Report to Seventh Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US)

The historical and political principles of the socialist opposition to imperialist war and the Putin regime

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The following is a report given by Clara Weiss to the Seventh Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (US) in support of the resolution, "Mobilize the working class against imperialist war!"

Read the full report on the Congress and the resolutions adopted at it.

This Congress has placed central emphasis on the historical continuity upon which our movement bases the political assessment of all key developments and the practice of the party. This approach is particularly important for the struggle against imperialist war.

As we state in the draft resolution, the imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine marks the opening stage of a new imperialist re-division of the world. In the most profound sense of the term, this war is an outcome of the unfinished twentieth century. Our opposition to this imperialist war as well as the capitalist Putin regime is rooted in a historical understanding of the entire 20th century and the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism.

From the beginning of the war, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has made clear that its opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is from the socialist left, not the imperialist right. In a statement published just hours after the beginning of the invasion, the ICFI stressed: "What is required is … a revival, in Russia and throughout the world, of the socialist internationalism that inspired the October Revolution of 1917 and led to the creation of the Soviet Union as a workers state."[1]

With this revolutionary internationalist opposition to the war, the International Committee of the Fourth International stands entirely alone.

The ICFI's opposition to the war versus nationalist and pro-war petty bourgeois forces

A large section of the ex-Pabloites and state capitalists internationally has lined up completely behind the NATO imperialist powers and their proxies in the Ukrainian oligarchy and far right. Under the fraudulent banner of fighting "Russian imperialism," forces like the International Socialist League and Sotsialnyi Rukh in Ukraine are sending their members into US-armed paramilitary forces.

Ukraine's International Socialist League is openly placing itself in the tradition of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, denying their genocidal crimes. Both of these tendencies maintain ties to the Democratic Socialists of America and Bernie Sanders. In other words, they maintain direct relations with the same Democratic Party that has played the principal role in instigating this war and is now arming the fascists in Ukraine.

There is another section of the international pseudo-left that has lined up completely on the other side of this war: the Putin regime. These forces include the Russian Stalinist United Communist Party (OKP) of Daria Mitina, the Turkish Revolutionary Workers Party (DIP) and the Greek Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK) of Savas Michael-Matsas, who opposed the International Committee in the split in 1985–86 on a fundamentally nationalist basis.[2]

In their statement, these petty bourgeois nationalists hailed the Putin regime as the spearhead of the "anti-imperialist" struggle which had to be supported. As one of their Turkish leaders pointedly stated: "We are not providing any political support to Putin but in the current situation we are granting him full and unconditional military support within the framework of our possibilities."[3]

While these two different camps of the international pseudo-left may now be quite literally shooting at each other, they are united in their commitment to defend capitalism and the bourgeois nation state. They are what Trotsky accurately called "petty-bourgeois reactionaries at the service of decaying capitalism." By contrast, as Trotsky insisted, "The task of the proletariat is not the defense of the national state but its complete and final liquidation."[4]

There is another trait shared by these forces: their unhinged falsifications of history and rejection of the October revolution. In fact, the falsification of history, including the glorification of fascism and attacks on the October revolution, have played an exceptionally important role in this war. The task of this report will be to outline the historical principles that form the basis for the draft resolution presented to this Congress and the socialist opposition of the ICFI to this war and the Putin regime.

The October revolution and the Trotskyist struggle against Stalinism

In a lengthy speech three days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Putin attacked the October Revolution, blaming its leader, Vladimir Lenin, for "creating" Ukraine. The event that Putin so bitterly opposes, the seizure of power by the working class under Bolshevik leadership in 1917, was the most progressive event in world history.

The political preparation of the October Revolution had three critical pillars. First, the Bolsheviks' decades-long struggle, led by Lenin, against national opportunism; second, Trotsky's elaboration of the perspective of

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permanent revolution; and, third, the struggle, waged by both Lenin and Trotsky, for the formation of a new Marxist International in the fight against the imperialist world war that began in 1914. Lenin and Trotsky had recognized early on that the same contradictions of world capitalism and the breakdown of the nation-state system that had led to World War I would also lead to social revolution. With the outbreak of revolution in Russia in February 1917, using a phrase coined by Lenin, imperialism broke "at its weakest link."

