

A letter to a friend on the historical and political background to the war in Ukraine

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The following letter was sent by WSWW International Editorial Board Chairman David North to a friend who requested his opinion on a recent online discussion held at a US college on the Russia-Ukraine war.

Dear Friend,

Thank you for bringing the online discussion on the Russia-Ukraine war to my attention and providing me with access to the campus event. I have now listened to the broadcast and will give you, as you have requested, my “professional” opinion of the presentation of the two academics. I will concentrate on the remarks of the historian, with whose work in the field of Holocaust studies I am familiar. In any case, he made the most substantial comments.

To be blunt, I was disappointed, if not surprised, by the superficial approach that was taken to this critical and dangerous turning point in world events. As you know, my evaluation of the war is that of one who has been active in international socialist politics. The *World Socialist Web Site* has publicly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, this principled opposition from the political left has nothing in common with the grotesquely one-sided official US-NATO propaganda narrative, which presents the invasion as an entirely unprovoked act of aggression by Russia.

Momentous events such as wars and revolutions invariably raise complex problems of causation. That is one of the reasons why the study of history is an indispensable foundation of serious political analysis. This general truth acquires exceptional importance in any discussion of Russia. This country was the site of arguably the most significant political event of the twentieth century, the 1917 October Revolution, whose historical, political and intellectual legacy still reverberates in our own time. The study of Soviet history remains critical to understanding the politics and problems of the contemporary world.

Making this point is not a matter of political nostalgia. The initial remarks of the historian referenced briefly the final decades of the USSR and stressed the trauma caused by its dissolution. However, his emphasis on the impact of this event on the personal psychology of Vladimir Putin did not lead to a serious understanding of either Russia or the present war. He did not attempt to explain the socio-economic foundations of the regime that emerged from the decision of the Stalinist bureaucracy to liquidate the Soviet Union.

Essential questions were not asked. In whose interests does Putin rule? What impact did the privatization of state assets have on the Russian capitalist elite’s perception of its security interests? Comparing the foreign policy of Putin to that of the Soviet Union, what elements of its policies changed and what elements persisted?

Geography is a persistent factor, and it is one that has haunted Russia, a country that has been the terrain of so many invasions—including, need I mention, the extermination war launched by Nazi Germany only 80 years ago, which claimed the lives of between 30 and 40 million citizens. The historian mentioned the impact on Putin of the mob scene outside Stasi headquarters in Berlin in 1989. I find it hard to believe that that incident

affected him more than the enduring societal recollection of the “Great Patriotic War” and its aftershocks.

The catastrophe that began on June 22, 1941 is embedded in the collective consciousness of Russians. This is not a matter of justifying the nationalistic conclusions that are drawn by Putin, not to mention ultra-right elements like Aleksandr Dugin, from World War II. But the experience of World War II is more important in understanding Russian perceptions, including among workers, than supposed dreams of a lost empire.

That being said, what I found most troubling about the webinar’s discussion of the war was the absence of any reference to the wars that have been waged by the United States, often with the support of its NATO allies, during the last 30 years. The entire coverage of this war in the media has been characterized by a level of hypocrisy that is disgusting. Even if one accepts as absolutely true all the crimes attributed to the Russians during the last month, they do not approach the scale of horrors inflicted by the United States and NATO on Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan—not to mention the other countries that have been on the receiving end of US bombings, missile strikes and targeted killings. Based on what one sees and reads in the broadcast news and print media, one might form the impression that the United States has been overtaken by a virulent form of collective amnesia.

Does no one remember “Shock and Awe”? If the Pentagon had planned the war on Ukraine, Kyiv and Kharkiv would have been flattened on the first night of the war. The US media acted as if the attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol (accepting as true the description of its contemporary use) that cost three lives was an act of unspeakable brutality. Has everyone forgotten the February 1991 US bombing of the Amiriyah air raid shelter on the outskirts of Baghdad that killed approximately 1,500 women and children? It is credibly estimated that deaths caused by US “wars of choice” total more than 1 million. And the dying continues. Millions of children are starving in Afghanistan. Dark-skinned refugees from the disaster created in Libya by NATO bombs are still drowning in the Mediterranean. Is anyone paying attention to this? Are the lives of the people of Central Asia and the Middle East less precious than those of Europeans in Ukraine?

