

# Russia and the war against Iraq

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The war against Iraq, whose prime mover is the American Bush administration, assisted by Tony Blair's British government, might start any time in the next few weeks, perhaps even in a few days. Having begun as an act of naked neocolonial aggression against a weak and almost defenseless country, it will inevitably set off a chain of events producing deep changes in political and social relations throughout the world.

Aggression against Iraq will open a period of sharply escalated militarism, the essential content of which will be a global re-division of spheres of influence and control. This eruption of imperialist violence will threaten the world with a conflagration whose extent could exceed the catastrophes of the twentieth century.

Russia, by virtue of its territorial location and its enormous natural resources, will not remain isolated from these events. They will exert an immediate influence on the moods and attitudes of the current Russian ruling elite. What is even more important, they will provoke a rethinking about many important political and historical questions among wide layers of Russian society.

In order to evaluate more concretely the depth and character of these changes, it is necessary once again to ponder the general nature of the coming war, its social roots, and its place in modern world history.

The American mass media portrays the war against Iraq as an act of preventive self-defense against an enemy who threatens the foundations of world civilization, and an effort to remove the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and set up a democratic regime in Iraq. Nevertheless, an ever-growing number of people around the world understand that this war will be carried out primarily to conquer the oil resources of the Middle East.

Oil, however, is only one factor in the coming aggression. The strategic calculations of the American ruling elite go beyond oil and assume that the subjugation of Iraq will be a step on the road to establishing world hegemony. In other words, the Bush government is seeking to carry through a political and economic reorganization of the world in the interests of American capital.

Not only weak and relatively backward states, like Iraq, but even the most important competitors of the US in Europe and Asia (such as Japan and China) are to be subjected to the will of the American corporate and political elite. Russia, which combines the second largest store of nuclear weapons, enormous natural resources and an economy in acute distress, is also on the short list of potential victims of this global imperialist "will to rule."

It is important to understand that the eruption of American imperialism is not a product of someone's mania for greatness, or the sick imagination of the people in charge in Washington. The causes are rooted in the fundamental contradictions of the world capitalist system and the inability of capitalism to overcome its contradictions in a peaceful and conflict-free manner. Contemporary world productive forces can no longer be contained within the framework of a system of nation states and within the economic relations of private property, which constitute, in Marx's words, the "anatomy" of capitalist society.

The extreme sharpening of these contradictions is not of recent origin, but revealed itself at least one hundred years ago. The insoluble conflict between the essentially social character of production and the private form

of appropriation under capitalism had already twice in the twentieth century resulted in terrible world wars, the first beginning in 1914 and the second in 1939.

Both of these slaughters ushered in a reorganization of the entire complex of world economic and political relations, and the United States played a leading role on both occasions. History decreed that the United States would act as a stabilizing force within capitalism, and, although it pursued primarily its own predatory interests, it was able to assist its defeated former enemies in Europe and Asia in restoring their socioeconomic and political position within the world balance of power.[1]

Today the United States aims at another such reorganization. But its role has changed. Today, America is neither a guarantor, nor the ultimate anchor, of world capitalism, but, just the opposite, lies at the center of the international crisis. Today it is a power that actively destroys the past equilibrium. A new reorganization in the spirit of Pax Americana presupposes not the "peaceful coexistence" of a few imperialist rivals, but the complete subjugation of them all to the will and interests of one. Clearly, this goal must produce terrific resistance and a series of destructive and bloody conflicts.

The active resistance of the German and French governments to the military plans of the US is therefore not surprising. This resistance has already threatened a collapse of some of the most important structures of the postwar order, among them, NATO.

The European governments are motivated by two sorts of worries. On the one hand, they fear that an American success in subjugating Iraq will rapidly weaken their own geopolitical position and make them much more vulnerable vis-à-vis the US, especially with respect to their sources of energy. On the other hand, they are terrified of growing social protest from below—from the broad toiling masses within their own countries. This protest, beginning as opposition to war, will inevitably become linked in the popular consciousness to the rejection of the economic policies of these states, which in the main differ little from the measures taken by the administration in Washington.