Although Russia had entered the war with imperialist aims, economically it was still a backward country. Feudal and even pre-feudal relations prevailed in much of the Russian Empire. None of the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution had been resolved, including the national question. The Tsarist autocracy presided over a vast, multinational state. The majority of the population belonged to national minorities that suffered systematic state discrimination and repression. This included the world's largest Jewish population at the time, millions of Ukrainians, as well as the Poles, Finns and a large Muslim population.

However, the rapid industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th century had created a working class which, while numerically still relatively small, was highly concentrated and politically militant. Proceeding from an analysis of the development of capitalist economy and social revolution on a world scale, Trotsky recognized that in a backward country like Russia it was only the working class that could resolve the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution. In resolving these tasks and taking state power, the working class would have to resort to socialist measures. Critical to this perspective was the understanding that the fate of the revolution in Russia would be decided on the world arena. Its conquests could only be developed and defended through an international extension of the revolution to other countries, especially the more advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe.

In his *History of the Russian Revolution*, Trotsky summed up the implications of his theory of permanent revolution for the problem of nationalities. He wrote:

> Nothing so clearly characterizes the historic belatedness of Russia when considered as a European country, as the fact that in the twentieth century she had to liquidate … those twin barbarisms, serfdom and the Ghetto. But in performing these tasks Russia, exactly because of her belated development, made use of new and utterly modern classes, parties, programs. To make an end of the idea and methods of Rasputin, she required the ideas and methods of Marx. …In order to achieve liberation and a cultural lift, the oppressed nationalities were compelled to link their fate with that of the working class. And for this they had to free themselves from the leadership of their own bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties—they had to make a long spurt forward, that is, on the road of historic development.[5]

The national bourgeoisies of the Russian Empire proved not only utterly incapable of fulfilling these democratic tasks, they were the vehicle for the imperialist intervention in the civil war against the Soviet republic. Nowhere did this dynamic assume such a clear and, one should add, violent character, as in Ukraine.

The venal Ukrainian bourgeoisie, seething with racism and nationalism, became the main pawn in the attempts of German imperialism to subjugate the entire region to colonial exploitation. In 1918, Germany staged a coup in Kiev, seeking to turn Ukraine into a launching pad for the dismantling of Soviet power and the former Russian Empire. It was only the outbreak of revolution in Germany later that year, in November 1918, that forced the retreat of the German army from Eastern Europe.

Another faction of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie, headed by Symon Petliura, collaborated with the Polish bourgeoisie in its invasion of Soviet Ukraine in 1920 and became known above all for launching some of the most violent anti-Jewish pogroms of the civil war. The veterans of Petliura's army would later go on to form the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

The establishment of Soviet power, especially in Ukraine, critically depended on a correct policy by the Bolsheviks on the national question. In its 1919 program, the Russian Communist Party summed up its political principles on the national question:

- The cornerstone of our policy is to draw together the proletarians and semi-proletarians of different nationalities in waging a joint revolutionary struggle to overthrow the landowners and the bourgeoisie.

- The distrust felt by the working masses of the oppressed countries toward the proletariat of states that used to oppress those countries must be overcome. To do this it is necessary to abolish each and every privilege enjoyed by any national group whatsoever. Complete equality of rights for all nationalities must be established, and the right of colonies and dependent nations to separate must be recognized.

- To this end, the party proposes a federation of states organized along Soviet lines as one of the transitional forms on the road to complete unity. …[6]

By early 1922, the gains of the October Revolution had been extended to large portions of the former Russian Empire.

The imperialist-backed counterrevolutionary armies had been defeated. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was proclaimed on December 30, 1922.

Its borders had been determined, first, by the course of this civil war, and, second, by the delay of the world revolution, which was the result above all of the monumental betrayal of German Social Democracy in 1918-1919. This international isolation generated immense social and political pressures on the fledgling workers state and the Bolshevik Party, and created conditions for the growth of a bureaucracy.

