

How the Democratic Party prepared the war in Ukraine

Part One: From the dissolution of the USSR to the “Maidan Revolution”

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[Part One](#) | [Part Two](#)

The mounting confrontation between US-NATO forces and Russia is portrayed by the Biden administration and the American corporate media as entirely the product of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This in turn is attributed to the demonic intentions of one man: Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This rips the Russia-Ukraine war out of its historical context. Most importantly, it conceals the role of American imperialism in preparing and deliberately instigating the conflict. The reactionary war has been seized on to generate a veneer of popular support to the long-prepared US-NATO campaign to overthrow the Putin regime, break up Russia, and reduce it to a semi-colonial status.

The Democratic Party has played the central role in an anti-Russia campaign that goes back more than a decade. This article will review the role of the Democrats particularly since the Obama-Biden administration took office in 2009. This account is not an after-the-fact assessment. It relies heavily on the contemporaneous analysis provided by the *World Socialist Web Site* as the process was unfolding, documenting both the role of the Democrats in carrying out the policy of the US ruling class and its national security strategists, and the effective takeover of the party by direct agents of the military-intelligence apparatus.

The break-up of the USSR and civil war in Yugoslavia

During the first stages of the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union, the two major capitalist parties in the United States were in general agreement on the policy to be pursued in that vast region of the world. The break-up of the USSR was pursued, albeit with some caution, to create the best conditions for American corporations and banks, and to cement US world domination in what was variously described as the “unipolar moment,” and “the end of history.”

Thus, George H. W. Bush ordered the massive military mobilization that resulted in the swift destruction of the Iraqi army in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but he did not press the advantage, rejecting the advice from some aides to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein, because he did not want to provoke a response from Moscow that might delay the ongoing collapse of the regime.

Similarly, Bush did not initially welcome the immediate secession of the various component republics of the USSR. He sought to limit the dispersion of the Soviet nuclear weapons stockpile, which was physically

distributed across four republics—Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Ukraine and Kazakhstan possessed the third- and fourth-largest nuclear arsenals in the world, more than China, France or Britain, although Moscow controlled the launch codes. Under the 1992 Lisbon Protocol to the START Treaty, signed in a hotel bar under the auspices of the US Secretary of State James Baker, the other three republics agreed to transfer their nuclear weapons to Russia.

After ratification by their respective governments, separate agreements were signed in 1994 (collectively known as the Budapest Memorandum), in which Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine formally agreed to transfer their nuclear weapons to Russia in return for financial aid and certain security guarantees, directed at both the Western powers and Russia. Great Britain was an additional signatory to the deal, along with the United States. The ensuing transfer process took time and was not completed until 1996.

Throughout this period, US foreign policy toward Russia unfolded within the framework set by the 1992 defense policy guidance, which declared, “Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.”

The first significant divisions over Russia policy—with the Democrats taking the more aggressive posture—emerged in relation to the civil war in Yugoslavia, which had begun in 1991, triggered by the recognition by Germany of breakaway regimes in the constituent republics of the Yugoslav federation, first Slovenia, and then Croatia. These declarations of independence left large portions of the Serb population, the largest ethnic group, suddenly minorities in the new states, which were defined by ethnicity.

Wars ensued, between Slovenia and the federal government in Belgrade, within Croatia, and then within Bosnia-Herzegovina, where no ethnic group was in the majority, although Muslim Bosnians were the largest group, followed by Serbs and Croats. The nationalist perspectives of all the ethnic-based bourgeois factions were completely bankrupt and reactionary, given the intermingling of the population through intermarriage and the integration of economic and social life in the larger Yugoslav state.

The US and NATO intervened in support of the anti-Serb factions, backing the Croatian government in a fascistic war against its Serb minority, as well as on the side of the Muslim-dominated government in

Bosnia. This culminated in the saturation bombing of Serbia in 1999 after the CIA-backed uprising in Kosovo, spearheaded by the Kosovo Liberation Army, an Albanian nationalist grouping linked to drug-trafficking and outright gangsterism.