Journalists who are now comparing Putin to Hitler seem to have forgotten what they themselves wrote during the air war on Serbia and the later invasion of Iraq. The historian referred to Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* as a major geopolitical thinker. Let us recall what he wrote on April 23, 1999, during the US-NATO bombing of Serbia:

But if NATO’s only strength is that it can bomb forever, then it has to get every ounce out of that. Let’s at least have a real air war. The idea that people are still holding rock concerts in Belgrade, or going out for Sunday merry-go-round rides, while their fellow Serbs are “cleansing” Kosovo is outrageous. It should

be lights out in Belgrade: every power grid, water pipe, bridge, road and war-related factory has to be targeted.

Like it or not, we are at war with the Serbian nation (the Serbs certainly think so), and the stakes have to be very clear: Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverizing you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too. If we can frame the issue that way, Mr. Milosevic will blink, and we may have seen his first flutter yesterday.

Allow me to recall the words of *Washington Post* columnist George Will, who is now frothing with rage over Putin's crimes. But this is what Will wrote during the US invasion of Iraq in a column dated April 7, 2004:

Regime change, occupation, nation-building—in a word, empire—are a bloody business. Now Americans must steel themselves for administering the violence necessary to disarm or defeat Iraq's urban militias...

One week later, on April 14, 2004, Will unleashed another homicidal tirade in the *Post*:

After Fallujah, it is clear that the first order of business for Marines and other U.S. forces is their basic business: inflicting deadly force.

Will's columns were not exceptional. They were fairly typical of what US pundits were writing at the time. But what has changed is the broader public reaction. At that time, opposition to US wars and the foreign policy that fomented them was widespread. But it is difficult to find even traces of public opposition today.

The examination of the aggressive foreign policy of the United States since the dissolution of the USSR is not only a matter of exposing American hypocrisy. How is it possible to understand Russian policies apart from an analysis of the global context within which they are formulated? Given the fact that the United States has waged war relentlessly, is it irrational for Putin to view the expansion of NATO with alarm? He and other Russian policy makers are certainly aware of the enormous strategic interest of the United States in the Black Sea region, the Caspian region and, for that matter, the Eurasian landmass. It is not exactly a secret that the late Zbigniew Brzezinski and other leading US geostrategists have long insisted that US dominance of Eurasia—the so-called “World Island”—is a decisive strategic objective.

This imperative has become even more critical in the context of the escalating US conflict with China.

It is within this framework that the future of Ukraine has become a matter of great importance for the United States. Brzezinski stated explicitly that Russia, deprived of its influence in Ukraine, is reduced to the status of a minor power. More ominously, Brzezinski spoke openly of luring Russia into a war in Ukraine that would prove as self-destructive as the earlier Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. A review of the events leading up to the war—going back to the US-supported Maidan coup of 2014—strongly supports the argument that this objective has now been achieved.

Again, the recognition that Russia perceived in the actions of the United States and NATO a serious threat is not a justification of the invasion. But

should there not be a critical evaluation of how the policies of the United States led to and even deliberately instigated it?

In an essay posted online by *Foreign Affairs* on December 28, 2021, nearly two months before the invasion, analyst Dmitri Trenin wrote:

Specifically, the Kremlin could be satisfied if the U.S. government agreed to a formal long-term moratorium on expanding NATO and a commitment not to station intermediate-range missiles in Europe. It might also be assuaged by a separate accord between Russia and NATO that would restrict military forces and activity where their territories meet, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. ...

Of course, it is an open question whether the Biden administration is willing to engage seriously with Russia. Opposition to any deal will be high in the United States because of domestic political polarization and the fact that striking a deal with Putin opens the Biden administration to criticism that it is caving to an autocrat. Opposition will also be high in Europe, where leaders will feel that a negotiated settlement between Washington and Moscow leaves them on the sidelines. [“What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine: Russia Seeks to Stop NATO's Expansion, Not to Annex More Territory”]

If an agreement on the non-NATO status of Ukraine could have been secured, would that not have been preferable to the present situation? Can it be seriously argued that Russia had no reason to object to Ukraine's integration into NATO? Those who experienced the crisis of October 1962 remember that it was triggered by the Soviet Union's placement of ballistic missiles in Cuba. Though this was done with the full consent of the Castro regime, President Kennedy made clear that the United States would not accept a Soviet military presence in the Western Hemisphere and was prepared to risk nuclear war over the issue. That was 60 years ago. Can anyone seriously believe that the Biden administration would act less aggressively today if, for example, Mexico or any other Caribbean or Latin American country entered into a military alliance with China, even one which claimed to be purely defensive?

