

# The political and historical issues in Russia's assault on Chechnya

**The Editorial Board**  
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For more than three months, Russian troops have been waging war against the Caucasian republic of Chechnya. Estimates of those killed run as high as 10,000. A third of the Chechen population have been made homeless and a quarter of a million are now refugees. An estimated 30,000-50,000 people are trapped in the besieged capital, Grozny, suffering Russian shelling and sporadic troop incursions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all workers, students and intellectuals to demand the immediate cessation of the war and the withdrawal of Russian troops. The self-serving claims by the Kremlin that it is acting in the interests of the Russian people must be rejected. The assault on Chechnya is a predatory war carried out in the interests of the ruling elite in Russia.

Former President Yeltsin and his newly appointed successor, Vladimir Putin, claim the attack on Chechnya is directed solely against terrorist bandits. But their attempt to present the war as a mere police action is refuted by the very methods through which it is being waged—the bombing of civilian populations in Chechen towns and cities.

The immediate pretext for the war was the claim that Chechen separatists were responsible for bombs that exploded in Moscow and other cities in September of last year, killing over 200 people. To date no convincing evidence has been presented to support allegations of Chechen involvement in the bombings. Based on the record of violent crime and political assassinations on the part of Mafia elements that compete for influence within Russian government circles, it cannot be ruled out that they were, in fact, responsible for these criminal acts.

In any event, the bombings and the Chechen war have served a useful political purpose for Russia's rulers. Coverage of the mounting social crisis within the country has been almost entirely dropped by the media, while the repressive powers of the police have been strengthened. The war has provided the main vehicle for Yeltsin's inner circle to ensure Putin's succession to the presidential office, portraying him as the strongman needed to bring order to Russia's chaos.

The key justification advanced by the Putin government for the war is that it is acting in the interests of the Russian people by defending the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation against the political puppets of hostile powers. For the Kremlin to portray itself as the saviour of the masses and the guardian of Russia's national interests is, however, ludicrous. The capitalist market policies pursued for nearly a decade by Yeltsin and now Putin have been responsible for the greatest social and economic disaster suffered by any people outside of wartime. A handful of semi-criminal elements at the apex of the new order have enriched themselves by condemning the vast majority of Russian workers to mass unemployment, poverty and the destruction of vital social services.

Moreover, ever since it first emerged a decade ago out of the former Stalinist bureaucracy, the Kremlin's ruling clique has relied on the support of the Western governments, banks and corporations for its existence. It functions essentially as a client regime of the US and Europe in liquidating formerly state-owned industry and providing international

capital with access to Russia's natural resources and markets.

The war against Chechnya is being fought to defend the interests of the new class of Russian compradors. Following the NATO bombardment of Russia's long-time ally Serbia, this ruling elite has become increasingly concerned about a Western challenge to its hegemony over the Caucasus—a region that serves as a strategic bridge between the immensely rich Caspian oil fields and Europe. Though official government pronouncements have generally identified Islamic regimes in the Middle East as the hidden sponsors of the Chechen separatists, some leading politicians have hinted at direct US involvement.

At a recent meeting of military leaders, Defence Minister Igor Sergeev declared, "The United States' national interests require that the military conflict in the north Caucasus, fanned from the outside, keeps constantly smouldering... The West's policy is a challenge to Russia with the aim of weakening its international position and ousting it from strategically important regions."

Such statements are, in part, aimed at winning popular support within Russia for the Chechen campaign, on the basis of widespread anti-American sentiment in the aftermath of the Kosovo war. But the threat posed by the growth of US militarism cannot be combated on the basis of the Great Russian chauvinism being whipped up by Putin and his allies in the military. Any support for the war by working people will only strengthen the hand of their own oppressors and the very government through which the international banks and industrial conglomerates seek to dominate Russia.

The aim of the Kremlin in Chechnya is to reassert Russia's Great Power status, strengthening their bargaining position with the imperialist governments and Western banks and thereby maintaining their right to share in the exploitation of the Russian and Caucasian peoples.

It would be a serious mistake to look to the Western powers, NATO or the United Nations as a counterweight to Russian aggression in Chechnya. The imperialist governments, and the United States in particular, bear a major responsibility for the present tragedy.

None of the media commentary on the war makes the obvious point that it is being carried out by the very regime which was sponsored by the US and Europe, who proclaimed it to be the first flowering of a new democratic order arising from the breakup of the USSR and the restoration of capitalist market relations. They attributed the highest humanitarian and democratic ideals to former Stalinist *apparatchiks* like Yeltsin at the very time that his government was overseeing the dismantling of state-owned enterprises, impoverishing millions and enriching themselves in the process.

