

Britain's undeclared war with Russia

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The shipment of Storm Shadow cruise missiles to Ukraine, the longest-range weapons yet received by Kiev, confirms the UK's role as provocateur-in-chief in the NATO war against Russia.

The Ukrainian army is now not only capable of striking Crimea—Russia's central concern in the war—but deep into the Russian mainland. It takes delivery of these weapons on the eve of a long-anticipated counteroffensive against Russian lines.

In these circumstances, all that has prevented a direct war breaking out between Britain and Russia is the Kremlin's restraint, fearing the triggering of NATO's collective defence clause.

At every stage of the war, Britain has led NATO's escalation. Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced last week that the war in Ukraine "didn't start in 2022. The war started in 2014." This dates the beginning of NATO's "biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War" to the Maidan coup sponsored by the US and European powers to instal an anti-Russian regime in Kiev.

The events led to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the eruption of civil war in Ukraine over the breakaway of regions in the East. The situation was formally addressed by the Minsk Agreements which were portrayed as a peace effort. Last December, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel admitted that this was only a cover "to give Ukraine time... to become stronger."

From that point, British imperialism was central in carrying out a joint programme of training and equipping the Ukrainian army while staging repeated anti-Russian provocations—most notably the 2019 allegations that Moscow had poisoned double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia with novichok.

The UK's war preparations

Under Operation Orbital, begun in 2015, Britain had already trained 22,000 Ukrainian troops in the seven years before the Russian invasion. It has since trained a further 14,000. In the lead up to the war, thousands of British soldiers were deployed in Eastern Europe on permanent missions or for large-scale NATO combat exercises.

The UK played a central role in NATO's aggressive posturing from the Baltic to the Black Sea. In June 2021, a British warship entered waters claimed by Russia near Crimea, in an incident that nearly resulted in a direct exchange of fire between UK and Russian forces.

The UK's actions have been accompanied by statements from leading military and political figures making clear Britain's hostile intentions towards Russia.

In 2016, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon told Parliament's Defence Select Committee that the UK would be ready for war with Russia by 2018. That year, Chief of the General Staff Sir Nick Carter declared that this included "project[ing] land capability over distances of up to some 2,000 km... copying what the Germans did very well in 1940". Carter was referring to the preparation by Nazi Germany for Operation

Barbarossa—the 1941 war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, recognised as the most brutal military campaign history has ever seen.

The 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy warned of the acute threat posed by Russia, as well as China, Iran and North Korea, and centred on increasing nuclear warhead capacity by 40 percent. In "Defence in a Competitive Age" the Ministry of Defence described Russia as "the greatest nuclear, conventional military and sub-threshold threat to European security."

After the Ukraine war broke out in February 2022, a spokesperson for Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the UK was taking measures "to bring down the Putin regime." New army chief General Patrick Sanders declared that the "British Army must be prepared to engage in warfare at its most violent."

The Integrated Review Refresh 2023 is introduced by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak with the declaration, "What has changed is that our collective security now is intrinsically linked to the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine."

Britain supplied £2.3 billion of military assistance to Ukraine in 2022, with a commitment to match that figure in 2023. Thousands of UK troops have been dispatched to Eastern Europe to participate in NATO exercises involving tens of thousands of soldiers and advanced weaponry. UK special forces troops have been deployed to Ukraine, as confirmed in leaked Pentagon files.

Russia has also accused Britain of covertly sabotaging the Nord Stream gas pipeline.

The UK's main public role since the outbreak of war has been as an outrider for the US and European NATO powers, being the first to supply Ukraine new classes of weaponry. Prior to the provision of long-range missiles, Britain also led the way with the supply of main battle tanks, sending a squadron of Challenger IIs. This was followed by Germany sending Leopard tanks and allowing other countries to send those in their armouries. The US then agreed a shipment of Abrams tanks.

Just days after confirming shipment of the Storm Shadows, now also agreed to by France, the UK used a visit by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to declare a "jets coalition" aimed at securing modern F-16 fighter jets for Ukraine.

The crisis of British imperialism

Britain's leading role in the war, outstripping to this point France and Germany, is paradoxically driven by its economic and geopolitical weakness, which it has sought to offset through a "special relationship" with the United States.

In its 2022 Congress resolution, "Mobilise the working class against imperialist war", the Socialist Equality Party (UK) answered the lie that the war in Ukraine was the result of a supposedly unprovoked invasion by Russia, explaining, "The war against Russia is the continuation and intensification of the drive for US global hegemony that was initiated with

the first invasion of Iraq in 1990-91 and intensified following the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991,” including wars and interventions against Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq again, Libya and Syria.

It continued:

“British imperialism participated as a chief partner in every one of these bloodbaths. The UK has long acted as Washington’s foremost ally in Europe. But since Brexit this alliance has assumed an ever more essential imperative in British imperialism’s efforts to project its global interests. Opposed by Washington, Brexit lost the UK its place within the European Union as the foremost advocate of US interests in the continent, especially in opposing German and French efforts to build a European military capability independent of NATO. This has necessitated a redoubling of London’s efforts to prove its usefulness to the White House and the Pentagon. British imperialism, amid an unprecedented collapse in its world standing, is cleaving as close to the US as possible in the hope of a share of the spoils.”

Anglo-Russian enmity and anti-communism

There are deeper historical interests and old scores involved. Relations between Russia and Britain have been hostile for centuries, despite significant periodic alliances championing European reaction, including during the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) waged with the political aim of combating the spread of republicanism from France.

Anti-Russian sentiment was fuelled most acutely by the Crimean War (1853–1856), when Britain and France backed the Ottoman Empire in defeating Russia, and was deepened during the “Great Game” conflict over control of Central Asia in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Britain and Russia found themselves in alliance with France in the Triple Entente (1907) only due to the enormous geostrategic threat posed to British by German imperialism, leading up to the eruption of the First World War in 1914.

The most significant cause of Anglo-Russian enmity in the 20th century was the October 1917 Revolution, led by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks. The seizure of power by the Russian working class in the world’s first socialist overturn of capitalism was viewed as a mortal threat by the British and international bourgeoisie. Britain led the allied armies of counter-revolutionary intervention (March 1918-October 1919) and supplied more than half the troops involved from Britain, the US, Italy, Serbia, Canada and France. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the class struggle in Britain, above all during the 1926 General Strike, and the ever-present threat of socialist revolution fed into the ferocious anti-Russian sentiment within ruling circles.

The re-eruption of German militarism and imperial ambitions in the Second World War pushed Britain under Winston Churchill into an alliance with the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. But as soon as the war was concluded the old enmities re-emerged with force.

Churchill, who gifted the world with the term “the Iron Curtain” at a speech in Fulton, Missouri in March 1946, had urged Washington to continue the war after 1945 against the USSR. “Operation Unthinkable” centred on a proposed July 1, 1945 assault by British, American, Polish and German Nazi forces against the Red Army. It was never implemented because the US was focused on the war against Japan, while Churchill was driven from office in the July 1945 general election that swept Labour to power.

While leader of the opposition, Churchill met with former-US army

officer Julius Ochs Adler on April 29, 1951, at the height of the Korean War, where he proposed that an ultimatum be delivered to Stalin once he was again prime minister, threatening to “atom bomb one of 20 or 30 cities”, to be followed by “if necessary, additional ones.”

Putin’s nationalist regime emerged out of the restoration of capitalism in 1991, the culmination of the Stalinist counter-revolution against October and the perspective of world socialist revolution on which it was based. Nevertheless, despite the entirely opposed nature of Putin’s government of capitalist oligarchs to Bolshevism, it is impossible to fully appreciate the extent of the UK’s hostility to Russia outside of the historic legacy of anti-communism and bitterness towards the Russian Revolution’s inspiration of anti-colonial struggles in which the British ruling class has been steeped from birth. It is an impulse ultimately rooted in class antagonisms; a hatred of the working class and socialism, shared by the upper middle class, felt so deeply that it is driving the ruling elite to contemplate war with a nuclear power that could end human civilisation.

Labour and the Tories: A single party of war

With Britain being dragged to the precipice of war with Russia, there has been no popular discussion of the consequences thanks above all to the unanimity between the Tories and the Labour Party. Sir Keir Starmer leads one half of a single, joint party of war sitting across both sides of the House of Commons.

At its latest conference, Labour delegates passed a motion submitted by the GMB trade union calling on the party to support the provision of military, economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, for the party to back an increase in funding for UK defence manufacturing, and supporting a long-term strategy to “tackle Putin and dictators around the world” and for the party to back an increase in funding for UK defence manufacturing.

Labour’s shadow foreign and defence secretaries David Lammy and John Healey have written in *Foreign Policy* magazine, “The next Labour government will ensure Britain is NATO’s leading European nation. We would apply a ‘NATO test’ to major defense projects within our first 100 days to ensure we are on track to fulfil our obligations to the alliance in full and review any capability gaps.”

These warmongers were handed leadership of the Labour Party by Jeremy Corbyn’s successful campaign to block a move by the membership to kick out the Blairites while he was in charge. The Corbynites have since either fallen silent on the war in Ukraine or, like his shadow chancellor John McDonnell, have lined up behind British imperialism and NATO.

War and the class struggle

The UK is above all driven on the path of war by acute social tensions and an eruption of class struggle at home.

Britain’s economic crisis and striving for global position dictates a brutal offensive against the working class, slashing wages, imposing speed ups and destroying social services under conditions of the worst cost-of-living crisis since the Second World War. In turn, militarism and war demands ever more draconian attacks, with the Royal United Services Institute hailing “the end of the peace dividend” such that Britain’s military spending must be prioritised over the “growing share of its national income devoted to the NHS and state pensions”.

The SEP's 2022 Congress resolution noted:

“The catastrophic impact falls upon a society already torn by extreme levels of social inequality and widespread deprivation. Faced with a growing oppositional movement in the working class, the British ruling class is turning to war as a means of enforcing a false ‘national unity,’ with repeated calls for sacrifice from the government to justify massive hikes on the price of fuel, food and other essentials.”

The result has been a strike wave ongoing since last summer, with more than 2.8 million days lost during the winter months, the highest in three decades, and more than half a million in March alone. Sabotage and betrayals by the trade union bureaucracy of the fight by NHS, education, postal and rail workers have been vital in policing opposition, at the cost of undermining the union leaders in the eyes of millions. But the government is moving to ever more naked state repression, exemplified by the new anti-strike Minimum Services Levels Bill, set to become law on May 22.

The war policy of British imperialism finds its only opposition in the working class, whose lives are being ruined and who face the prospect of death on an unimaginable scale.

But, as the SEP's 2022 resolution warned:

“While there is enormous opposition to war among British workers, this opposition lacks a programme, perspective and leadership. The task of the Socialist Equality Party is to develop within the working class and its vanguard an understanding of the inextricable connection between war abroad and exploitation and repression at home, and in this process build a revolutionary leadership in the working class”.

Only with this perspective can workers and young people internationally fight to bring the madness of war with Russia to an end.



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