

Putin's interview with Tucker Carlson: The Russian oligarchy pleads for "peaceful coexistence" with imperialism

Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists
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On February 9, a more than two-hour-long interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin was released by Tucker Carlson, an American journalist and prominent figure on the far right. In a sign of immense public distrust of media propaganda and concern over the war in Ukraine, the interview garnered significant interest, amassing over 18 million views on YouTube alone. It is therefore necessary to subject Vladimir Putin's positions to closer analysis, to expose his bankrupt policies and elucidate how they reflect the material interests, social psychology and historical origins of Russia's ruling oligarchy, of which Putin is the true embodiment.

Mythology versus history

Putin began the interview with a half-hour fantasized discourse on the history of Russia and Ukraine's origins. Despite Putin's attempt to present himself as a serious thinker grappling with the connection between current issues and historical events, he managed to make himself look ridiculous. Tucker Carlson could not conceal his own embarrassment as it became all too clear that his subject was not the formidable strategist or even the "evil genius" as portrayed in the Western media.

Seeking to impress the American media celebrity with a dazzling display of erudition, Putin came across as an absurdly pretentious autodidact. However impressed the Russian president may be with his own musings, Putin's survey of the past—from Prince Rurik and his successor Oleg and great-grandson Vladimir through to Genghis Khan, Catherine the Great and, finally, the present-day occupant of the Kremlin—was a slapdash collection of neo-tsarist Slavophile fairy tales that has nothing to do with serious history.

Putin began his narrative in the year 862, echoing the tsarist myth of the "thousand-year history of Russia" and glorifying the Russian Empire under the tsars. The reality is that the Russian nation has existed for at most half that time and has consistently lagged behind the more advanced capitalist nations of Europe and America.

He fixated on the medieval state of Kievan Rus' and portrayed it as "Russia." Yet neither Russians nor Ukrainians existed at that time as peoples or nations in the modern sense of the word. Kievan Rus' was not a nation-state, just as there were no nation-states in medieval Europe.

Putin adheres to the myth that nation and people are an eternal whole that has always existed. He understands nothing of the historically grounded socio-economic processes that gave rise to modern capitalist states. He does not explain why Russia did not evolve as a single nation-state but rather developed as a state encompassing many different

nationalities, most of which were oppressed by tsarism and Great Russian chauvinism.

Tsarist Russia had the reputation of being the "prison of nations" for a reason. In the tsarist empire, Russians made up only 43 percent of the population and Ukrainians about 17 percent. As Leon Trotsky noted in his *History of the Russian Revolution*:

The greedy demands of the state and the meagerness of the peasant foundation under the ruling classes gave rise to the most bitter forms of exploitation. National oppression in Russia was incomparably rougher than in the neighboring states not only on its western but even on its eastern borders. The vast numbers of these nationalities deprived of rights, and the sharpness of their deprivation, gave to the national problem in czarist Russia a gigantic explosive force. (Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol. 2, Chapter 39)

Acknowledging the importance of this, the Bolsheviks, many of whom hailed from national minorities themselves, advocated the "right of nations to self-determination." Lenin understood that only by upholding this democratic demand could the Bolsheviks garner support from the masses of oppressed nationalities and achieve the international unification of workers of all nationalities.

In the interview, Putin denounced Lenin for this very position. In a tacit acknowledgment of the democratic foundations of the USSR, he said:

For some inexplicable reason, Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, insisted that they have the right to withdraw from the USSR. And, again for some unknown reason, he transferred to the newly created Soviet Republic of Ukraine some of the lands with the people living there, although those lands had never been called Ukraine.

These passages expose Putin as an enemy of everything that was progressive about the October Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union.

The Bolsheviks in the early Soviet Union encouraged the cultural development of Ukraine, as well as other oppressed nations. This attested to the immense democratic impetus of the revolution and was one of the central reasons why, even after the rise of Stalinism and the terror of the 1930s, the workers of Russia and Ukraine united in defense of the

conquests of the October Revolution against the Nazi invasion of 1941.

Stalinism's betrayal of Lenin's internationalist and democratic principles regarding nationalities laid the groundwork for the violent outbreak of ethnic conflicts during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism in 1991. In a notable admission, Putin stated in the interview, "The collapse of the Soviet Union was actually initiated by the Russian leadership."

The world is now witnessing the ramifications of that "initiative:" a fratricidal war resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians and Russians.

Putin and the "errors" of imperialism: The Russian oligarchs seek "peaceful coexistence"

The most striking aspect of Putin's remarks was his effort to avoid any suggestion that US policies were rooted in definite economic and geopolitical interests. The policies of the Biden administration and NATO were trivialized as nothing more than regrettable mistakes. Putin could not understand why Washington rebuffed his appeals for friendship and understanding.

Though presented with numerous opportunities to forcefully condemn the instigation of the war by the United States, Putin adopted a tone of bewilderment. When asked by Tucker Carlson about NATO's expansion into Russia, the bombing of the German-Russian Nord Stream pipeline and the US refusal to accept Russia into NATO, Putin responded with phrases like, "I don't understand." According to Putin, the brutal policies of imperialist powers amount to a series of almost inexplicable mistakes that could easily be rectified if only one or two leaders "saw the light."

Putin recounted how, since 1991, Russian oligarchs have endeavored repeatedly to reconcile with the American ruling class. In 1991, he lamented, Russia expected to be embraced by the "civilized nations" but met with disappointment. He narrated how, even after the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, he inquired whether Russia would be accepted into the alliance, only to be rebuffed once more by the US.

As for the horrifying consequences of the Ukraine conflict, Putin displayed a striking indifference to the war's victims. Despite discussing the supposed "unity" of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, he made no mention of the estimated 400,000 Ukrainians who have perished, nor did he condemn the criminal nature of imperialist policies that have devastated Ukraine and numerous other regions over the past three decades.

The entire interview illustrates two things: First, Putin still clings to hopes for a "fair deal" with imperialism; and second, through his responses and the interview as a whole, he aims to lay the groundwork for initiating negotiations for such a deal, appealing to segments of the US ruling class to finally "come to their senses" and strike a deal with the oligarchs and Moscow. Factoring into these calculations is, no doubt, the fact that, as Putin observes in the interview, "the West is afraid of a strong China more than it fears a strong Russia."

Putin is always anxious to stress that the capitalist regime in Russia has totally repudiated not only economic but also political and theoretical links to the Soviet past. At one point in the interview he boasted of the "bourgeois" character of the ruling elite.

But a consequence of his ostentatious repudiation of the past is an avoidance of any assessment of the war that might, even to the slightest extent, legitimize the early struggle of the Bolshevik regime, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, against imperialism. The insights of Lenin dare not be repeated, such as the assessment the founder of Bolshevism gave of the underlying impulse behind imperialist wars:

The question is: what means other than war could there be *under capitalism* to overcome the disparity between the development of productive forces and the accumulation of capital on the one side, and the division of colonies and spheres of influence for finance capital on the other?" (Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* 1916, Chapter 7)

But while Putin repudiates the revolutionary heritage of the Soviet Union, his own conception of geopolitics remains heavily influenced by the Stalinist dogma of "peaceful coexistence" that he imbibed while serving, in the 1970s and 1980s, in the Stalinist secret police.

As the Stalinist regime lunged toward capitalist restoration under Gorbachev (1985-1991), it mocked the concept of "imperialism" as a Bolshevik fabrication.

In an analysis of Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev, David North commented:

The idea that the essential content of relations between imperialism and the Soviet Union is determined by the subjective attitudes of the political leaders of the different states—i.e., their desire for or hostility to "cooperation" and "peace"—ignores the far more fundamental objective economic factors. Evaluated from the standpoint of its theoretical underpinnings, this subjective and fundamentally reactionary approach is based on the same metaphysical conceptions that have guided the policies of the Soviet bureaucracy since Stalin and Bukharin first advanced the perspective of building socialism in one country. (David North, *Perestroika Versus Socialism: Stalinism and the Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR*, Chapter 6, Labor Publications 1989)

These seemingly irrational views had an objective basis in the material interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. North explained:

The foreign policy of the Soviet government, like that of all other regimes in the world, arises organically out of the material interests of the ruling social elite, and, therefore, is a continuation of its domestic policy. Indeed, it is in the sphere of foreign policy that the fundamental interests and historic aims of the bureaucracy find their most concentrated and clear-cut expression. From this objective standpoint, the foreign policy of Mikhail Gorbachev is inseparably linked with the program of capitalist restoration that is being pursued by the Stalinist bureaucracy under the banner of perestroika. While the bureaucracy seeks to systematically undermine the state property relations within the Soviet Union, its foreign policy is aimed at integrating the USSR economically into the structure of world capitalism and its international division of labor. (David North, *Perestroika Versus Socialism: Stalinism and the Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR*, Chapter 5)

Applying these insights to Putin's foreign policy, we see that, despite its contradictions and delusional elements, it reflects the material interests of the oligarchy that arose from the bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism. Its primary concern is to expeditiously reach an agreement with the imperialist powers, allowing it to safeguard what it perceives as its vital "national" interests in the exploitation of raw materials and the working class. From the perspective of the Russian oligarchy, the longer the war persists, the greater the risk of inciting a mass movement of workers in

Russia, Ukraine, and beyond. This, rather than direct confrontation with imperialism or dismemberment of the country by the imperialist powers, constitutes the Russian oligarchy's greatest apprehension.

The reactionary logic of the Putin regime's orientation is accentuated by two central components of its foreign policy strategy: First, it seeks to reshuffle the borders of Russia and Europe as part of a renegotiation of the terms of its "co-existence" with imperialism. In the interview, Putin not only defends the invasion of Ukraine as a legitimate response to the borders created under Lenin, but also insists that other countries, especially Hungary, which has long-standing border disputes with Ukraine, have a right to "reclaim land" that they consider their own.

Second, the regime's efforts to negotiate a settlement with imperialism are ever more overtly focused on appealing to the extreme right-wing opposition within the ruling class in the imperialist centers. In the interview, Putin once again asserted that the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine was a central objective of the war. By justifying the invasion with this slogan, Putin sought to appeal to the deep-seated anti-fascist sentiments of the working class and the collective memory of the Soviet working class's struggle against Hitler's aggression. However, Putin's true stance on fascism was revealed in this interview. With a straight face, he stressed the importance of combating fascism with Tucker Carlson, a notorious mouthpiece of the far right.

The way forward for the working class

By resurrecting tsarist and Russian Orthodox mythology and advocating the neo-Stalinist concept of "multipolarity," Putin ultimately demonstrates that the Russian oligarchy has maintained an exceedingly fragile social, economic and political position throughout its 30 years as a ruling class. The regime's extreme instability is evident in both its foreign and domestic policies.

Even as imperialism escalates toward World War III, Putin attempts to secure a deal through diplomatic and military maneuvers that are ideologically based on appeals to nationalism and the far right. The interview serves as an indicative step in this process.

The working class must draw important lessons from this interview. It exposes the political and historical bankruptcy of the oligarchic regime stemming from the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution and the subsequent restoration of capitalism.

The bitter experience of two world wars demonstrates that imperialism cannot be transformed into an instrument of world peace. To avert catastrophe, the working class must formulate its response to the war on an independent and internationalist basis, in opposition to all factions of the imperialist powers and the oligarchies that emerged from the Soviet Union's ruins. It must seek not the reshuffling of borders or a rearrangement of terms between capitalist countries but the overthrow of the nation-state structure and the world capitalist system.

What is imperative is the establishment of a socialist anti-war movement among youth and workers, grounded in the traditions and principles of internationalism and Marxism, namely Trotskyism. This is the goal pursued by the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists in Russia and Ukraine, alongside their comrades in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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