For the sake of boosting the competitiveness of their capitalist corporations, the European governments are preoccupied with the dismantling of what remains of the social reforms and democratic rights that the European working class won over many decades of struggle.

However, the European elites most energetic in their criticism of American war preparations are stuck in the horns of an insoluble dilemma. They cannot silently acquiesce to the imperious will of the US, since this would make them into a sort of American protectorate. Neither can they develop a real opposition to war, since this would lead to questions about the foundations of their own socioeconomic and political domination.

That is why the opposition to the Iraq war on the part of European parties and governments has such a limited, equivocal and deeply hypocritical character. While rejecting the need for war at this time, they accept American war aims as quite legitimate and justified. Nobody talks openly about the goals of the war. All of them support the myth that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction, and thereby legitimize Washington's war plans.

How does the position of Vladimir Putin's Russian government appear in this context? It equivocates even more than the Europeans. While denying the need for a direct military intervention in Iraq's affairs, it in no way questions even the most odious claims and arguments used by the American administration and chorused by the mass media as pretexts for launching the aggression.

Declaring its solidarity with Germany and France on the question of Iraq, Moscow attempts to do everything it can to retain the trust of its main partner across the Atlantic. Putin does not wish to question the "strategic choice" in favor of a prolonged alliance with America, which was announced following September 11, 2001. He behaves as a pragmatist who haggles with both sides, trying to figure out which will pay him more. The Russian media presents this tail-wagging as a special sort of wisdom, but, in truth, there is nothing behind it except a lackey's "Anything you wish."

Putin's policy of unprincipled maneuvering, devoid of any clear and independent strategic goal, flows from the nature of the regime that was established in Russia following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The new regime emerged through the direct support of the leading imperialist powers, which had viewed the existence of the Soviet Union as the great barrier to their establishment of direct control over the significant natural, human and technical resources in the interior of Eurasia.

The Soviet Union grew out of the October Revolution, one of the greatest events in world history. International by its objective nature, it established a workers and peasants government on the ruins of the tsarist autocracy, and issued a challenge to the world domination of capital.

Despite its subsequent isolation and degeneration under the weight of economic backwardness, the Soviet regime did not lose the greatest conquest of October 1917—the nationalized property relations. Notwithstanding the totalitarian character of its power, the privileged Stalinist bureaucracy that emerged from the interstices of the Soviet economy and became the embodiment of nationalist reaction was afraid for many decades to attack the basic social conquests of the Russian proletariat.

Trotsky justifiably called Stalinism the "gangrene" of the workers state and an agency of world capitalism. Nevertheless, the impetus of the Revolution was so powerful that for a long time the bureaucracy was forced to resist the hegemonic pretensions of world imperialism and defend the social foundations of the USSR, although it did so using its own criminal and destructive methods. It was only after the development of a new and specific correlation of historical conditions that the Stalinist bureaucracy threw aside all past pretensions about "building socialism" and decided, finally, to switch completely to the side of world imperialism, volunteering to act as its direct tool and junior partner.[2]

The 11 years since the dissolution of the USSR have clearly demonstrated the deeply destructive nature of this process, which has led to a colossal regression in economic, social and cultural life, a setback unprecedented in peacetime history. The governments of Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin succeeded where the Nazi invasion could not: they overthrew the social relations created by the 1917 Revolution and subordinated the former Soviet economy to the dictates of the world capitalist market.

Exchanging "power for property," the former bureaucracy has successfully remade itself into a caste of new masters.[3] But the historic conditions of its social transformation are such as to leave little room for maneuver: the new ruling elite is a powerless satellite of the world financial oligarchy and of the leading imperialist states. Its own economic position is so weak and so dependent on the vagaries of the world market as to make Russia's "European dilemma" an even more intractable problem than that confronting the established great powers of Europe.

On the one hand, the new Russian bourgeoisie has inherited the traditional, historically developed spheres of geopolitical influence of

"Great Russia." It has its own economic interests, which are now under threat.

At the same time, it has virtually no assets with which to counter the naked aggressiveness of the leading imperialist power, the US. The new Russian elite cannot even, after the example of Germany and France, play the card of anti-Americanism.