This explains why the very formation of the USSR was accompanied by an increasingly bitter conflict between the internationalist, Marxist tendency, represented by Lenin and Trotsky, and the nationalist faction around Joseph Stalin, which spoke for the interests of the nascent bureaucracy. In fact, it was over the formation of the USSR and the "national question" that Lenin launched his "last struggle" against Stalin and the bureaucratic apparatus—in alliance with Trotsky—almost exactly a century ago.

For Stalin, the chauvinist bully, the "unity" of the Soviet federation meant the unquestioned subordination of the ethnic and national minorities of the union to the *Russian* Soviet Republic and the central bureaucratic apparatus. In a letter to Lenin from September 22, 1922, Stalin demanded the complete economic and political subordination of the Soviet republics of Ukraine, the Caucasus and other regions to the central apparatus in Moscow.

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In the perhaps most revealing formulation, Stalin wrote: "The young generation of communists in the borderlands refuses to understand the [our] playing around with independence as a game." The civil war had forced Moscow to show "liberalism" toward the oppressed nationalities, but now, Stalin insisted, this had to stop. In other words, for Stalin, the principle of national self-determination upheld by the Bolsheviks at the time, was but a "game," designed to trick the oppressed masses into support for Bolshevism and the Soviet state.[7]

Against Stalin's opposition, Lenin insisted on the principle of the equality of all nationalities of the union and the right to secession for all national republics, including Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Georgia. He proposed major changes to the draft constitution for the Soviet Union that Stalin had prepared to enforce the principles articulated in the 1919 party program as the constitutional basis of the Soviet Union. As a result, the principle of self-determination was enshrined, including the right to secede from the union for all national republics. No other federation in world history had granted such vast rights to its different constituent parts.

While Stalin and other leading Bolsheviks who de facto supported his positions yielded to Lenin's authority, these political differences did not go away. They were an early, sharp reflection of the consolidation of tendencies within the Bolshevik Party that spoke for fundamentally different social forces. With Lenin severely ill and bedridden, it was the future leaders of the Left Opposition, Leon Trotsky and Christian Rakovsky (the former head of the Soviet republic of Ukraine), who took up the defense of the Bolshevik principles on the national question at the 12th Party Congress in April 1923.

The central role of Trotsky and Rakovsky in this struggle was not a coincidence: at stake in the conflict over the national question were the two issues that would continue to be at the center of the fight against Stalinism for decades to come—the struggle for the international unity of the working class and the oppressed masses, and the perspective of permanent revolution.

In October 1923, the Left Opposition was formed under the leadership of Leon Trotsky. By then, the internationalist Marxists had become a minority in the Bolshevik leadership. The conflict that ensued in the coming years encompassed virtually all aspects of Soviet domestic policies—including economic policies and inner-party democracy—as well as the strategy and policies of the Communist International.

On the national question, the Left Opposition defended the principles of Bolshevism against the bureaucratic apparatus. In its 1927 Platform, the Joint Left Opposition denounced "bureaucratism, sustained by the spirit of Great-Power jingoism" which had "succeeded in transforming Soviet centralization into a source of quarrels as to the allotment of official positions among the nationalities."[8]

The support in the working class and youth for the opposition was particularly strong in the industrial centers of Soviet Ukraine and in Soviet Georgia. In Ukraine's industrial Kharkov region, the Left Opposition had representatives in every fourth factory party cell and every third youth party cell in 1927.[9] However, these figures are only a very limited measure of the opposition's influence. In an indication of the deep-rooted popular consciousness of Trotsky's role in the revolution, a Ukrainian worker, who was not a party member, proposed to the Kiev City Council in May 1926 that Kiev be renamed "Trotskiev." He wrote, "As Trotskiev, the city's name will tell of the great revolutionary work done by Comrade Trotsky in Ukraine in the years of the cruelest class struggle…"[10]

Many of the leading figures of the Left Opposition also came from what is now Ukraine. This includes, of course, Trotsky himself, but also Boris Eltsin, an Old Bolshevik, who was born near Kiev and became the general secretary of the Left Opposition in the late 1920s.