There is a further issue that was not seriously addressed. Both professors minimized the continuing political and cultural influence of fascism in Ukraine, which is demonstrated in the renewed glorification of the mass murderer Stepan Bandera and the influence of the heavily armed paramilitary forces, such as the Azov Battalion, who identify with the horrifying legacy of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its armed force, the *Ukrainska povstanska armii* (UPA). The critical role played by the OUN and UPA in the extermination of Ukrainian Jews is a matter of established historical fact. The most recent account of their genocidal crimes, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941-1944*, by John-Paul Himka, makes for very difficult reading.

The horrors of World War II are “not only” a matter of history. (I put “not only” in quotation marks because these two words should never be used when referencing events associated with crimes such as the Holocaust.) It is well known that the cult of Stepan Bandera and the justification of all the crimes with which he is associated reemerged as a potent and extremely dangerous factor in the political and cultural life of Ukraine in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR.

In his authoritative biography of Stepan Bandera (*The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist: Fascism, Genocide, and Cult*) the historian Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe wrote that after 1991:

Bandera and the Ukrainian revolutionary nationalists again became important elements of western Ukrainian identity. Not only far-right activists but also the mainstream of western Ukrainian society, including high-school teachers and university professors, considered Bandera to be a Ukrainian national hero, a freedom fighter, and a person who should be honored for his struggle against the Soviet Union. The post-Soviet memory politics in Ukraine completely ignored democratic values and did not develop any kind of non-apologetic approach to history. [p. 553]

Rossoli?ski-Liebe further reports:

By 2009 about thirty Bandera monuments were unveiled in western Ukraine, four Bandera museums were opened, and an unknown number of streets were renamed after him. The Bandera cult that appeared in post-Soviet Ukraine resembles that which the Ukrainian diaspora had practiced during the Cold War. The new enemies of the Banderites became Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians, Russians, democrats, and occasionally Poles, Jews and others. The spectrum of people who practice this cult is very wide. Among the Bandera admirers, one can find on the one hand far-right activists with shaved heads performing the fascist salute during their commemorations, and arguing that the Holocaust was the brightest episode in Ukrainian history, and on the other hand, high-school teachers and university professors. [p. 554]

During the Cold War, the right-wing extremist Ukrainian lobby exerted substantial international influence and especially in the former West Germany, the United States and Canada. Until his assassination by the Soviet KGB in Munich in 1959, Bandera gave interviews that were broadcast in West Germany. The post-World War II career of Bandera's deputy, Yaroslav Stets'ko, also deserves attention. He corresponded with Hitler, Mussolini and Franco and attempted to obtain the support of the Third Reich for the "free Ukrainian state" that Stets'ko proclaimed after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. This project proved unsuccessful, as the Nazi regime had no interest in satisfying the aspirations of the Ukrainian nationalists. Stets'ko was taken into "honorary captivity" and brought to Berlin. In July 1941 he produced a statement in which he declared:

I consider Marxism to be a product of the Jewish mind, which, however, has been applied in practice in the Muscovite prison of peoples by the Muscovite-Asiatic peoples with the assistance of Jews. Moscow and Jewry are Ukraine's greatest enemies and bearers of corruptive Bolshevik internationalist ideas ...

I therefore support the destruction of the Jews and the expedience of bringing German methods of exterminating Jewry to Ukraine, barring their assimilation and the like. [Himka, p. 106]

Stets'ko survived the war, became a well-known figure in international right-wing politics and served as a board member of the World Anti-Communist League. Among the many tributes he received for his life-long struggle against Marxism was being named an honorary citizen of the Canadian city of Winnipeg in 1966. That was not all. In 1983, reports Rossoli?ski-Liebe, Stets'ko "was invited to the Capitol and the White House, where George Bush and Ronald Reagan received the 'last premier

of a free Ukrainian state'." [p. 552]

Rossoli?ski-Liebe recalls yet another event:

On 11 July 1982 during Captive Nations Week, the red-and-black flag of the OUN-B, introduced at the Second Great Congress of the Ukrainian Nationalists in 1941, flew over the United States Capitol. It symbolized freedom and democracy, not ethnic purity and genocidal fascism. Nobody understood that it was the same flag that had flown from the Lviv city hall and other buildings, under which Jewish civilians were mistreated and killed in July 1941 by individuals who identified themselves with the flag. [p. 552]

The international connections of Ukrainian neo-Nazis are intensely relevant to the present crisis. It has recently been revealed that Canadian officials met with members of the Azov Battalion. According to a report posted by the *Ottawa Citizen* on November 9, 2021:

The Canadians met with and were briefed by leaders from the Azov Battalion in June 2018. The officers and diplomats did not object to the meeting and instead allowed themselves to be photographed with battalion officials despite previous warnings that the unit saw itself as pro-Nazi. The Azov Battalion then used those photos for its online propaganda, pointing out the Canadian delegation expressed "hopes for further fruitful co-operation."