Under conditions of Russia's widespread poverty, and the memory of the recent better-fed Soviet past, combined with the weak but persisting historical memories of the Revolution, such anti-Americanism would inevitably assume the character of spontaneous anti-capitalist attitudes, dangerous to the regime. The only resort is Russian nationalism and chauvinism. But even this well-trying reactionary gambit is supported by the Kremlin only to the extent that the West considers it useful in securing its own interests in Russia.

Whatever pose of opposition to the war the Putin government assumes, it bears no trace of principle. Together with the German and French governments, the Kremlin does not dispute the right of a great power to attack Iraq and occupy it. Indeed, Putin has a vested interest in asserting the rights of the powerful so as to defend Russia's right to attack and conquer its weaker neighbors, in the manner of the tsarist autocracy.

Putin has his own criminal war in Chechnya. The second war in the Northern Caucasus is now more than three years old and continues to deal frightful wounds to the peoples of the region. While it was provoked as a means of securing the transfer of power in the Kremlin, it soon evolved into a means of defending the neocolonial and geopolitical pretensions of the ruling Russian elite.

As with the Bush administration's drive to war, Russia's war in Chechnya is an expression of deep crisis, from which Putin's regime sees only one way out—the escalation of external violence and fomenting of chauvinist and militarist poison inside the country.

Eleven years of capitalist "reforms" have brought the Russian masses nothing but misery and impoverishment. It is a lie to rationalize the social disaster by claiming that Russia's reforms have barely gotten under way. Those advancing this argument appeal to an abstract model of capitalism that never existed in history. According to this abstraction, the more capitalism there is, the more democracy and well-being for everyone.[4]

Actually, the reforms have been essentially carried through—that is, they have achieved their goal. In the course of a few years there has occurred a colossal transfer of the most significant elements of "nobody's" state property into private hands. The fact that tens and hundreds of millions have been left without bare necessities, that they have been reduced to the level of a struggle for physical existence, that diseases and crime grow apace, that regional and ethnic conflicts keep escalating, that the technical infrastructure has precipitously decayed, that the natural resources are being plundered and depleted—all of this is not accidental. These are not "mistakes," but the only possible outcome of a social regression unprecedented in modern history.

Contemporary capitalism daily demonstrates on a world scale its inability to develop backward regions or solve economic and social problems. Everything that goes toward the conditions of life of the overwhelming majority of humans is sacrificed in the name of private profit. In Russia also, the new elite strives to enrich itself at any price and acts according to the principle, "after us, the deluge."

For a time there were attempts to blame the criminal character of Russian capitalism on the "heritage of communism," or on some specifically Russian conditions. The recent American corporate scandals, however, have proved that the methods of falsification, asset looting, tax fraud, cooking the books, etc., are characteristic of the behavior of the business elite in a leading capitalist country no less than in Russia.

Present-day Russia leads the world in its extreme levels and grotesque forms of social inequality. As if to illustrate the Marxist critique of capitalism, it presents the spectacle of two countries within its borders: the

Russia of the “new Russians” and the Russia of the average toiler: two existences, which meet but rarely. Moscow, yesterday’s “advertisement for socialism,” has today become a symbol of the new capitalism a la Russe—the “casino economy,” a combination of New York and Las Vegas.

A 2002 survey of the 188 richest persons in Europe includes nine Russian citizens. Among these is the 39-year-old Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former Komsomol functionary, who presently heads the leading oil company, Yukos. With assets of \$8 billion, he has made it onto the list of the 30 richest persons on the planet.

The list of billionaires includes the government official V. Chernomyrdin (\$1.35 billion) and the retiree R. Viakhirev (\$1.8 billion). Both presided over Gazprom, the leading Russian gas company, acting, obviously, not from motives of altruism.

At the same time, the wages in many branches of the Russian economy are below the officially recognized minimum needed for survival. According to the Ministry of Labor, the minimum wage of 450 roubles per month decreed by the government constitutes only 22 percent of this “survival minimum,” and “does not even provide for the physical survival of the worker.”

Budgetary constraints prevent this “survival minimum” from being raised to the level of real survival any time soon. Meanwhile, Putin’s government continues to pay some \$15 billion each year to foreign creditors. This amount flows into the accounts of world banks and Western governments.[5]

“But what about democracy?” might be the response. “It must be admitted that the average Russian is truly suffering. But did we not win freedom in August of 1991?”

