

A letter from David North to a Russian Comrade: “Putin’s invasion is a desperate response to the relentless pressure exerted by the US and NATO upon Russia”

David North
2 April 2022

In light of the recent military debacle for Russia in Northern Ukraine, we are republishing this letter by World Socialist Web Site editorial board Chairman David North to a socialist in Russia.

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Dear Comrade,

As the war continues, it becomes increasingly evident that the fate of Ukraine is of significance to the United States only within the context of its expanding struggle for global hegemony. The Biden administration instigated the war, driving Putin — who up until the last minute hoped that he could persuade his “Western Partners” to make reasonable concessions to the Russian state’s “national security” — into a poorly prepared (both from a military and political standpoint) war. What is surprising is that Putin and his military command appear not to have fully grasped the extent to which NATO had armed and trained Ukraine’s military. But this failure of their intelligence services is rooted in the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, which was based on wildly unrealistic, almost childishly naïve, conceptions of the imperialist system. While repudiating all association with Marxism, the Kremlin retained its faith in the possibility of “peaceful coexistence” with its Western Partners. Putin, shortly before ordering the invasion, complained pathetically that Russia had been “played” by the West.

Moreover, it is apparent that Russia — after having failed to pressure the West — did not have a clear strategic plan. What, exactly, is Putin trying to achieve?

The military operation — at least in its initial stages — has been a disaster. It seems to consist of a series of reactions improvised in response to unexpected difficulties. The loss of seven generals in the opening weeks of the war is evidence of a staggering level of incompetence. Putin, who draws his inspiration from Imperial Russia, seems to be no more competent as a war leader than Nicholas II.

The American and European governments and media are denouncing Russian brutality. We are not at all inclined to minimize, let alone deny, the devastating impact of the war on the Ukrainian masses. But the US-NATO denunciations of Russia are shot through with hypocrisy. The Russian invasion did not begin with “shock and awe,” i.e., the type of massive bombing that the United States unleashed against Baghdad in 1991 and, even worse, in 2003. If the Pentagon had launched the war against Ukraine, Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities would have been more or less destroyed on the first day of the war.

Of course, this does not justify Putin’s invasion, which is a desperate and essentially reactionary response to the relentless and intensifying pressure exerted by the US and NATO upon Russia. The politically weak Russian bourgeoisie, which still lacks a substantial base for its rule, is trying to counteract this pressure through limited military actions. But this strategy, based on the conventional logic of bourgeois nation-state geopolitics, is strategically ineffective, tactically disastrous, and politically bankrupt. The latter aspect was exposed most clearly in the speech with which Putin initiated the invasion.

Normally, a “call to arms” invokes the greatest historical experiences through which the people have passed. But this cannot be done by the restorationist Russian bourgeoisie. It cannot evoke the “Russian” history of the twentieth century, for that history is embedded in the experience of the October Revolution and the Soviet Union. Putin rejects that history, and so his “war speech” leapt over 1917. He rejected Lenin and the Bolsheviks and invoked the Tsar and *Dzerzhimorda*, the Great Russian chauvinist bully. This reactionary appeal cannot inspire the masses in Russia, let alone appeal to the world.

At this point, it is not easy to foresee how the war will develop militarily. However, it can be foreseen that this war marks a critical turning point in the crisis of the world capitalist system. The global dimensions of the struggle will become increasingly apparent. For the imperialist powers, and above all the United States, the purpose of this war is a new division of the world. The main targets of this redivision are Russia and China. The United States is determined to 1) end Russia’s existence as an obstacle to its global interests, and 2) obtain direct control over Russia’s immense strategic resources. The realization of these goals requires the breakup of Russia in its existing form. As this struggle unfolds, the United States is pursuing similar objectives in relation to China.

It cannot be coincidental that the two principal targets of US imperialism are countries that had passed through a social revolution. Although both countries have restored capitalism, the residual historical legacy of the Russian and Chinese revolutions is a limited degree of “independence” from total US interference in and control of its economic and political life. Tragically, in the case of Russia, this independence is manifested in a largely negative way — that is, through its possession of the nuclear arsenal created by the USSR. But this arsenal does not provide, in the longer term, a viable strategy for the existential struggle that Russia confronts.

The International Committee of the Fourth International opposes the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This principled position is not contradicted by its recognition of the undeniable fact that the United States instigated the conflict. However, the Trotskyist movement does not base its strategy on the sort of pragmatic nationally grounded conceptions that

determine the policies of the capitalist regime in Russia.

The defense of the Russian masses against imperialism cannot be undertaken on the basis of bourgeois nation-state geopolitics. Rather, the struggle against imperialism requires the rebirth of the proletarian strategy of world socialist revolution. The Russian working class must repudiate the entire criminal enterprise of capitalist restoration, which has led to disaster, and re-establish its political, social and intellectual connection with its great revolutionary Leninist-Trotskyist heritage.

The essence of this heritage is its commitment to revolutionary internationalism. The war in Ukraine has set into motion a maelstrom of global dimensions. The economic dislocations produced by the war — intensifying the already far-advanced crisis of the capitalist system — are being felt all over the world. The rise in prices and the disruption of energy and food supplies have already led to mass protest demonstrations and strikes throughout the world. In Sri Lanka, enraged workers attempted during this past week to storm the presidential palace. Similar events will occur in capitals throughout the world.

The task that confronts the world Trotskyist movement, led by the International Committee of the Fourth International, is to provide the working class with the perspective and leadership that it requires in this new stage of revolutionary struggle.

With best fraternal greetings,

David North



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