

Pseudo-left International Marxist Tendency provides cover for imperialist powers in conflict with Russia

Jordan Shilton
9 March 2022

Washington and its imperialist allies have succeeded in inciting Russia's invasion of Ukraine and are working to further escalate the crisis into a direct conflict between Moscow and NATO. The imperialist powers have imposed sanctions tantamount to economic warfare against Russia, organized an unprecedented build-up of troops and military equipment throughout Eastern Europe, and are supplying high-powered weaponry to Ukraine with the aim of prolonging the conflict and making it bloodier.

Pseudo-left organisations around the world are stepping forward to supply propaganda justifying the actions of the American war machine. One such group is the International Marxist Tendency, which turns reality on its head by claiming that US imperialism is "weak" and will be forced to make "concessions" to Vladimir Putin, a representative of "Russian imperialism" the IMT says is chiefly responsible for the current conflict.

The IMT's role amid the current war drive is to repackage with "Marxist" phraseology the propaganda of the US State Department and other NATO countries that they have no intention of militarily intervening against Russia. They seek to lull leftward-moving workers and young people to sleep by promoting illusions in the continued viability of the capitalist system.

The IMT released the latest in a series of statements on the war in Europe on March 1, as dozens of NATO countries funnelled weapons to Ukraine to sustain the military alliance's proxy war with Moscow and just two days after Putin placed Russia's nuclear weapons systems on high alert.

In a statement titled "The Ukrainian war: an internationalist class position," the IMT declared, "There is absolutely no question of a new world war between the United States and Russia, nor between the US and China, in part, precisely because of the threat of nuclear war, but also because of the resolute opposition to such a war on the part of the masses... a nuclear war would signify the mutual destruction of both sides. They have even coined a phrase to describe this: MAD (mutually assured destruction). That such a war would not be in the interests of the bankers and capitalists is self-evident."

These complacent statements, drawing on Cold War anti-communism's justification for "nuclear deterrence," expose the fraud of the IMT's "Marxism." It was an elementary truth for all the great Marxist leaders, from Lenin and Trotsky back to Engels and Marx himself, that wars arise out of the objective contradictions of world capitalism, not the inclinations of bourgeois politicians and businessmen. These contradictions, between the outlived nation state system and the globalized character of the productive forces, and between private ownership and socialised production, drive the major powers into a never-ending struggle for the redivision of the globe.

The IMT's profession of confidence that the imperialist powers and Putin's reactionary Russian nationalist regime will come to their senses

and take a "rational" way out of the current crisis recalls nothing so much as the anti-Marxist revisionism of Eduard Bernstein, who proclaimed on the eve of the mass slaughter of World War I, "Fortunately, we are increasingly becoming accustomed to settle political differences in ways other than by the use of firearms."

The IMT's March 1 statement is one in a series of declarations seeking to downplay the threat of war and play up the stability of the capitalist system. In a piece published just over a month ago, "Will Russia invade Ukraine?", the IMT was still speculating about a "reduction of forces in Eastern Europe" by the United States. "The most likely course of events, therefore, is ongoing talks between the US and Russia, eventually ending up with the US being forced into some sort of concessions," the IMT's sages predicted.

"The US will try to keep the concessions they make behind the scenes and paint whatever comes out of it as a victory. However, what all of this shows is that the US is most certainly not 'back', and Putin, fully aware of this fact, is taking full advantage of the situation."

Turning to the US in a section titled "The weakness of the US," the IMT wrote, "The relative weakening of US imperialism, in this case exposed by its unwillingness to commit ground troops [to Ukraine], leads it towards retreat, which again compounds its weakness... From the point of view of US imperialism, divisions with its European allies should not be expressed out in the open. However, due to the weakness of the United States, they are not able to force a united line from NATO with which to confront Russia."

Bearing in mind the experiences of recent weeks, commenting on these lines further would diminish their unintended comic effect.

Putin is declared to be a representative of "Russian imperialism" by the IMT. They go so far in their March 1 statement as to suggest that "Russian imperialism" possesses the power to enforce some sort of post-war equilibrium based on its ability to resist Western sanctions and Washington's refusal to engage militarily.

"[N]o sensible person can deny that Russia is a regional imperialist power with ambitions in Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans," wrote the IMT, echoing numerous right-wing bourgeois politicians asserting Putin's alleged plans to conquer all of Europe. "China has clearly reached a deal with Russia to offset the effects of sanctions (another reason why they will fail). The Ukrainian affair will undoubtedly lead to a closer bloc between the Russian and Chinese imperialists in the coming period – a development that Washington must fear as the Devil fears holy water."