The report continues:

A year before the meeting, Canada's Joint Task Force Ukraine produced a briefing on the Azov Battalion, acknowledging its links to Nazi ideology. "Multiple members of Azov have described themselves as Nazis," the Canadian officers warned in their 2017 briefing.

Bernie Farber, head of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, said the Canadians should have immediately walked out of the Azov Battalion briefing. "Canadian armed forces personnel do not meet with Nazis; period, full stop," Farber said. "This a horrendous mistake that shouldn't have been made."

There is yet another disturbing aspect of this story which relates directly to the extremely aggressive anti-Russian policy of the Canadian government. Chrystia Freeland is the Canadian Deputy Prime Minister. Her grandfather, Mykhailo Khomiak, edited a Nazi newspaper called *Krakivski Visti* (*Kracow News*) in Occupied Poland and then briefly in Vienna from 1940 to 1945. Of course, Deputy Prime Minister Freeland should not be held responsible for the sins and crimes of her grandfather; but serious questions have been raised about the influence of right-wing Ukrainian nationalism on her own political views, and, therefore, on the policies of the Canadian government.

The *National Post* of Canada reported on March 2, 2022:

Freeland joined several thousand demonstrators at a pro-Ukraine rally in downtown Toronto. In a photo her office subsequently posted on Twitter, Freeland can be seen helping to hold up a red-and-black scarf bearing the slogan "Slava Ukraini" (Glory to

Ukraine).

Observers were quick to note that red-and-black were the official colours of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a nationalist partisan group active during the Second World War.

The media's reluctance to undertake an intensive investigation into Freeland's family connections and the broader connection between the Ukrainian far right and the Canadian government stands in stark contrast to the witch-hunt aimed at suppressing all traces of Russian influence in the cultural life of the country. Earlier this month, the 20-year-old Russian piano virtuoso, Alexander Malofeev—who is in no way responsible for the Russian invasion of Ukraine—could not go ahead with recitals that had been scheduled in Vancouver and Montreal. A similar purge of Russian cultural influence is underway in the United States and throughout Europe. This degrading campaign—which is the negation of the cultural ties between the United States and Russia that began to flourish in the mid-1950s despite the Cold War—should be seen as a manifestation of the very dangerous political and ideological impulses and motivations that are at work in the present crisis. Far from denouncing and opposing the anti-Russia hysteria, the intellectual and cultural institutions are, for the most part, adapting themselves to it.

There is a final criticism that I must make of the webinar. There was no reference in the discussion to the extreme political and social crisis within the United States, as if the domestic situation has absolutely nothing to do with the very aggressive stance taken by the United States. Many serious studies of World War I and World War II have focused on what is known among historians as “*Der Primat der Innenpolitik*” (The primacy of domestic politics). This interpretation, developed in the early 1930s by the left-wing German historian Eckart Kehr, placed central emphasis on the role of domestic social conflicts on the formulation of foreign policy.

A careful consideration of Kehr's conceptions—which acquired great influence among subsequent generations of historians—is certainly necessary in analyzing the political motivations of the Biden administration. Since the turn of the decade, the United States has been shaken by two historic crises: (1) the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) the attempted (and nearly successful) coup d'état of January 6, 2021. Both of these events, even when viewed in isolation, have been traumatic experiences.

In just two years, the United States has suffered, at minimum, 1 million deaths due to COVID-19, more than in any American war and, possibly, greater than the total number of deaths suffered by Americans in all US wars. The actual number of fatalities, based on a study of excess deaths, may be far greater. This means that an extraordinarily large number of Americans have experienced the loss of family members and close friends. More than 1 out of 100 Americans over the age of 65 has died. Millions of Americans have become infected, and a large but as yet uncalculated number of them are grappling with the effects of Long COVID. Normal patterns of social life have been disrupted in ways that have never been experienced in the history of the United States. Protracted social isolation has intensified the problem of mental health, which was extremely serious even before the pandemic began. And worst of all, the United States has proven to be incapable of bringing this crisis to an end. The prioritization of economic interests over the protection of human life has prevented the implementation of the Zero-COVID policy that could have ended the pandemic.

The extreme social, economic and political contradictions, developing within a society plagued by staggering levels of wealth and income inequality, finally exploded on January 6, 2021. The president of the United States attempted to suppress the results of the 2020 election, overthrow the Constitution, and establish himself as an authoritarian dictator. Not since the Civil War has the American political system

confronted such a fundamental political challenge. And those who either minimize the significance of the event or claim that the crisis has been overcome are engaged in self-delusion. Biden himself acknowledged on the anniversary of Trump's attempted coup d'état that it is not guaranteed that American democracy will still exist at the end of this decade.