It must be stressed that the majority of the Left Opposition did *not* capitulate to Stalinism and continued the struggle into the 1930s. If their names to this day are unknown to the working class of Russia and the world, it is because of the far-reaching impact of the Stalinist Great Terror and decades-long efforts to suppress the historical truth about the 1917 revolution and the Marxist opposition to Stalinism. In fact, many of the most critical political documents of the opposition in the Soviet Union of the 1930s were not found until 2018, i.e., 80 years after the peak of the Great Terror.[11] They leave no doubt that the Soviet Trotskyists continued to wage a conscious, active political struggle against Stalinism, despite the tremendously difficult conditions in the Soviet Union of the 1930s.

Critical to the political survival and strength of the Soviet opposition in this period was the clarification of the lessons of the defeat of the 1926–1927 Chinese revolution and the counter-revolutionary character of the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country." These lessons were most clearly articulated in Trotsky's critique of the 1928 draft program of the Communist International, also known as *The Third International after Lenin.* In this document—which to this day is foundational for the Trotskyist movement—Trotsky wrote:

> In our epoch, which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e., of *world* economy and *world* politics under the hegemony of finance capital, not a single communist party can establish its program by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country… In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not *vice versa*. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.[12]

Despite the growing bureaucratization of the Soviet state and the party, the national policy of the Soviet Union in the 1920s bore in critical respects the imprint of Lenin. In schools, Soviet children and youth received instructions in their native languages. The state sponsored publications in dozens of languages, including Yiddish and Ukrainian. Tens of millions of peasants of all nationalities learned to read and write within less than a generation, and in their native languages. It is these profoundly progressive policies that Putin had in mind when he condemned Lenin and the Soviet Union for "creating" Ukraine.

But these policies changed sharply after the expulsion of the Left Opposition from the party in December 1927 and the expulsion of Trotsky from the USSR in 1929. In the 1930s, compulsory Russification became state policy. But the biggest blow came with the Great Terror. Between 1936 and the early 1940s, the bureaucracy slaughtered the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, thousands of Trotskyists, who had never capitulated to Stalinism, and generations of socialist workers and intellectuals. This political genocide of revolutionary Marxists culminated in the assassination of Leon Trotsky himself in Mexico in 1940.

The terror assumed particularly ferocious dimensions in the national republics, and especially so in Soviet Ukraine where the NKVD set killing quotas that were higher than anywhere else. Moreover, as part of the so-called "national operations" of the NKVD, tens of thousands of party members and civilians were rounded up, often just because of their surnames that sounded German or Polish.

As Vadim Rogovin pointed out in his critical study, *Political Genocide in the USSR*, much of the cadre of the Communist International was murdered, including Communists from Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, China, Korea and many other countries. Another wave of purges in the post-war period assumed an even more openly nationalist and anti-Semitic character. The essential basis for this proliferation of Great Russian nationalism and outright xenophobia lay in the nationalist betrayal of the revolution.

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Despite these crimes, however, the Trotskyist movement continued to defend the Soviet Union against imperialism. In opposition to a petty bourgeois faction within the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1939–1940, Trotsky insisted that the assessment of the Soviet Union had to be rooted in a historical and class analysis of its origins. The Soviet state had undergone a horrific degeneration under bureaucratic rule but the central conquests of the October revolution—including the nationalization of most of industry by the workers state during the civil war, the state monopoly on foreign trade and the establishment of early elements of economic planning—had not yet been overthrown.

It was the duty of class conscious workers to defend the workers state against imperialist aggression. This political line did not signify any support whatsoever for the Kremlin. Since Trotsky's 1936 *Revolution Betrayed*, the Trotskyist movement had called upon the Soviet working class to defend the conquests of October by overthrowing the bureaucracy in a political revolution. Without such a political revolution and the international extension of October, Trotsky foresaw that the bureaucracy would eventually be propelled to reintegrate the Soviet economy into the world capitalist system by restoring capitalism, destroying the workers state and transforming itself into a new ruling class.