Arguments of this sort are no weightier than the conviction of those stubborn minds who insist that Russian reforms have not yet begun. Of course, when the totalitarian Stalinist regime fell there were solemn pronouncements about rights and freedoms, temporarily borrowed from the history books on the bourgeois-democratic revolutions in Europe and America.

These, however, were not conquests made by the people. Rather, they resulted from the victory of one part of the bureaucracy over another, at the expense of the interests of the people. In reality, “democracy,” “freedom” and “popular sovereignty” remained paper phrases, like the empty rhetoric of the Stalin and Brezhnev constitutions of 1936 and 1977.

The new post-Soviet regime did not intend to carry out any real destruction of Stalinism. Having pulled down the chiefs of the former party hierarchy, it included in its ranks the larger part of the old nomenclature. With the exception of purely surface personnel and name changes, the whole apparatus of Stalinist oppression (headed by the KGB) was preserved, and was soon elevated in status once again.

The state coup carried out by Yeltsin in the fall of 1993 denuded the new regime of even the fig leaf of democracy: the new presidential prerogatives exceed the aspirations of some dictators. Popularly elected parliament, independent judiciary, free press—these were all turned into a façade, behind which could be glimpsed the self-satisfied, ugly mug of yesteryear’s Stalinist careerist, who had in the meantime acquired the traditional habits of the old tsarist bully. Today he defends with all his power the interests of the semi-criminal nouveau riches.

Russian capitalism came to be. But its distinctive form—that of a thoroughly corrupt, criminal and dependent enterprise—is such because it cannot be anything else. We must accept this fact, and draw the necessary conclusions from it. Capitalism in Russia has no future because it has neither past, nor present. In a deeply historical sense, it is illegitimate.

The present state cannot last for long, because it is a state of deep crisis, not development. Whatever the initial outcome of the US war against Iraq, in the end it will propel Russian capitalism into a state of even greater dependency on the world market. The popular illusion among the Russian

people that Putin is a “national savior” will sooner or later dissipate. The masses will realize that Putin continues in the tradition of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, that he represents oligarchic business, bureaucracy and world capital, not the interests of the “common man.”

Up to now the strength of the post-Soviet regime in Russia lay in the popular belief that contemporary capitalism was different than the system analyzed by Marx and Lenin, that after 1945 it became compatible with social reform and democracy. The eruption of imperialist antagonisms, wars and violence around the globe, which is accompanied by ruthless attacks on the living standards and rights of the working people even in the advanced countries, will deal a crushing blow to such illusions. The working class will rediscover that socialism is not an ideal of the past, but a realistic response to the crisis of civilization that threatens it with new and unprecedented forms of barbarism.

The war will bring forth not only the spirit of destruction. It will also give momentum to revolutionary tendencies. The Fourth International, which today embodies the concentrated expression of a revolutionary alternative, and which at one time grew out of the struggle of Russian Marxism against the growth of Stalinism, will return to Russia.

Through the powerful weapon of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Fourth International will help the Russian masses realize that it is impossible to fight war without tying this struggle to the fight against social inequality and capitalism on a world scale. The heritage of three Russian revolutions will inevitably reemerge. The Russian working class will be obliged to find its rightful place in the ranks of today’s international struggle for socialism.

#### Notes:

1. It is necessary to note that the American decision to provide economic assistance to its imperialist competitors was not rooted in long-term calculations or altruism, but rather in its instinct for survival. The foundations of world capitalism were buckling under the pressure of the international revolutionary movement of the working class. There was no choice. When, following World War I, the US assisted Austria and Weimar Germany in restoring their economic systems, this was done to weaken the danger of communist revolution in Europe. The same motives prevailed following World War II with respect to Western Europe and Japan. Today, the American ruling elite sees no reason for similar assistance to its international competitors.

2. The collapse of the Soviet Union was not predetermined either historically or economically. The main reason that the Soviet economy ended up in a dead end was the reactionary policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy, aimed at constructing “socialism in a single country.” Within the context of the rapid growth of economic globalization in the late 1970s and 1980s, this perspective of autarchic development became ever more reactionary and economically unviable. Integration of the Soviet economy into the world system of production had to occur one way or another. The “Iron Curtain” had to fall.

