-colonial revolutionaries of Vietnam who rallied around Ho's famous slogan, "Nothing is more precious than independence and self-determination". The lesson here should not be lost as Ukraine battles for its national survival, and the weight of responsibility on the international left.

At the historic Bandung conference of Asian and African countries, Zhou Enlai spoke to independence and self-determination as a guiding principle for Third World countries. Zhou (1955) articulated that,

Asian and African countries, opposing colonialism and defending national independence, treasure all the more their own national rights. Countries whether big or small, strong or weak, should all enjoy equal rights in international relations. Their territorial integrity and sovereignty should be respected and not violated. The people of all dependent countries should enjoy the right of national self-determination, and should not be subjected to persecution and slaughter.

He went on to state,

Peace can only be safeguarded by mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Encroachment on the sovereignty and territory of any country and the interference in the internal affairs of any country will inevitably endanger peace. If nations give assurances not to commit aggression against each other, conditions will be created in international relations for peaceful coexistence. If nations give assurances not to interfere in each other's internal affairs, it will then be possible for the people of these countries to choose their own political system and way of life in accordance with their own will. (Zhou 1955)

Additionally, Zhou laid out five principles of international conduct that include: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; nonaggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality; and mutual benefit. All five have been violated by the Russian invasion.

Principal and secondary contradictions

How can these lessons help guide our orientation towards the Russian invasion and its complex mix of issues and history? Here it is essential to understand what is a principal contradiction, and what are secondary contradictions. For an understanding we can refer to Mao ([1937] 1975, 331) who explained:

When imperialism launches a war of aggression against such a country, all its various classes, except for some traitors, can temporarily unite in a national war against imperialism. At such a time, the contradiction between imperialism and the country concerned becomes the principal contradiction, while all the contradictions among the various classes within the country ... are temporarily relegated to a secondary and subordinate position.

In Ukraine, the principal contradiction is between Russia and the Ukrainian resistance to the invasion. Other contradictions internal or external to Ukrainian society, such as language rights, the neoliberalism of the Volodymyr Zelensky government, neo-fascists involved in fighting the Russians, and NATO's involvement are secondary contradictions. Mao ([1937] 1975, 332-333) was clear on this point.

There is no doubt at all that at every stage in the development of a process, there is only one principal contradiction which plays the leading role ... Therefore, in studying any complex process in which there are two or more contradictions, we must devote every effort to finding its principal contradiction ... one must not treat all the contradictions in a process as being equal but must distinguish between the principal and secondary contradictions. But in any given contradiction, whether principal or secondary, should the two contradictory aspects be treated as equal? Again, no.

Mao wrote "On Contradictions" in 1937, the year the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the "Second United Front" with the Kuomintang (KMT). Clearly Mao is writing in the context of the Japanese invasion and occupation of China, and arguing what was once the principal contradiction between the Communist Party and Kuomintang was now a secondary contradiction. Previously the KMT had been called the "running dog of imperialism" and were supported by the British and US. The CCP and KMT had been engaged in a bloody civil war for over a decade resulting in the loss of CCP's peasant base areas, and the bitter Long March to Yan'an. After the end of WWII, the principal contradiction was again between the CCP and KMT, leading to the civil war and the Communist victory.

This is not to say that secondary contradictions are unimportant or to be ignored, and as the Chinese experience shows a secondary contradiction may become primary, and vice-versa. But to develop a correct political strategy and tactical orientation, the principal contradiction must be understood at each juncture. Contradictions take on many forms. Often the principal contradiction is between class forces within a country. Or sometimes between states, such as Cuba facing decades of US hostility and attempts to destroy their revolution. The main danger facing the Ukrainian people is plainly the Russian invasion, and constitutes the principal contradiction in the context of the war. Just as in the Iraq war the principal contradiction was between US imperialism and the Iraqi people, not between Sunni and Shite. Internal class and political contradictions in Ukraine are not unimportant, but under conditions of a foreign invasion they assume a secondary aspect. Therefore, upholding independence and self-determination should be our main concern.