The ICFI's response to the dissolution of the Soviet Union

This warning was vindicated. In December 1991, the Stalinist bureaucracy accomplished what the Nazis and their fascist allies in Ukraine and throughout Eastern Europe had failed to do in World War II: it destroyed the Soviet Union. The International Committee was not taken by surprise by this development. The struggle by the IC against the Pabloite degeneration of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in 1982–1986 had been based on the defense of the entire history and political heritage of the Trotskyist movement and its struggle against both Stalinism and Pabloism.

The split from the WRP in 1985–1986 formed the basis for a renaissance of Marxism within the ICFI and enabled the Trotskyist movement to intervene powerfully in the crisis of Stalinism. In 1989–1991, IC delegates visited the Soviet Union. These were the first visits by representatives of the Trotskyist movement to the Soviet Union since the political genocide of the Great Terror, half a century earlier. Comrade David North gave lectures attended by hundreds in Moscow and Kiev and corresponded with hundreds of workers and youth, especially from Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine. The Russian-language *Bulletin* of the ICFI circulated widely and formed the basis for establishing contact with the Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin who had worked for a long time in political isolation on a history of the Left Opposition.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union last December, the WSWS made available many of these documents, some of them for the first time, in an important exhibit. Their prescience is striking, and I urge everyone to carefully review these documents. They remain critical for the orientation of the party and the education of a new layer of revolutionary workers. I will only quote from one speech that Comrade North gave in Kiev, just a little over two months before the Soviet Union was liquidated and new, rivaling nation-states were established in its place. He said:

> Declaring "independence" from Moscow, the nationalists can do nothing more than place all the vital decisions relating to the future of their new states in the hands of Germany, Britain, France, Japan and the United States. … The return to capitalism, for which the chauvinist agitation of the nationalists is only one guise, can only lead to a new form of oppression. Rather than each of the Soviet nationalities approaching the imperialists separately with their heads bowed and their knees bent, begging for alms and favors, the Soviet workers of all nationalities should forge a new relationship, based on the principles of real social equality and democracy, and on this basis undertake the revolutionary defense of all that is worth preserving of the heritage of 1917.[13]

A generation later, it is almost a cliché to state that the restoration of capitalism has resulted in a socioeconomic disaster. Across the former Soviet Union, the indices for social inequality, as well as for diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis or suicides, are among the worst in the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed both the murderous indifference of the oligarchs to the lives of workers and the devastating consequences of the destruction of the Soviet health care system. According to an excess death count by the *Economist*, over 1.2 million people fell victim to the policy of social murder in Russia alone. Of the 10 countries listed by the *Economist* as having the highest per capita figures of excess deaths in the pandemic, nine had undergone capitalist restoration in the 1980s and 1990s. Internationally, the destruction of the Soviet Union was marked by an escalation of the social counter-revolution and the explosion of US militarism.

The ICFI never denied that the dissolution of the Soviet Union represented a defeat and setback for the working class internationally. However, in stark contrast to the Pabloites who had accommodated themselves to Stalinism and, in fact, supported the restoration of capitalism, the International Committee did not see in 1991 the "end of socialism." On the contrary: It had vindicated, if in the negative, the decades-long struggle by the Trotskyist movement against the nationalist politics of Stalinism.

The globalization of production had undermined the basis for all nation-based organizations and bureaucracies, precipitating their wholesale capitulation to imperialism, and, in the case of the trade unions, their integration into the state machinery and corporate management.

The collapse of bureaucracies and organizations that had shackled and betrayed the working class for generations marked the beginning of a new period of imperialist wars and a new stage in the development of the socialist revolution in which the Trotskyist movement would play *the* leading role. In order to reestablish Marxist consciousness in the working class and prepare a new upsurge in the socialist revolution, the ICFI made the defense of historical truth about the history of the October revolution, Leon Trotsky and the Trotskyist movement as a whole a central component of its work. The 20th century, the ICFI insisted, had not ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Rather, it had remained unfinished and its unresolved problems—social inequality, war and fascism—would shape the world as it entered the 21st century.