Russia was allied with the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. The NATO air war against Serbia, which included the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, culminated in a confrontation between US and Russian forces at the airport in Pristina, Kosovo, which threatened to become an outright military clash, only averted at the last minute.

The Clinton administration pursued its aggressive policy, particularly in relation to Kosovo, without much Republican Party support, outside of the hawkish faction led by Senator John McCain. Clinton was unable to get a resolution through Congress endorsing US military action, which had to be conducted within the NATO framework instead. He obtained support for a postwar US military deployment as part of a “peacekeeping” force only by a narrow margin.

Afghanistan, Iraq and the Orange Revolution

Official US foreign policy toward Russia did not shift significantly until the administration of George W. Bush, the son of George H. W. Bush. Using the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as a pretext, Bush ordered the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. He then outlined in his first State of the Union Address a doctrine of pre-emptive war (illegal under the precedents set in the post-World War II Nuremberg Tribunals), which justified unilateral US attacks on countries deemed to be “potential” threats.

The first targets, identified by Bush as the “axis of evil,” were Iraq, Iran and North Korea, with later additions including Syria and Libya. All these governments, not incidentally, had close relations, and in some cases direct alliances, with Russia.

A new US National Security Strategy, issued on September 17, 2002, codified this new doctrine, which became the basis for the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by Congress in the fall of 2002. Congressional Democrats were split over the AUMF, but key foreign policy leaders, including Joe Biden, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, delivered enough Democratic votes to ensure passage of the resolution, which provided the legal framework for the impending US invasion of Iraq.

Once the conquest of Iraq had been carried out, the divisions within the Democratic Party were quickly papered over. The Democrats conducted their 2004 presidential campaign as a party of war, nominating Senator John Kerry, an advocate of a more effective effort to suppress Iraqi resistance to the US occupation, as their presidential candidate, and rejecting nominally antiwar candidates like Howard Dean.

When the 2004 “Orange Revolution” took place in Ukraine in December 2004—the overturning of the election of pro-Russian presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich, and the victory of pro-EU and pro-US candidate Viktor Yushchenko in a third round of that year’s elections—the result was hailed by the US political establishment as a triumph of democracy.

But the new regime quickly sank into a mire of corruption and factional infighting between rival groups of capitalist oligarchs, each seeking to profit from the privatization of assets bequeathed by the former Soviet Union. Ukraine had been the second largest constituent republic of the USSR, endowed with rich agricultural resources and significant industrial and public infrastructure, and there was a lot to plunder.

The Bush administration was preoccupied with the debacle in Iraq and

the ongoing war of occupation in Afghanistan. It failed to press the advantage represented by the installation of the Yushchenko government. Sections of the Republican Party, including former presidential candidate Bob Dole and former party chairman Paul Manafort (later Donald Trump’s campaign chairman), even became lobbyists and political advisers for Yanukovich or for the billionaires who financed and backed his Party of Regions, based largely in the predominantly Russian-speaking eastern half of the country.

The Bush administration tried to seize on the 2008 Russia-Georgia war as the occasion for a major anti-Russian campaign, to be spearheaded by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, as explained in a WSWS analysis in August 2008. But this project was suddenly overshadowed and ultimately shelved by the eruption of the global financial crisis with the collapse of Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008.

For the next several years, managing the financial crisis, winding down the war in Iraq and intervening in the sudden eruption of the “Arab Spring” revolts in 2011, culminating in the US-NATO bombing of Libya and the civil war in Syria, preoccupied the new Obama-Biden administration. Equally important was the massive escalation of the US war in Afghanistan, to which Obama committed more than 100,000 troops. This huge force required equally huge logistical support, with many supplies shipped to the landlocked country over Russian railways with the consent of the Putin government.

The Obama administration launched the “Northern Route” in January 2009, and for a time it exceeded in volume the much shorter and more direct route through Pakistan. This became particularly important in 2011 and 2012, when Pakistan shut down shipments to Afghanistan for months in response to the killing of Pakistani citizens by US drone missile strikes.

Moscow even permitted the transit of US soldiers and weapons to Afghanistan through Russian airspace. In March 2012, plans were announced for a NATO transit hub at an airbase in Ulyanovsk on the Volga River. On June 25, 2012, the Russian government issued a formal decree authorizing NATO to use the airbase, sparking protests because the city is the birthplace of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution. The city was renamed for Lenin under the Soviet Union (he was born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in 1870 in Simbirsk, a provincial center in the Tsarist empire).

In order to maintain this de facto alliance with Moscow, the Obama administration accepted the victory of Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential elections. In the first round, incumbent Viktor Yushchenko was eliminated, receiving a humiliating five percent of the vote, an expression of vast popular disillusionment with the free market policies of the “Orange Revolution.” In the second round, Yanukovich defeated the candidate of the Ukrainian nationalists, Yulia Tymoshenko, by a margin of three percentage points, in an election certified as fair by international observers. The new government quickly withdrew Ukraine’s application to join NATO and signed an agreement with Russia extending its lease on the Sevastopol naval base, headquarters of the Black Sea fleet, for another 25 years.

These were the circumstances which prevailed when Obama made his mocking retort to Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney during a 2012 debate, after Romney had declared Russia, not Al Qaeda terrorism, to be the principal threat to the United States. “The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back,” Obama sneered, “because, you know, the Cold War’s been over for 20 years.”

In truth, Romney was only saying publicly what the CIA and Pentagon had already concluded after the strategic debacle for US policy in Ukraine. Obama fully subscribed to that understanding, but he sought to conceal it from the American public while Washington prepared a counterstroke.

The Maidan “revolution”—a right-wing coup

The occasion for a radical policy shift was provided by Russian intervention into the Syrian civil war. Moscow had long been allied with the Assad regime, which had offered Russia its only military base outside the former Soviet Union, a naval installation at Tartus. Russia supplied Syria with extensive military aid, but no personnel, while the US-backed rebellion intensified, mobilizing Al Qaeda-linked forces, including Islamist militants shipped into the country by the CIA from Libya, where they had served as the ground troops for imperialism in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011.

Obama had declared the use of chemical weapons in Syria a “red line” that would justify US military intervention against Assad, and an incident in August 2013, likely engineered by the CIA, provided the necessary pretext. But Obama had not secured the home front. His factional opponents in the Republican Party, in control of the House of Representatives, blocked a vote for an Authorization for the Use of Military Force, similar to those before the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and Obama’s threats were left hanging. Putin swooped in, offering a diplomatic escape route, and Obama accepted the Russian offer to take custody of all chemical weapons in Syria and remove them from the country.

This humiliating public backdown provided further impetus for the US effort to undermine and weaken Russia, which was not long in coming. In November 2013, Ukraine President Yanukovich announced that his government would no longer support an effort to seek membership in the European Union and would instead align itself with the customs union established by Russia. There were immediate protests in Kiev by pro-EU elements in the middle class, which were reinforced and ultimately taken over by openly fascist forces such as the Svoboda Party and the Right Sector.

These groups had little popular support, but they had been the recipients of massive financial subsidies from the United States and other imperialist powers. In a phone call intercepted in early February by Russia and made public, US State Department official Victoria Nuland could be heard boasting that the Obama administration was spending \$1 billion a year on regime-change operations in Ukraine.

The protest demonstrations in the central square of Kiev (Maidan) grew in size and hostility towards the Yanukovich regime. When the regime cracked down on demonstrators, the US and EU responded with threats of economic sanctions.

