

The NATO-Russia war and the tasks of the international working class

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We are publishing here the opening report delivered by David North to the 2022 International May Day Online Rally held on May 1. North is the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the US.

This year's May Day is being held under extraordinary circumstances. The world stands on the precipice of a nuclear world war that threatens the extinction of life on this planet. The challenge of May Day 2022 is to make this celebration of the international unity of the working class the beginning of a global movement of the broad mass of the world's population to stop the criminal and reckless escalation of the NATO-Russia war toward nuclear conflict and force its end.

The organization, development and victory of this movement requires a clear understanding of the causes of the war and the interests that it serves.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution, unequivocally denounces US and European imperialism for instigating the conflict with Russia. This is not a war in defense of democracy in Ukraine or anywhere else in the world. It is a war whose aim is the redivision of the world, that is, a new allocation of the material resources of the globe.

Russia has become a target of US imperialism not because of the Putin regime's autocratic character, but because, first, its defense of the interests of the Russian capitalists collides with the drive of the United States for global hegemony, which is centered on its preparations for war with China; and, second, the vast expanse of Russian territory is the source of immensely valuable and strategically critical raw materials, metals and minerals—gold, platinum, palladium, zinc, bauxite, nickel, mercury, manganese, chromium, uranium, iron ore, cobalt and iridium, to name only a few—that the United States is determined to bring under its control.

The other major imperialist powers allied with the United States are, likewise, pursuing their own reactionary economic and geostrategic interests. The conflict in Ukraine has provided German imperialism—which waged a war of extermination against the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945—with the opportunity to undertake the most massive rearmament campaign since the collapse of the Nazi regime. As always, British imperialism is eager to participate in an American-led war, hoping that its “special relationship” with the United States will entitle it to a favorable distribution of the spoils of war. The French imperialists hope that by sanctioning, however reluctantly, the American war against Russia, the United States will not interfere with French operations in Africa. Even the lesser powers of the NATO alliance expect to be repaid for their endorsement of the US-led war. Poland, for example, has not forgotten that Lviv was once the Polish city of Lwow.

As for the United States' invocation of the sacred right of Ukraine, as a sovereign nation, to join NATO if it so chooses, Washington does not recognize the extension of that right to any country whose national defense interests are viewed as a threat to American security. Even as the crisis unfolds in Ukraine, the United States is threatening military action

to stop the Solomon Islands—6,000 miles away from the American West Coast—from entering into a defensive relationship with China.

The claims that NATO is reacting to an “unprovoked” invasion of a politically blameless Ukraine by an aggressive Russia, intent on restoring the lost “Soviet empire,” are a pack of lies. An objective study of the background of the war clearly demonstrates that Russia's invasion of February 24, 2022 was a desperate response to NATO's relentless expansion. As the development of the war over the past two months has clearly shown, the United States and NATO armed and trained Ukrainian forces, working closely with the neo-Nazi elements associated with the Azov Battalion, to wage a proxy war against Russia.

The pretense that NATO's massive mobilization against Russia has been an unforeseen, unplanned and improvised response to the invasion is a fairy tale for the politically naïve. This is a war that the United States and NATO wanted, gamed out, prepared for and instigated. Since the initial “Orange Revolution” of 2004-2005 and, especially, the Maidan putsch that was organized by the Obama administration to bring down the pro-Russian Yanukovich government in 2014, the United States has been set on a course for war with Russia.

The cynical claim that the US and NATO did not plan for or instigate the war is refuted most powerfully by the repeated warnings made by the International Committee. At the first online May Day rally sponsored by the International Committee and *World Socialist Web Site* in 2014, we warned, just a few months after the Maidan putsch, that “the Ukrainian crisis was deliberately instigated by the United States and Germany through the orchestration of a coup in Kiev. The purpose of this coup was to bring to power a regime that would place Ukraine under the direct control of US and German imperialism. The plotters in Washington and Berlin understood that this coup would lead to a confrontation with Russia. Indeed, far from seeking to avoid a confrontation, both Germany and the United States believe that a clash with Russia is required for the realization of their far-reaching geopolitical interests.”

Exactly six years ago today, at the 2016 May Day rally, we warned that the drive of the United States for global hegemony set it on a path toward war with Russia and China. We stated:

A substantial section of Pentagon and CIA strategists believe that the strategic isolation of China requires not only American control of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. The United States must also dominate Eurasia, characterized in the textbooks of international geopolitics as the ‘world island.’ This is the strategic objective that underlies the growing conflict between the United States and Russia.

International relations have reached a level of tension that equals, if it has not already surpassed, what existed in the late 1930s on the eve of World War II. All the major imperialist powers—including Germany and Japan—are increasing their

military commitments. That a conflict between the United States, China and Russia could involve the use of nuclear weapons is already being acknowledged. It would be the gravest of errors to assume that neither the political and military leaders of the imperialist powers, nor their frightened adversaries in Beijing and Moscow, would ever risk the devastating consequences of nuclear war.

One year later, at the May Day rally of 2017, we called attention to discussions among US strategists of the feasibility of using nuclear weapons in a future military conflict. We cited various strategies that entailed the use of nuclear weapons, which included 1) nuclear use against a non-nuclear opponent; 2) a first strike aimed at eliminating an opponent country's capacity to retaliate; 3) threatening to use nuclear weapons to force an opponent to back down; and 4) the launching of limited nuclear war. We asked:

Who are the maniacs who have devised this strategy? The willingness to consider any of these strategies is, itself, a sign of madness. The use of nuclear weapons would have incalculable consequences. Will this fact deter the ruling classes from resorting to war? The entire history of the twentieth century, not to mention the experience of just the first 17 years of the twenty-first, argues against such a hopeful assumption. The political strategy of the working class must be based on reality, not self-deluding hopes.

Just one more quote: At the 2019 May Day rally, against the backdrop of mounting political crisis in the United States, we said:

The violation of constitutional norms in the conduct of domestic policy and the resort to gangster methods in foreign policy are rooted, in the final analysis, in the crisis of the capitalist system. The desperate efforts of the United States to maintain its position of global dominance, in the face of geopolitical and economic challenges from rivals in Europe and Asia, require a state of permanent and escalating war.

This reckless policy will prevail with or without Trump. Indeed, the anti-Russia hysteria that has gripped the Democratic Party makes it reasonable to suspect that, were it to regain the White House, the danger of a world war will be even greater.

Events have confirmed our warnings. Nothing can stop the unfolding of the terrible logic of imperialist war and its consequences except the revolutionary movement of the working class against capitalism. This perspective underlies not only our denunciation of US-NATO imperialism, but also our attitude to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The imperialist character of the war being waged by NATO does not justify, from the standpoint of the international working class, the decision of the Russian government to invade Ukraine. The International Committee condemns the invasion as politically reactionary. The Putin government's decision to invade has killed and injured thousands of innocent Ukrainians who are in no way responsible for the policies of the corrupt Kyiv government, divided the Russian and Ukrainian working class, and played into the hands of the imperialist strategists in Washington D.C. and Langley, Virginia (the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency). It has provided German imperialism with the opportunity to massively rearm.

The dangers that now confront Russia are, in the final analysis, the consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the restoration of capitalism. The destruction of the Soviet Union—the outcome of the Stalinist repudiation of the principles of socialist internationalism which guided the 1917 October Revolution—was based on three catastrophically false conceptions that had been fervently embraced by the Soviet bureaucracy.

The first was that the restoration of capitalism would result in the rapid enrichment of Russia. The second was that the dissolution of the bureaucratic regime would result in the blossoming of bourgeois democracy. The third was that capitalist Russia's repudiation of its revolutionary legacy would result in its peaceful integration into a blissful brotherhood of nations. These delusional expectations have been shattered by reality.

The warnings of Leon Trotsky, brilliantly elaborated in his 1936 treatise, *The Revolution Betrayed*, have been vindicated. Capitalist restoration has resulted in the impoverishment of large sections of the Russian population, the replacement of the bureaucratic regime with dictatorial oligarchic rule and the imminent threat of Russia's breakup into semi-colonial statelets controlled by imperialist powers.

The fact that the Putin regime could not find an answer to the dangers confronting Russia other than by invading Ukraine, and now threatening a nuclear response to NATO's provocations, testifies to the political bankruptcy of the regime of capitalist restoration. The Russian capitalist oligarchy, whose wealth is derived from the systematic plundering of the nationalized property of the workers' state, repudiated all that was progressive in the social and political foundations of the Soviet Union.

It is hardly accidental that Putin, in his speech of February 21, 2022, justified the imminent invasion of Ukraine with an explicit and bitter denunciation of the Bolshevik regime's defense of the democratic rights of the nationalities that had been brutally repressed by the Tsarist regime prior to its overthrow in 1917. Putin declared that the creation of a Soviet Ukraine was "the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called 'Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine.' He was its creator and architect."