The imperialist onslaught against Russia and the character of the Putin regime

Following the January 1991 US invasion and savage bombing of Iraq, the ICFI called the Workers Conference against Imperialist War and Colonialism in Berlin. In its manifesto, the ICFI concluded:

> All the great historical and political tasks that confronted the working class and the oppressed masses at the beginning of the

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> 20th century are now posed in their starkest form. The savage bombing of Iraq and the virtual destruction of its industrial infrastructure marks the beginning of a new eruption of imperialist barbarism. Capitalism cannot survive without enslaving and destroying millions…[14]

It is important to recall that the Soviet bureaucracy, in its final act of betrayal before it destroyed the USSR, lent its support to this imperialist war of plunder which proved to be the beginning of three decades of imperialist wars in the Middle East and Africa, the bloody historical prelude to the unfolding imperialist onslaught against Russia and China. The Russian oligarchy has inherited the Stalinist bureaucracy's delusional belief in the possibility of "peaceful coexistence" and a negotiated settlement with imperialism. As Putin himself admitted just before launching the invasion, in the late 1990s, he had even asked US President Clinton personally whether the US would support Russia's accession to NATO in 1998. Of course, the US would not.

Through a combination of NATO expansion, coups on its borders and military interventions in countries allied with Russia and China, the imperialist powers have systematically and relentlessly encircled Russia. This explosion of US militarism and the ICFI's analysis of it were reviewed in the critical report by Comrade Andre Damon.[15]

Indeed, if one reviews the history of the wars waged by US imperialism over the past thirty years, the unfolding war for the carve-up of Russia and China appears like a brutal inevitability. Despite their reintegration into the world capitalist system, the imperialist powers have been barred by the ruling oligarchic regimes from directly plundering the vast resources of these countries. Vying for these resources between themselves, and driven by irresolvable domestic crises, they are now determined to change this.

In point 2, the draft resolution describes the basic aims of the US war against Russia as follows: "the removal of the present regime in Russia, its replacement by an American-controlled puppet, and the breakup of Russia itself—in what is referred to as "decolonizing Russia"—into a dozen or more impotent statelets whose valuable resources will be owned and exploited by US and European finance capital." This passage is central for understanding both the unfolding conflict and the politics of the pro-NATO pseudo-left and their insistence that Russia is an "imperialist country."

In his polemic against Shachtman's and Burnham's claim in 1939–1940 that the Soviet Union was no longer a workers state, Trotsky pointed to the call by the Fourth International for the overthrow of the bureaucracy and asked what new political conclusions would follow from the definitions proposed by Shachtman and Burnham.[16]

Similarly, one could ask: What is to be gained politically by claiming that Russia is an imperialist country? The ICFI has made its revolutionary opposition to the Putin regime and its war very clear, and from a socioeconomic standpoint the claim makes little sense. Russia has an economy equal in size to that of Texas—now even less because of the enormous impact of the economic sanctions—and effectively functions as a raw material supplier for other capitalist countries.

But the claim that Russia is "imperialist" serves a vital political function: It provides a political cover for the imperialist aggression against Russia and the war aims of the imperialist powers. This was made clear by a webinar for congressmen and women hosted on June 23 under the title "Decolonizing Russia." The webinar, staffed by CIA operatives and right-wing nationalists from Ukraine and the Caucasus, effectively argued that Russia was a colonial empire that had to be broken up with the support of Washington. When the moderator asked, "Is decolonizing breaking up Russia? And if so, are there any risks associated with that?" no one could give an answer because the only answer was, of course: Yes.

It is this strategy which the pro-NATO pseudo-left covers up for with its clamor about "Russian imperialism." The fostering of nationalist, regionalist and ethnic tensions has been a key component of imperialist war policy for decades. It was utilized systematically during the breakup and bombing of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It should be recalled that the WRP renegade Cliff Slaughter and the remnants of the WRP anticipated the far-right shift of the ex-Pabloites when they granted full political and logistical support to NATO's operation in Yugoslavia and backed the modern-day adherents of the fascist Ustashi in Croatia. This sharp turn to the right by the Pabloites was extensively analyzed by the ICFI in several critical documents in the 1990s, including *Marxism, Opportunism and the Balkan Crisis*.[17]

With the split from the WRP in 1985–6, the ICFI had embarked on the opposite class trajectory. The revision of the position on the right of nations to self-determination was an outgrowth of that struggle and a critical component of the IC's response to the explosion of US militarism in the aftermath of 1991.