Is it really implausible to suggest that the interaction of these two crises has played a significant role in the formulation of American foreign policy? Would this be the first time that a government seized upon, and even provoked, an international crisis to deflect attention from intractable domestic problems?

In concluding this letter, I must return to a point that I made earlier, that the study of Soviet history is critical to an understanding of the current world situation. Amid the capitalist triumphalism that prevailed in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was much fanciful talk of the “End of History.” Within the former Soviet Union, the equivalent of this self-deluding euphoria was the belief, especially among intellectuals and status-conscious professionals, that the restoration of capitalism would bring untold riches to Russia and a flowering of democracy. The unfulfilled dreams of the 1917 February Revolution would be realized. The bourgeois Provisional Government, overthrown by the Bolsheviks in October, would be reborn. All those with talent, ambition and connections could become either rich entrepreneurs or, at least, members of a new and prosperous middle class. Wherever Marxism had put a minus, the newly minted petty bourgeois now put a plus mark.

The second element of this euphoria was that Russia, having thrown off its revolutionary and utopian strivings, would be a “normal” country, welcomed lovingly into the community of Western nations. References to Lenin's writings on imperialism, not to mention those of Trotsky, were greeted with giggles. Russia had, at last, come to its senses; and no one took “Marxism-Leninism” seriously anymore. I should add that I encountered the same conceptions among Ukrainian academics that I met in Kyiv.

In any case, these great illusions—in universal capitalist prosperity, a flowering of democracy and the peaceful integration into the world system dominated by the United States—have been totally shattered.

Economic “shock therapy” and the collapse of 1998 bankrupted broad sections of the aspiring middle class. The democracy of which the middle class dreamt collapsed amidst the bombardment of the Russian parliament in October 1993. Capitalist restoration produced a corrupt oligarchical system, with massive social inequality, dominated by a semi-authoritarian Bonapartist regime. And, finally, rather than being peacefully integrated into the community of nations, Russia found itself under relentless military and economic pressure from its “Western partners.” The promises it had received, relating to the non-expansion of NATO, proved worthless. Every effort made by Russia to assert its independent interests was met with economic sanctions and military threats.

In the form of the Ukraine crisis, Russia is confronting the tragic and potentially catastrophic consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Putin is seeking to overcome this crisis through thoroughly reactionary and politically bankrupt measures—that is, through a war that is aimed at strengthening the borders of the Russian national state. It is significant that Putin's war speech began with a denunciation of Lenin, the October Revolution and the establishment of the USSR. Ironically, in his hatred of Marxism and Bolshevism, Putin's views are aligned completely with his NATO enemies.

Rejecting the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, Putin is attempting to resurrect the foreign policy of Tsar Nicholas and appealing for support of “Mother Russia.” On the basis of this pathetically retrograde policy, he has produced a modern-day version of the disastrous Russo-Japanese War of 1904, which fatally undermined the Romanov regime and set Russia on the path of revolution. There is reason to believe that this war will lead to a similar outcome, but it will not be the type of revolution that the Biden

administration will welcome. The Russian working class is a massively powerful social force, with an extraordinary and historically unequaled tradition of revolutionary struggle. Decades of political repression—the most criminal expression of which was the physical extermination during the Stalinist terror of the revolutionary Marxist intelligentsia and working class vanguard—separated the working class from this tradition. But this crisis completes the discrediting of the post-Soviet regime and will create the conditions for the renewal of socialist internationalism in Russia.

It is not only in Russia that the post-1991 illusions have been shattered. Within the United States and in all capitalist countries, the intersection of social, economic and political crises will produce a resurgence of opposition to capitalism and the reckless policies of imperialism that have brought the world to the threshold of nuclear war. Of course, the outcome that I foresee is not guaranteed, but I can envision no other progressive solution to the intensifying world crisis.

The webinar discussion could not be expected to address comprehensively all the complex issues posed by the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war. However, to the extent that it reflects the discussions now taking place at colleges throughout the country, it typifies the dangerously uncritical and complacent attitude toward a crisis that threatens to develop into a catastrophe. I hope that the analysis presented by the *World Socialist Web Site* will encourage serious scholars to speak out against this dangerous escalation and to use every means available to them to elevate public opinion by counterpoising historical knowledge to jingoistic and warmongering propaganda.

I hope that this letter more than adequately meets your request for my opinion of the webinar.

With very best regards,

David North



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