Currently some on the left assert a proxy war between the US/NATO and Russia as the principal contradiction. The result is to minimize the role of the Ukrainian people and blame the West for causing the Russian invasion. NATO has been aggressive in pushing its alliance eastward, and certainly tense US-Russian relations are a factor in the war. But these problems do not overshadow Russia's blatant violation of Ukraine's independence. Russia has made clear this is a war of annexation, declaring eastern Ukraine and Crimea part of its national territory. Here we should revisit Lenin who wrote;

Why are Social-Democrats against annexations? In our view the answer is obvious: because annexation violates the self-determination of nations, or, in other words, is a form of national oppression. (Lenin 1974)

The proxy-war argument has several problems. To begin, seeing all conflicts in the world as proxy wars between major powers originates from the realist school of imperialist thought. It has long had major influence in US ruling circles, its main proponents being George Kennan and Henry Kissinger. Spanning the extended period of revolutionary Third World upsurges, starting with the independence of China to the Vietnam and Algerian wars and liberation struggles in Africa, imperialist powers characterized these struggles as proxy wars between the Soviet Union and West, primarily the US. While the Soviet Union and China gave material aid to the forces of liberation, and the US worked to maintain the global imperialist system, the principal contradiction was expressed by Mao's famous statement, "Countries want independence, nations want self-determination, people want revolution." The people of China, Vietnam, South Africa, Cuba and all other liberation movements did not fight for the Soviets, but for their own just cause.

The realist proxy war standpoint is rooted in an imperialist worldview that rejects the role of colonized people as protagonists in their own liberation. Since all conflicts are proxy wars between great powers, people struggling for national liberation are tools of one or the other great power. The realists advocate deals between dominant powers, spheres of influence, and the division of the world into blocs. There is no room for a multi-centric world order based on the sovereignty and self-determination of all nations. Left realists accept this basic assessment of the world.

Consequently, we need to examine the left realist position on Ukraine that argues the Russian invasion was a defensive act caused by an aggressive NATO surrounding Russia and that, moreover, NATO missiles threaten Russia as they move closer to its borders. According to left realists, these acts make the Russian invasion a proxy war between the US and Russia. There are indeed antagonisms between Russia and NATO, but the left realist view is fatally one-sided. From the standpoint of small and mid-size former Soviet states, such as Ukraine, Latvia, and Lithuania, it is Russia that threatens them with one of the world's largest militaries and the world's largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. NATO should have disbanded after the Warsaw Pact did, and NATO could have refused to incorporate the former Warsaw bloc and Soviet republics, but they hardly forced countries into joining. Although Russia saw this as an aggressive move into their sphere of influence, countries have a right to ally with anyone they choose. Is there any mystery as to why they chose the European Union over an authoritarian petro-state? Left realists prefer these small countries bend the knee to Russia and recognize Putin's "legitimate" fears. But no recognition is given for their legitimate fears of their former colonial ruler.

Determining the principal contradiction has important practical results that reveal splits in the left. If the principal contradiction is between Ukraine and Russia, then Ukraine has a right to self-defense and the right to obtain arms. Just as Vietnam had the right to obtain Chinese and Soviet arms to defend itself against the US invasion. In fact, an international boycott of arms to Ukraine would only result in their defeat and a successful annexation by Russian forces. On the issue of ending the war, Ukraine must be the primary negotiator over its own fate, and the leading voice in the determination

of its own future. On the other hand, if you hold the principal contradiction is between the US and Russia, then ending Western arms shipments becomes primary because it is a dangerous escalation between the major powers. Following this logic, US/Russian negotiations become key to ending the war. In effect, the realist position assigns the Ukrainian people a minor role in a conflict where they are fighting for national survival. Determining the principal contradictions also determines the understanding of events that led up to the war. If the US is the main instigator, the Maidan uprising becomes a coup organized by the US, rather than driven by internal contradictions over corruption by both pro-US and pro-Russian oligarchs. And the desire to join the EU and NATO becomes Western aggression, rather than fear of Russia by small and mid-size border states. By locating the principal contradiction as US aggression against Russia, left realists align with great power chauvinism; in effect, that all conflicts are defined by competition between major powers. Lost is Ukrainian self-determination.

Understanding US/Russian tensions as a secondary contradiction does not mean ignoring the reality of great power competition. It still means that the US needs to be part of the negotiations, that the US did meddle in the Maidan uprising, and that NATO was aggressive in its push eastward. But it does not obscure the Russian invasion as the principal problem, nor relegate Ukraine to a secondary role and its full independence to a secondary question, to be determined by an agreement between great powers. Lastly, when left realists accept Russian security concerns as the motivation for the invasion, it weakens our ability to convince people to take an anti-war stance when the US declares the exact same security reason for its next invasion. Reaffirming the long-standing principle of independence and self-determination must be maintained as the clear dividing line between socialist and imperialist worldviews.

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