

Alex Callinicos: An imperialist apologist writes on Ukraine

Chris Marsden
14 March 2014

Alex Callinicos is the theoretical leader of the Socialist Workers Party in Britain and a senior lecturer at Kings College London. His most recent writings on Ukraine mark him out definitively as a pliant tool of imperialist intrigue, ready to employ any lie, no matter how brazen, in order to facilitate the predatory activities of Washington and London.

A March 3 article, “Putin raises the stakes in imperialist Crimea crisis,” is a barely disguised defence of US imperialism. It is, according to Callinicos, “Russia’s seizure of military control over Crimea [that] has brought Ukraine to the brink of war.”

There is no examination of the events leading up to that seizure. Quite the opposite. Of the coup engineered by Washington and its European allies that brought down the pro-Russian regime of Viktor Yanukovich, Callinicos writes that whereas it expressed a “struggle that has been going on for more than a decade among the corrupt and thuggish bunch of oligarchs,” this was somehow subordinate to “a genuine popular movement against the now exiled president.”

Moreover, “thanks to the historic weakness of the left in Ukraine, the far right has played a significant role in the ‘Euromaidan’ occupation in Kiev... those who claim Yanukovich’s overthrow was a ‘fascist coup’ are parroting Moscow propaganda.”

The only sentence supposedly refuting the incontrovertible role of fascist forces such as Svoboda and the Right Sector in deposing Yanukovich is the declaration that he fell “because the section of the oligarchy who had previously backed him withdrew their support.”

No mention is made at all of the key role played by US and European imperialism in backing the alliance of oligarchs with their political stooges, including Svoboda and the Right Sector.

In response to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s claim

“to be acting in defence of Ukraine’s Russian speakers,” Callinicos again defends the bona-fides of the US-installed regime by asserting that “beyond a parliamentary vote in Kiev to strip Russian of its status as an official language, there is little evidence of any real threat to Russian speakers.”

Turning to what he refers to as “the inter-imperialist rivalry between Russia and the West,” Callinicos makes the extraordinary assertion that the European Union (EU) and the US have very little interest in the Ukraine!

“Ukraine matters much more to Russia than it does to the United States or the EU,” Callinicos declares. “A Ukraine that was fully integrated into the EU and Nato would be a step towards Moscow’s worst nightmare of being encircled by the West,” he adds.

However, the EU depends on “US military capabilities... And American eyes are turned towards the Pacific. When Barack Obama backed down from his threat to mount missile attacks on Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian regime last autumn he underlined that US has no appetite for any more land wars in Eurasia.”

“Washington is undoubtedly keen to see Ukraine integrated in the Western alliance system,” he concludes. “But the idea put around by some on the left that behind the Ukraine crisis lies a drive by American neoconservatives for war with Russia is the purest nonsense... Socialists in the West must of course oppose any military intervention by the US or NATO in Ukraine. But the crisis reminds us that imperialism can’t be reduced to American domination. It is a system of economic and geopolitical competition among the leading capitalist powers. Rather than tail any of these powers, we must fight this entire system. This means opposing Russian intervention in Ukraine.”

This is not someone with a false political line. It is a man who knows that he is lying. Back in 2008, Callinicos wrote an article, “System failure: Economic turmoil and

endless war,” for *Socialist Review* .

Writing on the subject of US designs on the Ukraine, Georgia and other territories in the Caucasus that historically fell under Russia’s sphere of influence, Callinicos stated: “World politics since the 9/11 attacks has been dominated by the efforts of the Bush administration to maintain the global hegemony of the US by exploiting its military superiority.” The Bush administration was intent on “provoking a confrontation with Russia in the Caucasus.”

“One key dimension of US grand strategy since the end of the Cold War has been to exploit Russia’s weakness ruthlessly by expanding the European Union and Nato into eastern and central Europe as a way of both encircling Russia and expanding US influence deep into Eurasia. Begun under Bill Clinton in the 1990s, the policy has been extended by the Bush administration, which has given enthusiastic support to the rather shaky pro-Western regimes in Ukraine and Georgia.”

Callinicos then warned:

“In any circumstances, seeking to expand Nato to incorporate Ukraine and Georgia, in two of Russia’s key border zones, would have been reckless. Given the shift in the relative balance of power between Washington and Moscow, the policy—strongly pushed by Bush at the Nato summit in Bucharest last April—was the height of folly.”

The net result was “the outbreak of the war between Russia and Georgia.”

Callinicos concluded with, for him, a devastating rebuttal of any claim that Russia held a significant advantage over the US. “As recently as 1980 the Soviet Union produced 14.8 percent of global manufacturing output, nearly half the US share of 31.5 percent,” he wrote. But by 2007, “Russia accounted for 3.2 percent of world gross domestic product, less than its 1992 share of 4.2 percent, and way below the US share of 21.63 percent. The highest estimate of Russian military spending put it at \$70 billion in 2006, compared to the Pentagon’s \$535.9 billion. Russia has lost strategically and economically vital territory in Ukraine and Central Asia, and its population continues to decline.”

“This means,” Callinicos concluded, that “that the US is the only genuinely global imperialist power.”

The decline identified, which has encouraged and enabled US aggression in the Caucasus, is the result of the restoration of capitalism and destruction of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy, of which Putin’s regime of oligarchs is the product. This provides the essential starting point for any socialist critique of Putin’s

Russian nationalist and militarist response in Ukraine and the political fight for the independent political mobilisation of the working class of Russia, Ukraine, Europe and America.

But for Callinicos, who wraps his right-wing line in the inanities and political fictions of “state capitalism,” including falsely depicting Russia as an imperialist power, the strategic lessons to be drawn from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 are a blank page.

Callinicos happily forgets what he wrote in 2008 because he is intent on defending the putsch carried out by Washington in Kiev and insisting that Russia is the imperialist aggressor.

This is not the first time Callinicos has employed claims that are false on their face to sanction a pro-imperialist policy. In July 2012, the US was over a year into a military campaign to destabilise the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, using proxy Islamist forces backed by Turkey and the Gulf States.

Callinicos responded by describing Syria as a “revolution” rooted in a “popular uprising,” insisting: “The idea that Syria is being ‘recolonised’ implies that it is a long-standing Western priority to remove the Assad regime. But there is no evidence of this... Those in the Western left who allow a reflexive and unthinking ‘anti-imperialism’ to set them against the Syrian revolution are simply confessing their own bankruptcy.”

Callinicos concludes his March 3 article on the Ukraine with the suggestion, “Never has the slogan ‘Neither Washington nor Moscow but international socialism’ been more relevant.”

In truth, this old “third camp” SWP slogan does not accurately reflect his politics. Callinicos is an avowed opponent of “unthinking anti-imperialism” because he is an apologist for imperialism. His operating slogan should properly read: “No to Moscow, Yes to Washington.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact