

Military debacle in northeastern Ukraine fuels infighting in Russian oligarchy

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The collapse of Russian forces in the face of a counteroffensive by Ukraine the northeast of the country has brought to the fore bitter conflicts within the Russian oligarchy.

Over the past week, the Russian military has lost about a tenth of the territory it had previously occupied in Ukraine. The fleeing troops vacated almost all of the Russian-occupied parts of the Kharkiv province, including several strategically and logistically important towns like Izyum and Balakliya, leaving behind military equipment.

The military debacle has not only exposed the significant logistical and intelligence problems of Russia's military, and the extremely low morale among its troops. Above all, it has dealt a severe blow to the strategy of the Putin regime. Having emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, the Putin regime has responded to decades of NATO encirclement and provocations with the invasion of Ukraine, hoping that it could force the imperialist powers to the negotiating table. A principal component of this strategy has been the effort to contain what is essentially a war with NATO.

But this strategy has been blown to pieces by the aggressive moves to escalate the war by the imperialist powers and the transformation of the Ukrainian army—the second largest in Europe after Russia's—into a well-equipped fighting force. According to the *New York Times*, it was the Biden administration, which has pledged over \$50 billion in weapons for Ukraine since February, that proposed the offensive to the Zelensky government. Moreover, the American media and military figures are openly bragging about the central role of US-delivered weapons and intelligence in the offensive, making it all but impossible to deny that the Russian military is fighting a NATO proxy army in Ukraine.

Coming on the heels of a series of major provocations, including strikes on Crimea and the assassination of Daria Dugina, a prominent proponent of the war near Moscow, the offensive is clearly part of the efforts by the imperialist powers to goad the Kremlin into an expansion of the war and embolden the most hawkish elements within the Russian state and oligarchy.

Already, the military debacle has provoked an outcry even among the most loyal Putin supporters. Within the media and political establishment, there are ever more open calls for a general mobilization and a public acknowledgement that what is taking place is, in fact, a full-scale war.

At a Duma (parliament) session on Tuesday, September 13, a deputy from the ruling United Russia Party, Mikhail Sheremetev, said, "Without a complete mobilization, the transition [of the entire country] into war mode, including of the economy, we will not achieve the necessary results [in Ukraine]. I am saying that society must now be consolidated as much as possible and be determined to achieve victory."

Gennady Zyuganov, the head of the Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), flat-out refused to speak of a "special military operation." For the past six months, the Kremlin has insisted that what is taking place is only a "special military operation." The term "war" is banned from the Russian media.

Zyuganov said, "How is a special military operation different from a war? A military operation can be stopped at any point. But you cannot stop a war, it either ends with victory or defeat. I am telling you that what is happening is a war, and we have no right to lose it. We must not panic now. What is needed is an all-out mobilization of the country, entirely different laws are required." Zyuganov also called for an increase in military expenditures and more modern equipment for the army.

Zyuganov's statements are all the more significant as his party, which openly glorifies Joseph Stalin and the Great Terror, has functioned as the largest loyal opposition party to the Putin regime for over two decades, and has played a critical role in stifling and disorienting social opposition.

The leaders of the other nominal opposition parties, including "Just Russia," supported Zyuganov's calls for a general mobilization and also insisted that the war should be named for what it is.

Following the heated session at the Duma, the Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted that "at the moment there is no discussion" in the Russian government about a full or partial mobilization.

Nevertheless, the Russian media continues to be filled with discussions about it, with many media outlets publishing extensive analyses of what a partial or general mobilization would look like. Based on Russian law, a mobilization can only be introduced in case of "aggression against Russia, the immediate threat of aggression or the emergence of armed conflicts that are directed against Russia." In the case of a full mobilization, all male citizens aged 18 to 50 can be drafted and the entire economy would be refocused on war production. Much of everyday social and economic life would be regulated and surveiled, in one form or

another, by the Ministry of Defense. Some media outlets speculate that a mobilization could also occur, initially at least, in a partial and even secret manner.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the North Caucasian republic, who has publicly fumed about “mistakes” by the Russian army, has spearheaded an effort to mobilize volunteers to strengthen the Russian troops. Several regional governors have supported his calls for a “self-mobilization” in the regions.

