

British journalist Paul Mason: The pseudo-left's chief pro-NATO, pro-war ideologue

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Paul Mason is the most high-profile political spokesman championing demonstrations called by the UK's Ukraine Solidarity Campaign and other groups protesting Russia's invasion. The protests have been small, mainly mobilising Britain's Ukrainian community, wealthy anti-Putin Russian expats in London and some Labour MPs and trade union functionaries.

An examination of Mason's writings makes clear the political character of a campaign portrayed in the media as "anti-war," but which is aimed at paving the way for an imperialist war for regime change in Russia that threatens a nuclear conflict. He is arguably the most naked example of the transition of a broad swathe of the pseudo-left milieu directly into the camp of imperialist reaction.

Mason still portrays himself as a man of the left, but he has travelled very far to the right since he was a member in the 1980s of Workers' Power—a split from the Socialist Workers Party fulfilling the standard function of Britain's pseudo-left as apologists for the Labour Party and the trade unions. He abandoned his youthful radicalism following the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. Like so many others, he concluded that "revolution" had failed, and that this failure confirmed the non-revolutionary character of the working class.

He boasts in the March 3 *New European* of how this makes him uniquely qualified to support Ukraine (and therefore NATO) against Russia. He recalled events in February 1992, "two weeks after the dissolution of the USSR," when he was part of a group of pseudo-left individuals protesting President Boris Yeltsin's privatisation of the economy. At a demonstration he attended, the working class was nowhere to be seen, he writes. The result was the victory of the "oligarchs and the Western capitalists who decided to strip Russia of its wealth and dignity." Mason abandoned ship, proclaiming his unity with the "Western oriented" young people of Kyiv fighting for "the right to be European" and "our democratic system and values."

An anti-Russian war propagandist

Mason's anti-socialist politics has found its most grotesque expression in his support for the "democratic" imperialist powers against what he defined in April 2015 as the basic emerging threat posed by "Russian influence" and a possible alliance with China evidenced in both Ukraine and Syria. With the Trident nuclear submarine missile programme up for renewal, Mason argued, "The unpalatable truth—for those who believe in nuclear deterrence—may be that four new submarines are not enough. All the things touted as alternatives to the current Trident system—cruise missiles, free-fall bombs and static silos—might be needed on top of it."

He was appointed as an advisor to Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell

in 2016, at a time when Jeremy Corbyn, elected Labour leader in September 2015, was under relentless assault by the Blairites over his professed opposition to renewing Trident and to NATO membership.

In April 2016, Mason issued a video arguing, "I think Labour should vote to keep Trident" while strengthening Britain's conventional forces against the "rapidly evolving threats" of "terrorism" and "a newly aggressive and unpredictable Russia." He urged Corbyn to adopt a policy of specifically threatening nuclear war against Russia: "Instead of the Cold War policy of keeping Russia guessing about how the nuclear deterrent will be used we need to communicate a clear set of conditions for using it."

In an accompanying essay, he called for a "new NATO Strategic Concept" including support for an enhanced "ballistic missile defence" system positioned in the East European and Baltic states bordering Russia and "new, permanent non-aggressive [!] deployments to NATO forces in Europe."

Long-held positions like these have ensured Mason's rise to prominence as Britain and the other NATO powers have instrumentalised plans to provoke war in Ukraine. His specific mission is to appeal to the upper-middle class layers whose social interests he champions, facilitated by his now close connections with the Blairites. Mason worked on Sir Keir Starmer's successful Labour leadership election campaign in 2020, after which his consultancy, Exarcheia Ltd, was hired by Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey.

On April 14, 2021, Mason wrote in the *New Statesman* complaining of how, "As Russia threatens to invade Ukraine, the West appears paralysed... Voters want governments to defend their rights and their socially liberal way of life against the encroachments of men such as Putin and Xi Jinping."

On November 15, he warned again in the *New Statesman*, "We cannot avoid the fact that, piece by piece, crisis by crisis, Putin and his allies intend to destabilise our democracy and destroy belief in it."

On his own blog on February 12, 2022, he wrote that the "imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine" meant that the "left" should formulate its own "vision for NATO" including support for "political mass movements" against "Russia, China, Belarus and all the other mafia states." He concluded that "Fostering the democratic overthrow of Putin" must become an explicit aim of "the European left, social democratic and Green movements."

Mason outlined his proposal for the "left" to "reform" NATO, calling for the formulation of "a coherent counter-hybrid warfare strategy" that would empower "civil society to resist fascism and disinformation," and the creation of "large volunteer reserve forces on the Swiss or Finnish model."

Those who oppose the militarisation of society are accused of appeasement similar to Labour leader George Lansbury in the 1930s, who "could not adapt to the emergence of a fascist superpower" in Nazi Germany.