In a 2019 lecture, "The dissolution of the USSR and the unipolar moment of US imperialism," Comrade Bill Van Auken explained that "the development of capitalist globalization gave rise to a new type of nationalist movement." These movements "stood in sharp contradiction to the earlier national movements … which posed the progressive task of creating new states by unifying disparate peoples in a common struggle against imperialism. … The nationalist movements that emerged at the close of the 20th century sought, instead, to break up existing states along ethnic, religious and linguistic lines with the aid of imperialism."[18]

We hold this position with regard to the former Soviet Union today. The restoration of capitalism was not only bound up with the breakup of the USSR into nation-states but also unleashed powerful centrifugal forces within the new Russian ruling class. Russia's natural resources are a central source for the self-enrichment of the oligarchy but their regional distribution is highly unequal. The rivalry within the oligarchy over control of these resources has been a central element in the frictions among regional elites and tensions between these regional elites and the central government in Moscow. In the 1990s, the further breakup of the Russian Federation was discussed as a very real possibility by think tanks across the world. A central feature of Putin's domestic policy since 2000 has been to "discipline" regional elites, subordinate them to Moscow and strengthen the central state apparatus.

The misnamed and imperialist-backed "liberal opposition," which now organizes "anti-war protests" to the cheers of the Western bourgeois press, speaks for a faction in the oligarchy which hopes that, through a breakup of the Russian Federation in its existing form, and a direct lineup with NATO, it will be able to more directly exploit the working class and Russia's resources. Their main spokesman, Alexei Navalny, has not only close ties to Washington and Berlin, he is also an avowed racist who has participated in far-right rallies and maintains political relations with separatist and regionalist tendencies throughout the Russian Federation.

These forces, along with a narrow layer of the upper middle class that has profited from capitalist restoration and sections of the military and secret services, form the social basis for the regime change operation by the imperialist powers. While they claim to oppose the war in Ukraine, they in fact support the other warring side—NATO. And far from "peace," their political program would entail the imperialist-led carve-up of Russia, a process that will inevitably entail a series of wars and civil wars.

Of course, the Putin regime is quite conscious of these plans to break up Russia. Indeed, Putin has publicly warned of a repetition of the Yugoslavia scenario in Russia just two months before he launched the invasion of Ukraine. He has repeatedly reiterated these warnings since.

But his regime itself speaks for the same class interests as Navalny and the "liberal opposition." The Russian oligarchy as a whole never had and never could have any independence from imperialism. Whatever the bitter conflicts over foreign policy within this class, it is fundamentally oriented

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toward finding a negotiated settlement with one or the other imperialist power. Having arisen out of a counter-revolution against October 1917, the oligarchs are very conscious of the fact that their main enemy is the international working class.

Indeed, the Putin regime's promotion of the legacy of Tsarism and Stalinism, from the standpoint of the oligarchy, is a conscious and accurate articulation of the counter-revolutionary traditions out of which it historically arose. It must also be stressed that, just as the escalating threats of the deployment of nuclear weapons by the Putin regime, its promotion of Great Russian chauvinism can only serve to *further* the aims of the imperialist powers while confusing and dividing the working class.

Conclusion

The dangers of the unfolding war are incalculable and the WSWS has raised and must raise these dangers, up to the very real threat of nuclear annihilation, sharply before the world's working class. But there is also another side to this development.

As in 1917, the same contradictions that are leading to world war will *inevitably* lead to social revolution. This is a historical law. Already, the international working class has begun to rear its head. The old political props of imperialism—from Stalinism to the trade unions and the petty bourgeois ex-left—have collapsed. Our assessment of the fifth stage in the history of the Trotskyist movement marks a recognition of the fact that the period that was initiated with the Stalinist reaction against October and that has forced the relative isolation of the Trotskyist movement has come to an end. Throughout the preceding four stages, since 1923, the Trotskyist movement has been forged as the world party of socialist revolution in the decades-long struggle against Stalinism and petty bourgeois opportunism.

This struggle has prepared the far-reaching, objective transformation in the relationship between the Fourth International and the working class that is now underway. It has placed the ICFI in a position in Sri Lanka where it can intervene powerfully in and provide leadership to the struggle of the oppressed masses of that island in the seizure for power; it has created the basis for the formations of sections of the IC in Turkey, Brazil and throughout the world, as well as the vast expansion of its existing sections. It has also created the political and theoretical foundations for the building of the Trotskyist movement in the former Soviet Union and China, the most immediate targets of the imperialist redivision of the world.

I would like to conclude by urging comrades to vote in favor of the draft resolution presented to this Congress. It clearly articulates the political line based on which the American working class, fighting in the center of world imperialism, can be unified with its class brothers and sisters across Europe, Russia and Asia, in a socialist struggle against imperialist war, capitalism and the nation-state system.

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[1] Oppose the Putin government's invasion of Ukraine and US-NATO warmongering! For the unity of Russian and Ukrainian workers!" WSWS, February 24, 2022.

[2] On the role of Michael-Matsas in the split with teh WRP in 1985-1986, see: David North, "The Debs, ed. David North's 'New Era,'" August 11, 1989. For an analysis of Daria Mitina's OKP and her alliance with Michael-Matsas, see: Bill Van Auken, Eric London: "Workers Party in Argentina seeks to "refound" Fourth International in alliance with Stalinism," WSWS, June 7, 2018.

[3] This statement by Sungur Savran from the Turkish DIP was referenced by Daria Mitina on her blog on May 22, 2022.

[4] Leon Trotsky, *War and the Fourth International* (1934).

[5] Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Ch. 39: "The Problem of Nationality"

[6] "Program of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)", in: *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power. Documents: 1918–1919, Preparing the Founding Congress*, edited by John Riddell, Pathfinder Press 1986, p. 634.

[7] Letter by Joseph Stalin to Vladimir Lenin from September 22, 1922, in: *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, No. 9, p. 199.

[8] Leon Trotsky, "The National Question" Opposition (1927). Chapter 6: "The National Question"

[9] OGPU report on the activities of the Left Opposition in the Kharkov region, addressed to Ivan Tovstukha, the secretary of Joseph Stalin, from 3 August, 1927. RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), f. 17, op. 171, delo 31, p. 45.

[10] Pis'mo neizvestnogo rabochego v Kievskii gorsovet, 1 maia 1926 goda [Letter by an unknown worker to the Kiev city council, 1 May, 1926], in: *Pis'ma vo vlast'. 1917–1927: Zaiavleniia, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i bol'shevistskim vozhdiam [Letters to the government. 1917–1927: Declarations, complaints, denunciations, letters to state organs and the Bolshevik leaders]*, Moscow: ROSSPEN 1998, p. 503.

[11] For more on the discovery of these documents, see: Clara Weiss, Vladimir Volkov "of Left Opposition manuscripts from the early 1930s," WSWS, August 27, 2018.

[12] Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin* (1928).

[13] David Axelrod, "Putsch: Soviet Union at the Crossroads," October 3, 1991.

[14] Joint International Committee of the Fourth International, "Oppose Imperialist War and Counter-Revolution! May 1, 1991

[15] Andre Damon, "America's New World Order"— The historical and social roots of US plans for war with Russia and China," WSWS, September 21, 2022.

[16] Leon Trotsky, "The USSR in War" (September 25, 1939), in: *In Defense of Marxism*.

[17] Marxist Opposition Committee of Baltic States, "Major Turning Point in the Balkan Crisis," May 7, 1994.

[18] Bill Van Auken, "The Dissolution of the USSR and the Unipolar Moment of US Imperialism," lecture given at the 2019 SEP Summer School, July 25, 2019.

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