On February 22, the right-wing opposition seized power and Yanukovich fled Kiev for exile in Russia, in what the WSWS described as a “fascist-led putsch,” although the Western media hailed it as a democratic revolution. In an indication of its real character, the new regime immediately declared Ukrainian the sole national language, although 20 percent of the population speak Russian primarily. The chief rabbi of Kiev urged Jews to leave the city, given the prominence of neo-Nazis in the Maidan uprising.

The response to the coup in Russia was to mobilize military forces, particularly on the borders of eastern Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula, both populated by a majority of Russian speakers. On February 28, pro-Russian militia forces seized control of Crimea, soon joined by Russian troops. (The peninsula, site of the main naval base on the Black Sea, had been transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954; until then it had been part of the Russian SFSR. Both Russia and Ukraine were then constituent republics of the Soviet Union).

On March 3, the International Committee of the Fourth International issued a statement on the Ukraine coup and the mounting confrontation between the US-led NATO powers and Russia, focused initially on the Russian actions in Crimea. The statement warned that while the

imperialist powers were directly threatening Russia, the response of the Putin regime, the product and agent of capitalist restoration in Russia, was politically bankrupt. The ICFI declared:

In the Ukraine events, the world is witnessing the catastrophic consequences both within Russia and internationally of the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. These consequences are the ultimate outcome of the nationalist policies pursued by the Stalinist regime that usurped political power from the Soviet working class and repudiated the program of world socialist revolution upon which the October Revolution was based.

It is worth recalling Trotsky’s warnings that the dissolution of the Soviet Union would result in Russia’s descent to a semi-colonial status. Trotsky in the 1930s, under conditions of the Stalinist regime and its reign of terror against all socialist elements in the country, raised the slogan of an independent Soviet Ukraine, insisting that independence on a bourgeois basis could have only the most reactionary implications. A bourgeois Ukraine, moreover, could be nothing other than a plaything of the various imperialist powers. So it was then, so it remains today.

The coup regime in Kiev began to carry out an increasingly right-wing program, implementing drastic austerity measures aimed at the Ukrainian working class, and making threats of massacre when these measures sparked protests in eastern Ukraine, an area with close economic ties to Russia and largely populated by Russian-speaking people.

In the midst of these events, the billionaire oligarch controlling the Ukrainian gas firm Burisma, a former official of the Yanukovich regime, took out an insurance policy by hiring the US vice president’s son, Hunter Biden, for a lucrative position on the company’s board of directors. The money grubbing by the younger Biden was part of a “gold rush” to Kiev, as wheeler-dealers, arms traffickers and political charlatans of all descriptions flocked to Ukraine hoping to profit from the new US-backed regime.

After getting the green light from Washington, the Ukrainian government launched a military onslaught in eastern Ukraine, spearheaded by fascist elements such as the Right Sector and the Azov Brigade. The WSWS condemned the mounting air strikes and artillery bombardment of Donetsk, the capital of the breakaway region, declaring, “For the first time since the NATO bombardment of Belgrade fifteen years ago, another European city with a million inhabitants—Donetsk—is being fired on with heavy weapons.” The American media, which today laments the suffering of the population Kiev, Kharkiv and Mariupol, said nothing about the devastation inflicted on Donetsk.

Once again, unforeseen developments drew the attention of American imperialism away from developments in the former Soviet Union. In July 2014, the Saudi-financed offshoot of Al Qaeda, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which had become a significant factor in the US-backed civil war against the Assad regime, abruptly changed the direction of its military operations, crossing the border into Iraq, routing the military forces of Baghdad, taking control of the entire western third of Iraq, largely Sunni-populated, and capturing Iraq’s second-largest city, Mosul. The impending collapse of the decades-long project of creating a US puppet regime in Iraq forced the Obama administration to refocus on the Middle East, rushing troops and supplies to Iraq, and arming Shi’ite militia forces, allied with Iran, to fight ISIS. Ukraine was put on the back burner.

To be continued



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