Mason in particular attacks the Trotskyist movement and what he otherwise refers to as “the orthodox communist tradition” for supposedly failing to make “any revisions to the Leninist position on war (i.e. revolutionary defeatism) in the light of the experience of the Second World War... They are saddled with 1914 Leninism in an era when anti-humanist dictatorships are intent on destroying Western democracy and—if we are really unlucky—the socially liberal society we’ve created through struggle over the past 60 years.”

Mason repurposes the Stalinist perspective of subordinating the working class to its national ruling classes during the Second World War. The Popular Front advocated by Stalin centred on a military alliance between the Soviet Union and the “democratic imperialist powers.” For the Communist parties in Britain and elsewhere, this translated into support for their own governments based on the prioritisation of the anti-fascist struggle in a “People’s War.”

Mason’s “popular front” is more directly a call for the petty-bourgeois “left” and identity politics groups to recognise that their interests lie with the City of London and NATO in preserving their comfortable lifestyles. He portrays Russia and China as the contemporary iteration of fascist Germany and the NATO powers as a bulwark against a supposed war of aggression to “disorganise the West: split NATO, split the [European Union], split the populations of Western democracies...”

Hailing German imperialism’s “momentous decision to re-arm,” he declares, “Western leaders now realise that Putin intends to turn Europe into a sandbox for war and dictatorship... Having achieved the first moment of strategic unity for more than a decade, my hunch is that the Western leaders have begun planning for a long, grinding geostrategic battle against Putin which they—and we, the democratic populations of the West—can win.”

“If we are lucky,” he concludes, “the West will now isolate, paralyse and disintegrate Russia as a state, while rearming itself for both conventional and nuclear deterrence.”

NATO’s envoy and drill sergeant

Mason has served two additional political functions for the British bourgeoisie.

His most direct service was as a go-between linking Kiev with the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress in the UK. On February 19, he took part in and publicised a “Labour, Plaid Cymru and trade union delegation” with the stated mission of “hearing the voices of Ukrainian workers, LGBTQ+ people, ethnic minorities and human rights activists.” It included Welsh Labourite Mick Antoniw, ASLEF train drivers’ union leader Mick Whelan and National Union of Mineworkers leader Chris Kitchen. The visit’s intended purpose was to dispel claims that Ukraine is a hotbed of far-right activity, including by taking evidence from “territorial defence units training to resist aggression.”

Mason did not do a very good job. Posts on his Twitter feed include: “Our labour movement and UK left delegation just met with the 112th Territorial Defence Brigade in Kyiv. They are reservists and volunteers... 45% female... They will be used for defence of the city...”

The gender composition of the 112th notwithstanding, a reader posted of the accompanying photo, “Did you ask them why they have the OUN patch on their uniforms?”

The Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) was Stepan Bandera’s Nazi-collaborationist organisation during World War II. Bandera is today the ideological inspiration for a swathe of far-right parties and militias that function as the backbone of the Ukrainian state’s war effort and are heavily armed by the NATO powers.

What also makes Mason a valuable political asset for imperialism is his use of pseudo-Marxist jargon to attack anyone on the “left” opposing NATO’s war plans. This has centred on attacks on the Stop the War Coalition (STWC). The STWC was an inevitable target in the run up to the Ukraine war, given that it correctly identified NATO’s expansion towards Russia’s borders as the primary aggravating factor in the danger of a war breaking out in Ukraine.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained this February, “The STWC does not offer workers a genuine means for opposing the enormous and escalating danger of war against Russia,” because its answer “is an appeal for British imperialism, including the Conservative government and Starmer’s Labour Party, to project a foreign policy that breaks free of Washington and aligns the UK within a European political and military block with a supposedly more pragmatic attitude to Russia.”

This naturally did not shield it from attack by the media and the Labour Party. In December 2021, Mason denounced the Stalinist chair of the STWC, Andrew Murray, for criticising NATO and US President Joe Biden for “arming Ukraine to the hilt.” Putin’s aim, said Mason, is “to destroy Western democracy”; to counter Russia’s “ultranationalist, racist, homophobic anti-democratic dictatorship... we are going to need a bigger army.”

Labour’s attack was eventually targeted at the political forces which the STWC advances as the leaders of an anti-war movement, Labour’s “left” MPs. On February 24, the STWC was to hold an online rally. It had issued an open letter seven days earlier, opposing “any war over Ukraine,” recognising “the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination” while acknowledging “Russia’s security concerns.” It urged, “NATO should call a halt to its eastward expansion.”

The day of the STWC meeting, Starmer demanded that eleven Labour MP signatories to the STWC letter retract their support. Within an hour, all eleven did as they were told. To underscore his own political loyalty, Corbyn’s former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell announced that he would be speaking alongside Mason at a February 26 pro-Ukrainian demonstration in London.

This incident marked the utter collapse of the STWC’s perspective. Its aim of convincing British imperialism to change course and move away from US tutelage was to be realised through the Labour Party and a Corbyn-led government. Instead, Corbyn was ousted, and his acolytes have abandoned the STWC when told to do so by Starmer in his role as head of “the party of NATO.”