At this point, the Russian military has deployed but a small fraction of its over 1 million men to Ukraine. Putin himself has insisted that only volunteers and no draftees are being deployed to Ukraine.

The bitter conflicts within the Russian oligarchy can only be understood in light of the systematic intervention of imperialism in the Ukraine war and in Russian politics, as well as the class nature of the Russian oligarchy itself. Having emerged out of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s destruction of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism, it never had and never could have any independence from imperialism. All the different factions, if by starkly different means, ultimately seek an accommodation with one or another imperialist power, and fear nothing more than a movement in the working class.

Despite constant efforts by the oligarchs find an “agreement” with imperialism, the imperialist powers have systematically encircled Russia since 1991, seeking to bring all the resources of the former Soviet Union under their direct control. The current war in Ukraine is the temporary culmination of this development. The ultimate aim lies not so much in Ukraine itself, but in the complete subjugation and carve-up of Russia.

The destabilization of the Putin regime is therefore a central component of the war strategy.

In a report from 2019, the RAND corporation, a leading US think tank, outlined a strategy of “overextending Russia” to destabilize the regime. According to RAND, the principal means to bring about such an economic “overextension,” apart from sanctions especially in the energy sector, was to force the Russian regime to invest more in its military. The report stressed that the Kremlin was reluctant to do so and that the US would therefore “find it hard to persuade Russia to substantially increase defense spending unless it convinces the Kremlin that new threats to Russian security demand a change to this policy.”

There is little question that the systematic provocations by NATO in the lead-up to the Russian invasion were aimed at bringing about precisely this “change” in Russian foreign policy. Since the invasion, NATO has conducted ever more overtly a de facto war against Russia on Ukrainian territory through an army and paramilitary forces that are principally armed and trained by the imperialist powers.

The calculation is that, by goading Russia into an expansion of the war, including a general mobilization, the Putin regime can be fatally destabilized and overthrown by another faction of the oligarchy in a US-backed operation. The latest offensive and crisis in the Russian ruling class has raised hopes that this prospect may be realized sooner rather than later. One of the most vocal spokesmen of US imperialist policy vis-a-vis Russia, retired US general Ben Hodges, wrote in the *Telegraph* earlier this week, “it

is a genuine possibility that Vladimir Putin’s exposed weaknesses are so severe that we might be witnessing the beginning of the end—not only of his regime, but of the Russian Federation itself.”

In this operation, the imperialist powers rely on a faction within the Russian oligarchy that is gathered around the pro-NATO misnamed “liberal opposition.” While their main figurehead, Alexei Navalny, continues to be imprisoned, almost as soon as news of the collapse of Russian offensive broke, municipal deputies from Petersburg that are associated with the liberal opposition launched a petition aimed at impeaching Putin based on allegations of “high treason.” These layers stand in the tradition of a faction of the Russian oligarchy that has advocated an integration of Russia into NATO. They are effectively calling for a whole-sale capitulation to imperialism, hoping that they would staff the puppet regimes that would emerged out of an imperialist carve-up of Russia.

Facing growing pressure from different factions of the oligarchy, the Putin regime’s main concern is the prospect that, much like World War I which was ended by the Bolshevik-led October revolution, the war will lead to a social revolution in Russia and internationally. In a recent piece for a Kremlin-aligned think tank, Sergei Karaganov, a leading foreign policy pundit, explicitly warned of a repetition of what he called “the disaster of 1917.” Even more so than the oligarchy’s delusory belief in the possibility of an agreement with the imperialist powers, this is the main reason for Putin’s desperate efforts to contain the conflict and limit its impact on the home front.

For the working class, the critical question is to develop its own, socialist response to the emerging world war, independent from and in opposition to all factions of the oligarchy and imperialism. The principal political basis for this fight is the assimilation of the entire political heritage of the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against the Stalinist betrayal of the October revolution, and for the political independence of the working class. This requires a determined struggle to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in both Russia and Ukraine.



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