Yes, Lenin was the creator of the Soviet Ukraine, and the Bolshevik defense of the rights of the oppressed nationalities, and especially in Ukraine, was a major factor in the victory of the Red Army, led by Trotsky, in the Civil War that followed the October Revolution. Putin was careful to avoid mentioning that the process of bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union found its initial expression in Stalin's efforts to undermine Lenin's defense of the rights of the non-Russian nationalities.

These principles had been most eloquently elaborated in a document drafted by Trotsky in 1919, which specifically addressed the critical issue of Ukraine. While making no concessions to the reactionary bourgeois nationalists, Trotsky wrote: "In view of the fact that Ukraine culture... has for centuries been suppressed by Tsarism and the exploiting classes of Russia, the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party makes it obligatory for all members of the Party to help in every way to remove all obstacles to the free development of the Ukrainian language and culture."

Putin, a bitter enemy of socialism and the heritage of the October Revolution, is incapable of making any genuinely democratic and progressive appeal to the Ukrainian working class. Instead, he invokes the reactionary legacy of Tsarist and Stalinist Great Russian chauvinism.

The Fourth International's opposition to Putin's invasion of Ukraine is based on the defense of the principles upheld by Lenin and Trotsky. But the defense of those principles require unrelenting opposition to the reactionary machinations of US and European imperialism.

The imminent danger of a nuclear Third World War is the culmination of the global wave of socioeconomic and political reaction and imperialist violence that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As he walked about the streets of Kyiv this past week, António Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, proclaimed in a despairing

tone that war in the 21st century is an “absurdity.” If Mr. Guterres arrived at this philosophical insight only after visiting Ukraine, one must wonder where he has been hiding during the last 22 years. This still young century has not known a moment’s peace. In fact, the last 30 years have witnessed the unending and uncontrollable rampage of imperialist violence, whose principal instigators have been the residents of the White House.

Guterres’ comment exemplifies the separation of the war in Ukraine from all that preceded it. It is as if the American and NATO wars of the last three decades had never happened. The violence and loss of life in Ukraine are being presented in the mass media as a horror without modern precedent. The crimes committed by the Russians are, it is claimed, of a character so extreme that they can be compared only to the atrocities of the Nazis. The invasion of Ukraine has been proclaimed an act of genocide, requiring nothing less than the establishment of a war crimes tribunal and the prosecution of Vladimir Putin. The allegations of genocide have been invoked by President Biden to justify the call for Putin’s removal—that is, for regime change in Russia.

Moreover, the propaganda campaign against Russia has been extended to criminalize the Russian people. Russian writers, musicians, athletes, scientists and even the world historic achievements of Russian culture have been targeted for collective punishment. This vicious attack is aimed at promoting blind hatred of Russia, to create the crazed environment necessary for all-out war. This is a well-known tactic of propaganda, which in its modern form is the product of World War I. Its purpose, as described by historian Robert Haswell Lutz as far back as 1933, is “the creation of new desires, group hypnosis, isolation of counter-propaganda, saturation of the public with selected and biased information.”

The development of these techniques has been perfected in the United States, and its most effective use was the Bush administration’s claim in 2002–2003, entirely concocted, that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction.” The effectiveness of this campaign, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* explained in 2003, “was largely dependent on a compliant press that uncritically repeated every fraudulent administration claim about the threat posed to America by Saddam Hussein.”

Even if all the specific crimes attributed to the Russian military were true—and there has, as yet, been no credible substantiation of the allegations, such as the Bucha atrocity—they do not even begin to approach the dimensions of documented crimes committed by the United States in the course of the wars it has waged over the last 30 years.

The United States has, since 1991, bombed or invaded Iraq, Somalia, Serbia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Sudan. This is not a complete list, but the total number of deaths resulting from these invasions comes to several million people.

The American media plays around with allegations of “genocide” as a means of blackguarding the targets of US imperialism and, in the process, trivializing the real meaning of the word. But if the word is to be used, it can be applied to the consequences of American interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia in just the last three decades. Biden denounces Putin as a war criminal who should be hauled before the tribunal at the Hague. Perhaps so. But based on the documented record of crimes committed by the United States, there are many American presidents and high state officials who should stand on the dock alongside Putin.