Condemnation of Russia's war by the US and Europe is entirely hypocritical. Their military offensive against Iraq and the imposition of sanctions are responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children. During the conflict with Serbia, NATO bombed civilian populations in Belgrade and cities and towns throughout the country, and asserted its right to trample on the national

sovereignty of smaller nations. The US has long maintained its right to carry out acts of aggression, such as last year's bombing of Sudan's largest pharmaceutical factory, on the pretext of "fighting terrorism".

The NATO assault on Serbia was only the latest in a series of measures taken by the US that challenge longstanding geo-political interests of Russia. In the past few years NATO has been expanded to embrace Russia's former allies in the Soviet-era Warsaw Pact, while many have been offered the possibility of membership of the European Union. The US is also pressing ahead with renewed plans to create a national shield against nuclear missile attack, in contravention of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. This brings with it the danger for Russia that the US could strike its territory with relative impunity. At the same time, the US is continuing to pursue its policy of marginalising Russian control over oil routes from the Caspian basin and through the Caucasus. Under these conditions, it was inevitable that the most chauvinist forces within Russia would be strengthened.

There is no indication, however, that either the US or Europe is willing to sacrifice their economic and political ties to Russia over its actions in Chechnya. Their concerns are not with the fate of the Chechen people, but the danger of a complete breach in relations with a regime that has served their interests well. Official pronouncements by the Western governments routinely combine calls for moderation on Russia's part with recognition of Moscow's right to stem "terrorist activities" on its own territory. This should serve as a lesson to all those who have been bamboozled by the human rights propaganda of Washington into supporting US imperialism's own war drives—in Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovo.

The *World Socialist Web Site* advances an independent perspective for the working class—Russian, Chechen and international—based on the fundamental political lessons of the 20th century.

The war in Chechnya is rooted in the decades-long betrayal by the former Stalinist regime of the social and democratic aspirations of the October 1917 revolution. Stalinism must be held to account for the continued national and democratic grievances of the Chechen people, due to its flagrant breach of the principles of internationalism and equality that guided the Bolshevik Party under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

The working class was only able to take power in 1917 by winning the support of the majority of the peasantry and the oppressed nationalities throughout the Russian Empire. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was formed in 1922 and encompassed 140 million people, including 65 million drawn from hundreds of different national minorities.

In order to secure the leadership of the working class over these oppressed masses, the Bolsheviks proclaimed the equality and sovereignty of all the Soviet peoples, the right to separate and form independent states, the abolition of national-religious privileges, and the free development of national minorities and ethnic groups. In this way, they allayed any suspicion of a continuation of Great Russian chauvinism, while combating the political influence of the imperialist powers and the White forces of the national bourgeoisie. Clearly establishing that the unification of the Soviet peoples was voluntary helped prevent the break-up of the old Tsarist Empire into a plethora of small, backward and essentially impotent national units that would remain politically subordinate to the major Western powers.

This policy gave a tremendous impulse to the movement of the oppressed masses all over the world. The October Revolution provided the essential answer to the question: through what methods and on what programme could the colonial masses attain liberation from imperialism and ensure their path towards economic and social progress? It proved by example that the real basis for overcoming national oppression is the conquest of power by the working class, laying the foundations for the development of a socialist economy. Stalinism's greatest crime was to discredit and undermine the confidence of the world's workers and peasants in such a socialist solution.

The Bolsheviks understood that the task of socialist construction could only be completed on a world scale. So long as the USSR remained isolated, it was only possible to take the first steps towards overcoming the legacy of Russia's economic backwardness. The necessary material and economic foundations for the construction of a truly egalitarian and prosperous society could only be found through the extension of the revolution to the more advanced countries of Europe and the eventual establishment of a world socialist system.

Under conditions of the defeat of revolutionary struggles in Europe, however, broad layers within the party and state bureaucracy came to reject this perspective as "unrealistic". They began to place the defence of their own privileges above the historic interests of the working class, finding their leader in Stalin and their theoretical justification in the reactionary utopia of building "socialism in a single country".

Leon Trotsky formed the Left Opposition within the Bolshevik party in order to oppose Stalinism's nationalist perspective and the re-emergence of what Trotsky termed "Great-Power jingoism". The growing bureaucracy, headed by Stalin, increasingly dealt with its Marxist opponents through terror, repression and murder, and its crimes against the Soviet workers and national minorities intensified.

One of the worst atrocities committed by the Stalinist bureaucracy was the mass deportation of 400,000 Chechens and Ingush to Soviet Central Asia in 1944 during the Second World War, which resulted in the death of an estimated 30 percent of the deportees.

Opposition to the war does not connote support for either the perspective or methods of the separatist groups and nationalist leaders in Chechnya. The claim that the only alternative to the repression of the Kremlin is an independent Chechen state is false. Such a perspective cannot constitute a viable foundation for the progressive economic development of the Caucasus, or meet the social and democratic needs of the mass of its people.

It is not a question of harking back to the conditions of either the Chechen or Russian masses under the old Stalinist regime. All the peoples of the USSR suffered the suppression of their democratic and social rights for decades under the bureaucratic police state set up by Stalin and his heirs.