The IMT take their readers for fools, failing to even attempt an account for the fact that Russia is being subjected to unprecedented economic warfare by the imperialist powers. If Moscow possesses such wide-ranging imperialist interests as the IMT would have us believe, how can it

be that its banks are being excluded from global trade, its foreign assets, including those of its central bank, seized, and its currency crashed with the aim of starving the Russian population?

The IMT's off-hand reference to "Chinese imperialism" is also absurd. Despite the country's rapid economic growth in recent years, it remains dependent on foreign investment and is the target of a diplomatic, economic, and military offensive led by US imperialism.

As for Europe, the IMT confidently asserts, "The moment the present conflict ends (as, one way or another, it must), these sanctions, and many others, will be quietly dropped, since the harmful effect on the European economy – in the first place on Germany – would be too painful to bear."

Having declared that capitalists are not interested in world war, that a military conflagration between the US-NATO and Russia is totally excluded, and that Putin and Xi Jinping's "imperialism" has the strength to fend off a "weak" US and create a new capitalist equilibrium, the IMT's statement arrives at the conclusion: "Ultimately, capitalism, in its epoch of senile decline, means war and economic crisis. The only way to put an end to its horrors is through the working class taking power, in one country after another, and sweeping away this rotten system. For that, a revolutionary leadership is needed – one which is firmly based on the principles of socialist internationalism."

The anti-Trotskyist origins of the IMT

The concealing of right-wing, pro-imperialist politics behind such formal pledges to "fight for Marxism" and the "socialist revolution" has been the hallmark of the IMT since its founding in the early 1990s.

Ted Grant, who co-founded the IMT with Alan Woods, broke from Trotskyism in the late 1940s based on the explicit rejection of the working class as a revolutionary force. Grant, anticipating the revisionist arguments that would later be developed by Michel Pablo, claimed that a revolutionary faction of the Stalinist bureaucracy would emerge in the Soviet Union to lead the transition to socialism—defining the Stalinist regime as a form of "Soviet Bonapartism." He saw the social democratic parties and trade unions in the major imperialist countries, and the bourgeois nationalists in the colonial countries, as the natural leaders of mass movements, which could create "workers' states" without the active participation of the working class.

Grant and Pablo's perspective obviated the need to build a revolutionary party in the working class, since they no longer saw it as having any progressive role to play. Although Grant's followers would split with Pablo in 1964, his political perspective did not differ fundamentally from the United Secretariat. As the *World Socialist Web Site* observed in an obituary of Grant in 2006, "Grant's politics could be characterised as Pabloism sans Pablo."

Grant pursued this policy in Britain as leader of the entryist Militant Tendency by maintaining unswerving loyalty to the Labour Party. Unlike the Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League, who intervened into the Labour Party rank-and-file during the 1950s and 1960s with the aim of breaking workers from their illusions in social democracy and winning them to a revolutionary socialist perspective, Grant's Militant Tendency used "Trotskyist" rhetoric to keep leftward-moving workers and young people confined within the labour and trade union bureaucracies based on the claim that they could be pushed to implement socialism.

Objective changes in the structure of world capitalism, above all the globalisation of production, proved the political bankruptcy of the politics pursued by Grant and the Pabloites. Britain's Labour Party and other national-based social democratic parties throughout the world lurched sharply to the right during the 1980s and 1990s, becoming open tools of

big business and the ruling elite.

In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist bureaucracy, as Trotsky had warned in the 1930s, consciously worked to dissolve all the gains of the October Revolution, above all nationalised property relations, to establish itself as a new capitalist ruling class.

Grant and his followers responded to these changes by intensifying their efforts to cover for the Labour and trade union bureaucracies. The IMT emerged following a split with a faction led by Peter Taaffe, who would go on to form Militant Labour and then the Socialist Party, over the tactical question of whether to persist with work inside the Labour Party as the predominant form of political activity or set up a more "independent" organisation wedded firmly to the trade union bureaucracy.

Grant's tendency, known in Britain by the name of its paper *Socialist Appeal*, insisted that work inside the Labour Party had to be maintained at all costs.

Apologetics for Stalinism and the sudden appearance of "Russian imperialism"

Grant and Woods were so wedded to their decades-long orientation to Stalinism and social democracy that they could not bring themselves to admit that capitalism had been restored in the Soviet Union through a conscious policy pursued by the bureaucracy. To this day, whenever the IMT writes about the liquidation of the USSR, it argues that the Soviet Union "collapsed," a turn of phrase that gives the impression that there was something unforeseen or accidental about the entire process.