The claim that NATO’s war against Russia is a response to unprovoked aggression against Ukraine is not the only fiction. In his latest remarks at the White House this past Thursday, Biden declared that he was asking Congress to allocate another \$33 billion “to support Ukraine in its fight for freedom.” But this is how the US Department of State described the state of “freedom” in Ukraine in its 2020 report:

...killing; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment of detainees by law enforcement personnel; harsh and life-threatening conditions in prisons and detention centers; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary...

The report also noted “serious acts of corruption; lack of investigation of and accountability for violence against women; violence or threats of violence motivated by anti-Semitism; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting persons with disabilities, members of ethnic minority groups, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex persons; and the existence of the worst forms of child labor.”

The Ukraine government, the report complained, “failed to take adequate steps to prosecute or punish most officials who committed abuses, resulting in a climate of impunity. Human rights groups and the United Nations noted significant deficiencies in investigations into alleged human rights abuses committed by government security forces.”

The Ukrainian government has banned the Communist Party and many other political organizations, and has also passed laws aimed at suppressing the use of the Russian language.

These “deficiencies” are no longer reported by the media, which is now glorifying Ukraine’s “fledgling democracy” and its president, Volodymyr Zelensky. But only recently, the International Monetary Fund and western banks, while imposing a drastic regime of financial austerity on Ukraine, were bitterly denouncing Zelensky as the leader of a government embedded in corruption. Biden, who is unrestrained in his denunciation of Russian oligarchs, maintains a respectful silence on their counterparts in Ukraine, even though it is a well-known fact that a handful of billionaires control the impoverished country’s economy.

But of all the lies and false narratives employed to legitimize NATO’s use of Ukraine as a proxy in the war against Russia, the most insidious and politically revealing are those that cover up the sordid history of fascistic nationalism in Ukraine, which carried out the mass murder of Poles and Jews during World War II.

The media is silent on the elevation of Stepan Bandera, the mass murderer who led the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) during World War II, to the status of a cult-like figure. The glorification of Bandera and the members of the OUN and its armed wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, as national heroes began with the accession of Viktor Yushchenko to the presidency after the Orange Revolution. After 2014, it became a crime to denigrate these fascistic and rabidly anti-Semitic heroes of genocidal nationalism.

The falsification of history has served as the essential ideological foundation for the legitimization of armed fascist units in the present-day Ukrainian military, of which the Azov Battalion is the most notorious element. The Azov Battalion has played a central role in the bloody civil war in Eastern Ukraine that has claimed since 2014 more than 14,000 lives. Its influence is not confined to Ukraine. As explained by one expert who has studied Azov’s activities, “It’s a movement that has served and will continue to serve as a model and inspiration for other far-right movements around the world. Its two-faced embrace of violence and its ambitions to be part of an increasingly powerful transnational far right make it a threat beyond Ukraine’s borders.”

In alliance with such reactionary forces, US imperialism and its NATO allies are bringing the world to the brink of a nuclear catastrophe. The Biden administration is acting with a level of recklessness that borders on criminally insane behavior. Throughout the Cold War, it was accepted as indisputably true that an armed conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union had the potential to escalate into a devastating nuclear exchange and, therefore, had to be avoided. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the overriding fear of President Kennedy was that a

Significant human rights issues included: unlawful or arbitrary

misreading of the adversary's intentions by leaders in Washington and Moscow could lead to a nuclear war. The Biden administration, not to mention its counterparts in London and Berlin, appears totally indifferent to that danger.

The comments made by Biden are marked by obvious contradictions. Only several weeks ago Biden stated that a military confrontation between the United States and Russia could lead to World War III. But now he is pouring weapons into Ukraine and multiplying the likelihood of direct conflict. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which Putin will feel compelled, based on political and military considerations, to directly attack countries that are supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine for use against Russian soldiers. How will the Biden administration respond if Russia retaliates against a NATO country and, as could well happen, strikes American forces in the process?

On the one hand, Biden dismisses Putin's threats to utilize nuclear weapons as merely expressions of desperation. But it is precisely a sense of desperation that increases the danger of a resort to nuclear weapons. This, however, does not seem to worry Biden. When he was directly asked whether he was concerned that Putin may act on the belief that Russia is at war with the United States, Biden shrugged the question off with the reply, "We are prepared for whatever they do."

This can only mean that the United States recognizes that the war between NATO and Russia has the potential to escalate to nuclear war. But neither Biden nor any other leader of the NATO countries has clearly acknowledged this danger or stated publicly what the consequences of a nuclear war would be.