Nevertheless, the formation of the USSR under Lenin's Bolshevik Party represented an enormous step forward in the collective political, economic and cultural development of the peoples of the Eurasian landmass. From that standpoint, the emergence today of various separatist movements in the Caucasus and elsewhere is not an opposition to the social counterrevolution that culminated in the liquidation of the USSR, but is part of it.

The Islamic separatist forces in Chechnya have been able to exploit historic and contemporary grievances against Russia, but their methods, outlook and perspectives do not fundamentally differ from those of Yeltsin and Putin. Ever since the liquidation of the USSR, the Caucasus has been torn by national disputes that have claimed tens of thousands of lives. These conflicts have been promoted and led in large part by former Communist Party bureaucrats, such as the first leader of the post-perestroika Chechen independence movement, Jokhar Dudaev.

These are not legitimate movements of national liberation. They have nothing to do with a struggle against imperialism, nor do they in any sense embody the democratic aspirations of the oppressed masses. They express, rather, the social interests of various cliques of aspiring native capitalists, who seek to establish their own direct links with world capitalism by carving out ethnically homogeneous territories and dividing the working class along ethno-communal lines.

National independence, as far as this social layer is concerned, is seen as a means to appropriate the profits from oil distribution and refining, coupled with drug dealing, gun running and prostitution. The armed struggle against Russia is the method by which they seek to translate their

proximity to substantial oil reserves into a lucrative client relationship with Washington, Berlin and London.

This was highlighted by a December 27 *Wall Street Journal* article by Khoz-Ahmed Noukhaev, the president of the Caucasus Common Market (CCM). Noukhaev is a typical representative of the leading circles of Chechen separatists. He began his career as the leader of the notorious Chechen mafia in Moscow, describing his criminal activity such as racketeering as “a continuation of the fight for independence”.

In his *Wall Street Journal* column, Noukhaev boasts of the separatists' ability to wage “endless guerrilla warfare” and warns that “both Europe and the US have a vital strategic and economic interest in restoring peace to the Caucasus as soon as possible—before the war in Chechnya spills over into Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Caspian oil fields.”

Such direct appeals to Western interests are by no means an exclusively Chechen phenomenon. Their echo can be found in similar nationalist movements around the world. In the first part of this century, the bourgeois leaderships of national liberation struggles in the oppressed countries sought to cast off imperialist domination and gain control of their own national market. Today, however, the global integration of capitalist production has led to the development of a new type of national-separatist movement based on ethnic identity or communalism. Rather than pursuing an end to imperialist control and the development of national markets, these movements seek the dismemberment of existing states and the establishment of direct relations with the imperialist powers and transnational corporations.

In every case, this striving to attract inward investment is predicated on the slashing of wages, the systematic increase in the level of exploitation and the dismantling of vital social provisions such as health care and pensions, which are considered an unpardonable drain on corporate profits. Things will be no different in Chechnya. The ruling elite may grow fat on oil revenues and their criminal activities, but the largely rural population will remain condemned to poverty and squalor.

The only progressive basis for opposing the Chechen war—and the ever greater attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class throughout Russia—is the struggle to unify the hundreds of millions of people who are the victims of capitalist restoration against their corrupt rulers in the Kremlin as well as the imperialist powers.

At the dawn of the 20th century millions of workers were inspired by the perspective of socialism and the struggle for the international unification of the working class. Why then should critical-minded workers today accept the demoralised, cynical and ignorant claim that such a perspective has no relevance for the 21st century?

Already at the beginning of the last century, the limitations of bourgeois national movements were apparent to the most advanced thinkers of their age—such as Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky. Why should the resurgence of this phenomenon in an incomparably more debased form—advocating ethnic identity as the basis of nation building—and in an era when the globalisation of economic life far surpasses anything at that time, be embraced by the working class today?

In order to combat the Great Russian chauvinism of the Putin regime, the peoples of the former Soviet Union must renew their commitment to the socialist and internationalist perspective on which the USSR was originally established. The voluntary unification of the Russian and Caucasian peoples in the early 1920s was only possible through the economic reorganisation of Soviet society to meet the basic needs of the working masses. Notwithstanding the subsequent Stalinist degeneration of the USSR, this remains the only route to social progress and democracy. In pursuing this goal, working people in Russia and Chechnya must turn to their fellow workers in Europe and America as their natural allies in the struggle against imperialist aggression and capitalist exploitation.

The central political task facing workers in Russia and throughout the world is the development of a new Marxist leadership to resume the

struggle for world socialism. The *World Socialist Web Site* is the Internet site of the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky in the struggle to defend socialist internationalism against the betrayals of Stalinism. It is the forum around which the most politically advanced workers and intellectuals will coalesce and build the world party of socialist revolution.



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