But this process could have happened in two opposite ways: either in favor of socialism, or in favor of capitalism. The extension of world proletarian revolution beyond the borders of the USSR opened up the possibility for a progressive resolution of this crisis. The bureaucracy feared this result most of all. Under the cover of “glasnost” and “perestroika” it adopted the opposite course: to privatize state property, liquidate the monopoly of foreign trade and open the Soviet economy to the transnational capitalist corporations.

Giving its own answer to the economic and social crisis of the Soviet Union, the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote at the time: “The development of socialism in the Soviet Union and the solution of the economic problems arising in its evolution are indissolubly bound up with the extension of proletarian revolution to the world arena. The shortage of technology and the continuing contradictions between industry and agriculture can only be resolved through access to the world

market. There are only two roads to the integration of the Soviet Union into that market—that of Gorbachev leading towards capitalist restoration and that of the world socialist revolution” (*Fourth International*, vol. 14, no. 2, June 1987, p. 38).

3. When speaking of the social character of the Soviet Union, Marxists always noted that the bureaucracy was not an economically dominant class, but rather played the role of a privileged caste, a parasite on the foundations of the nationalized economy. Has it now become a “class” in the true sense of this word?

It is insufficient to simply extrapolate past analysis onto contemporary conditions. From the point of view of strictly economic definitions, we should probably call the new layer of private owners in Russia a “class.” However, while not rejecting this general approach, we consider that, absent more concrete explanations, such a label would leave out of account some very important social and historical peculiarities, and might result in erroneous political conclusions.

The Russian entrepreneurs constitute a component part of the world capitalist elite. But this elite is becoming ever more parasitic. Its existence is tied less and less to a definite historically necessary and, no less important, progressive role in the productive process. In other words, the world bourgeoisie steadily loses those characteristics that in the past made it a social group able to dominate economically, not as a result of naked violence, falsification, cooking the books and other financial documents, etc.,—i.e., through methods outside the economic sphere.

Despite their accumulation of stolen riches, a gang of highway robbers does not thereby become an economically dominant class, just as the knife and the ax, needed for these robberies, does not assume the role of means of production.

We are, of course, far from describing in a general economic sense the present ruling elites of America, Europe or Japan as gangs of robbers. But the historical tendency points in this direction. This tendency shows itself more strongly with respect to belated and grotesque Russian capitalism. The less Russian “businessmen” are able to develop the economy, the more they hold onto the gains conquered during the years of “prikhvatizatsiya” [insider takeover, trans.]. The isolated and esoteric character of this elite group steadily increases. Hence, in our opinion, it justly earns the designation “caste.”

4. The real economic basis for illusions about the indissoluble ties of capitalism and democracy lies in petty commodity production based on individual ownership of the means of production, the absence of widespread use of hired labor and the equality of individual producers to one another. As Marx had shown in *Capital*, in a historic sense petty commodity production predated the capitalist form of production, and is far from being its equivalent. Capitalism concentrates the means of production in a few hands, expropriates the mass of independent producers in the town and country, and, thereby, creates huge economic inequality, thus leading to a situation where democracy sooner or later turns into pure fiction.

In the eighteenth century, during the epoch that preceded the industrial revolution—the industrial and technical foundation of capitalism—the petty commodity producer could still appear as the embodiment of true “human nature.” The great thinkers of the period, for example, Jean Jacques Rousseau, worked out mentally plans for establishing a utopian democracy of individual commodity producers, equal in their rights and economic status. These ideas were demolished in the course of the French Revolution.

5. During the years of “perestroika,” among the circles of “advanced” intellectuals infected with petty-bourgeois prejudices there was a popular phrase designed to demonstrate the hopeless situation within the Soviet Union as compared to the capitalist West: “Our standard of life equals their standard of death.” It is impossible, without a dose of bitter irony, to remember these words today. They reflected arrogant expectations and

dilettante beliefs in the “miracle” of capitalism. The realities of “market reforms” have far exceeded the most gloomy, albeit well-founded, warnings to the contrary.



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