This deliberate concealment of the potentially disastrous consequences of the US-NATO war against Russia is a crime of historically monumental proportions.

There is a general inclination to underestimate, if not dismiss, the danger of war. Most people tend to assume that because the consequences of nuclear war are so horrific, only the insane would allow it to happen. "Reason" must prevail in the end.

But the entire history of the 20th century and of the first two decades of the 21st testifies against such self-reassuring complacency. World Wars I and II, with their tens of millions of victims, happened. The outbreak of war is not a product of the insanity of individuals, but of the lethal contradictions of capitalism.

UN Secretary-General Guterres says that war in the 21st century is an absurdity. But this "absurdity" is indissolubly linked to a host of other "absurdities": the absurdity of class society, the absurdity of private ownership of the means of production, the absurdity of the concentration of unfathomable wealth in an infinitesimal percentage of the world's population while billions of people live in grinding poverty and face starvation, the absurdity of the systematic destruction of the planet's ecology, and the greatest absurdity of all—the tribal division of humanity into nation-states that foment endless and unnecessary conflicts that serve only the interests of the corporate-financial oligarchy that rules over society.

Is it not "absurd" that the most powerful governments in the world have refused to take well-known and necessary public health measures to eradicate the SARS-CoV-2 virus that has claimed approximately 20 million lives, and that they believe that the solution to the pandemic consists of simply ignoring it?

But the same leaders who have presided over the disastrous response to the pandemic are now making the decisions that are leading to World War III.

In their private discussions, President Biden, Prime Minister Johnson, President Macron, Chancellor Scholz and, for that matter, President Putin acknowledge among themselves that a world war would lead to a societal catastrophe. But in the 20th century, those who led their countries into World Wars I and II also feared the consequences of the global conflict.

Even Hitler understood that his actions could lead to disaster. But that did not stop them. In the end, they concluded that war offered the only way out of a complex of intractable political and socioeconomic crises.

This is the situation that exists today. The world capitalist system is afflicted by a complex of social, economic and political contradictions for which there exist no peaceful solutions. The United States, the explosive epicenter of the world capitalist maelstrom, confronts simultaneously the loss of its hegemonic global position, the intractable deterioration of its economy, and the far-advanced breakdown of its domestic political institutions and social equilibrium.

Frightened by the looming danger of an economic crash and terrified by the signs of a growing social radicalization of the working class, the ruling class sees war as a means of projecting internal tensions outward, of artificially "unifying" a profoundly divided country by hurling it into war.

But the resort to war will intensify the crisis in the United States and all over the world. Already the effects of the war are being felt in inflation and the life-threatening curtailment of food and other necessities of life. These conditions have provoked mass strikes and demonstrations.

The contradictions that threaten world war also create conditions for world socialist revolution. The challenge that confronts the working class is this: to strengthen and accelerate the objective tendencies that lead to revolution, while undermining and weakening those that lead to world war.

The basis for the struggle against war is the movement of the working class. That is the great social force that has the power to stop war, put an end to capitalism, tear down national borders and build a world socialist society.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality parties and groups reject all chauvinist calls for the defense of the national state. We uphold the internationalist principles of Leon Trotsky, who wrote in 1934:

A "socialist" who preaches national defense is a petty-bourgeois reactionary at the service of decaying capitalism. Not to bind itself to the national state in time of war, to follow not the war map but the map of the class struggle, is possible only for that party that has already declared irreconcilable war on the national state in time of peace.

Only by realizing fully the objectively reactionary role of the imperialist state can the proletarian vanguard become invulnerable to all types of social patriotism. This means that a real break with the ideology and policy of "national defense" is possible only from the standpoint of the *international proletarian revolution*.

Therefore, the central task is the mobilization of the international working class against the imperialist drive to war. The reckless escalation must be stopped. The strength of the working class must be mobilized to bring about the end of the war in Ukraine.

The International Committee makes a special appeal to the courageous and class-conscious workers of Russia and Ukraine. Repudiate the reactionary policies of your bourgeois governments. Reject the entire project of capitalist restoration, which has led to this terrible war.

Return to the traditions of the Marxism and Bolshevism which once inspired the working people of your countries. We know that those traditions still live in the consciousness of the masses and are certain that they will reemerge in collective action.

The international working class must declare war on imperialist war. The most critical of all political tasks is the building of the Fourth International as the World Party of Socialist Revolution. We call on all those who agree with this perspective and are ready to take up this fight to

join our ranks.



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