Amid widespread condemnation of the Corbynites’ cowardice, Mason wrote in the *New Statesman* what was now expected of them by their masters. Since “Nato is the only thing stopping Russia doing to us what it’s doing to Ukraine,” the “left” should get on board. From now on, “We’re going to need a bigger army and a bigger reserve... We’re going to have to fight Putin’s hybrid warfare tactics from within British society. That means the Labour and trade union movement becoming active participants in the fight against disinformation, ostracising those who collaborate with outlets such as RT and Sputnik, or who pose for snapshots with Putin’s Donbas militias.”

Finally, Mason stressed, “we’re going to have to do this with our European allies, whose combined capabilities in defence, cyber and counter-hybrid warfare will be invaluable.”

The pseudo-left’s capitulation to imperialism

Mason’s other polemical foray was against Britain’s Socialist Workers Party and an International Socialist Tendency (IST) statement on Ukraine published February 16. The statement was a standard example of how the

state capitalist tendencies draw an equals-sign between US and European imperialism and Russia and China, describing Russia as “a weaker but still vicious imperialist power,” with Ukraine “merely a pawn” for “both sides.”

Its description of a global conflict between rival imperialist blocks gives way to a list of demands such as “No war over Ukraine!” “Both Russian and NATO forces pull back!” and “Demilitarize Europe!”

The International Committee of the Fourth International has explained the objective political significance of the state capitalist and Pabloite groups’ designation of Russia and China as imperialist in its 2016 statement, “Socialism and the Fight Against War”:

“This definition has been plucked from midair, with barely any attempt to explain the historical process through which Russia and China, within the space of just 25 years, changed from bureaucratically degenerated and deformed workers’ states into imperialist powers.”

It continued, “The International Committee of the Fourth International calls for the overthrow of the capitalist states in Russia and China by the working class as an essential component of the world socialist revolution. It has explained that both states are the product of Stalinism’s betrayal of the socialist revolutions of the 20th century and its ultimate restoration of capitalism,” noting that the Putin regime’s “promotion of ‘Great Russian’ nationalism is the extreme outcome of Stalinism itself, which was a violent and counterrevolutionary repudiation of the internationalist program of Marxism.”

Adding the word “imperialist” to descriptions of China and Russia “serves very definite functions. First, it relativizes, and therefore diminishes, the central and decisive global counterrevolutionary role of American, European and Japanese imperialism. This facilitates the pseudo-left’s active collaboration with the United States in regime-change operations such as in Syria, where the Assad regime has been backed by Russia. Second, and even more significantly, the designation of China and Russia as imperialist—and thus, by implication, as colonial powers suppressing ethnic, national, linguistic and religious minorities—sanctions the pseudo-left’s support for imperialist-backed ‘national liberation’ uprisings and ‘color revolutions’ within the boundaries of the existing states.”

None of this goes far enough for Mason. In a February 20 comment, “Learning to say ‘Goodbye Lenin,’” he wrote that because it “refuses to side with Putin and Xi Jin Ping” the IST statement is “as good as it gets in the world of Leninist re-enactment,” but “It’s not good enough” and would likely be “the default position of long-time socialists” who “want to remain neutral as Ukrainians defend themselves...”

Neutrality must be abandoned, Mason insisted, in a conflict “between the globalist, democratic former imperialist countries of the USA and EU” and “the authoritarian, anti-modernist dictatorships of China and Russia.”

Aside from Mason’s discovery that the US and EU are no longer imperialist states, perhaps the most noteworthy feature of his filthy polemic is the response to it of the SWP’s leading theoretician, Alex Callinicos.

“Dear Paul,” Callinicos wrote. “You know that I respect you. I thought your latest book, *How to Stop Fascism*, was excellent...”

He was “gratified, but also impressed by the care you took to read and criticise” the statement he had helped draft, professing agreement with Mason on “opposing Russian imperialism” before explaining to him that the US and the EU are also imperialist powers, as if he was talking to a confused student.

He concludes with the polite suggestion that “You seem to have signed up on the side of the ‘former imperialist’ West,” before explaining that such differences don’t matter anyway, as, “The sad truth is that the radical and revolutionary left is too weak internationally to have much impact on this crisis.”

Callinicos signs off with the salutation, “In comradeship.” The use of

such a term for Mason says everything about the political function of the pseudo-left groups. The SWP leader doesn’t openly agree with Mason but embraces him even after stating that “in substance your attack on the IST seems little different from Keir Starmer’s shameful denunciation of the Stop The War campaign and pledge of loyalty to Nato.”

Starmer and Mason pledge loyalty to NATO and advocate war. The SWP and STWC make their protests but pledge their own fealty to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy through the medium of the wretched and cowardly Corbynite “left.”

Such forces will build nothing, least of all an anti-war movement that must challenge the most fundamental interests of British, US and world imperialism. Because this demands the systematic mobilisation of the working class against the ruling class and its political agents in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.



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