Even more than four years after the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR, when the horrendous consequences of economic "shock therapy" were clear, with workers' living standards plunging across the former USSR as a clique of oligarchs enriched themselves through the destruction of nationalised property relations and the theft of state property, Grant and Woods admonished anyone who would try to impose a "final solution" on "unfinished processes" when discussing the class nature of the Russian state.

Placing their hopes on factions of the military and the newly established capitalist class under Yeltsin, Grant and Woods wrote in a lengthy 1996 piece, "The collapse of Stalinism and the class nature of the Russian state": "The process is not complete. On the basis of the frightful economic and social collapse, not only the working class, but a section of the bureaucracy is beginning to swing the other way. It is possible that this process could lead eventually to civil war. This perspective partly depends on which way the officer caste will jump. It is quite likely that the decisive section of the officers will move in the direction of proletarian Bonapartism which, after all, guaranteed their privileges much better than the present regime."

The IMT's analysis underwent a dramatic shift with the rise to power of Putin and a relative stabilisation of the Russian economy thanks to high energy prices. Virtually overnight, Russia went for the IMT from being a "transitional society" where capitalism had not yet been restored to an "imperialist" power with global ambitions.

As a recent article by the IMT marking 30 years since the "collapse" of the Soviet Union said of the period surrounding Putin's rise to power in 1999, "The Western powers assumed, quite wrongly, that Russia would return to capitalism as a colony of the West... the new Russian oligarchy had its own interests, and was starting to find its confidence. Russia re-emerged on the scene of world politics, not as a poor, impoverished nation but as an imperialist power, hungry to reclaim its spheres of influence that had been lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union."

The IMT's sudden shift is all the more remarkable due to the lack

of any public discussion at the time about what had so drastically changed to justify labelling Russia an imperialist power. Their website, *In Defence of Marxism*, was founded in 1998 but published no articles or statements referring to “Russian imperialism” for many years.

In fact, the main document on the IMT’s website on “Russian imperialism,” titled “Imperialism today in the character of Russia and China,” dates from 2016. The document, which includes no shortage of sterile abstractions from Lenin’s great work *Imperialism* to give the IMT’s new discovery an air of “Marxist” authority, openly admits that two major factors in the group’s decision to deem Russia imperialist was Putin’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and military intervention to back Syria’s Assad regime in 2015.

There could hardly be a clearer case of a pseudo-left group of “Marxist” imposters adjusting their line to suit the political needs of American and European imperialism. Grant and Woods saw no need to alter their description of Russia as a “transitional society” between capitalism and socialism following the juridical liquidation of the Soviet Union, which ended the nationalised property relations established by the October Revolution, plunged tens of millions of people into unemployment and destitution, and transferred the vast resources of the third-largest economy in the world into the hands of a cabal of ex-Stalinist oligarchs.

But the moment Putin engaged in a foreign policy agenda based on reactionary Great Russian nationalism that cut across the interests of US and European imperialism in Syria and Ukraine, the IMT rushed to proclaim that the former KGB agent had overnight and single-handedly turned Russia from a society where capitalism was not yet restored into an imperialist power!

For Grant and the IMT, the working class never had an independent political role to play as a revolutionary force. Its national sections, like Fightback in Canada, Socialist Appeal in Britain, and Der Funke in Germany, have remained buried in pro-imperialist, pro-austerity parties during the past three decades. Fightback continues to describe Canada’s New Democratic Party as a party of the “working class,” despite its fulsome support for every US-led war of aggression since the NATO bombardment of Serbia in 1999. Der Funke continues to operate in Germany’s ex-Stalinist Left Party, which has declared its strong endorsement of German imperialism’s mad programme of military rearmament.

The IMT’s spouting of pro-imperialist propaganda about Washington’s intention to avoid military conflict with Russia and its hopes for some sort of new “peace” arrangement based on the strengthening of a Russia-China bloc are fully in keeping with its record. It speaks for privileged sections of the middle class who are fully on board with these pro-war policies. Their purpose is to disarm the working class under conditions of the gravest capitalist crisis in decades and provide a “left” cover for the imperialist powers’ war drive, which threatens to plunge the entire world into a catastrophic global conflagration.

In opposition to the reckless drive to war, working people around the world must take on the task of building an international anti-war movement. The only basis upon which such a movement can be constructed is the conscious political struggle for socialism. A key element of this fight is the relentless exposure of pseudo-left groups like the IMT.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: