

On the eve of the NATO summit in Ankara: European powers drive Ukraine war toward direct conflict with Russia

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The war in Ukraine has entered an extraordinarily dangerous new stage. On the eve of the NATO summit in Ankara on July 7–8, the European imperialist powers are recklessly escalating the conflict with Russia, transforming Ukraine into a launchpad for deep strikes into Russian territory and preparing the political, military and industrial foundations for a direct NATO-Russia war.

Such a war would not remain confined to Ukraine. It would threaten to engulf the whole of Europe and could rapidly escalate into a nuclear conflict.

Workers must understand the seriousness of the situation and draw the necessary political conclusions. Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers have already been killed or wounded. Entire cities have been destroyed and millions displaced. Yet the NATO powers, above all in Europe, are not seeking to stop the slaughter. They are escalating it and are prepared to sacrifice hundreds of thousands and even millions more.

The central danger is that the distinction between a proxy war and a direct war between NATO and Russia is being systematically erased. Ukraine’s long-range drone and missile strikes against targets deep inside Russia—energy facilities, military-industrial sites, airfields, ports and infrastructure around Moscow and St. Petersburg—depend on NATO intelligence, satellite surveillance, targeting data, weapons systems and political direction.

The European powers are deliberately pushing Kiev to escalate. They calculate that strikes deep inside Russia will force Moscow to respond and that any Russian retaliation can then be used to justify a still broader NATO intervention. This is the logic of provocation. It is the logic that leads to world war.

The NATO summit in Ankara is being prepared as the next stage in this escalation. The alliance has committed itself to massive increases in military spending, including 5 percent of GDP for defence and broader military-related expenditure by 2035. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte has called for “NATO 3.0,” a “rebooted” alliance in which the European powers take far greater responsibility for war in Europe, “backed by American power.” At the June meeting of NATO defence ministers, the emphasis was on “combat-ready capabilities,” military production and the supply of weapons to Ukraine.

Europe is being reorganized as a war bloc. Germany, Britain, France, Poland, the Baltic states and the Nordic countries are among the most aggressive forces pushing the war forward. The crisis of US hegemony, the uncertainty of American policy under Trump, and the weakening of the transatlantic order are compelling them to develop their own military capacities and assert their imperialist interests.

For Germany, Britain and France, the war in Ukraine is the means to become once again independent military powers on the world stage. They are using it to justify the largest rearmament since the Second World War,

the restructuring of industry for military production, the reintroduction of conscription, the militarization of schools and universities, and the building of a police-state apparatus at home. Rearmament and war are the response of a ruling class that sees military escalation as a means to suppress class struggle and redivide the world.

The escalating war is accompanied by the mobilization of ever more human material for the slaughter. Russia is preparing further mobilizations. Ukraine, bled white by years of war, is desperately trying to replenish its ranks. The European Union, in coordination with Kiev, is moving to exclude newly arriving Ukrainian men of military age who lack authorization to leave Ukraine from temporary protection in Europe. Ukrainian workers and youth who seek refuge from the war are to be sent back as cannon fodder for the front.

Ukraine cannot defeat Russia on the battlefield. Its strategy is therefore to escalate the war to the extreme, provoke Russian retaliation and draw NATO ever more directly into the conflict. Zelensky has approved a campaign of “preemptive” strikes against Russian facilities used for the war, including energy infrastructure, transport systems and military-industrial facilities on the Crimean Peninsula and deep inside Russia.

The political aim of this strategy is not merely to improve Ukraine’s battlefield position, it is to destabilize the Putin regime itself. The European powers and their strategists are increasingly operating on the assumption that they can use Ukraine’s deep-strike campaign, sanctions, attacks on Crimea and military pressure to force Moscow into capitulation or provoke a crisis within the Russian state.

A recent article by Mark Galeotti in the *Times of London*, titled “If Putin fears he is losing Crimea, there’s no telling what he’ll do,” gives a glimpse into these calculations. Galeotti notes that sections of Russia’s administrative and business elite would prefer to freeze the conflict, hold what has been conquered and negotiate an easing of sanctions. But he also points to a maximalist faction demanding escalation: the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of reservists, the deployment of conscripts and more aggressive covert operations against European factories supplying Ukraine.

This confirms the warnings made by the WSWs. The NATO powers are not dealing with a stable and controllable situation. They are backing Putin into a corner while gambling that he will either retreat or be destabilized. But if the Kremlin believes that the loss of Crimea, or even the inability to defend it, threatens the survival of the regime, it could respond with a drastic escalation. The same pressure that sections of the European ruling class hope will break Moscow could at the same time trigger a wider war.

Putin’s entire policy over the past quarter century has been based on the bankrupt conception of securing a place for the Russian oligarchy within the world capitalist order through accommodation with its “Western

partners.” This conception lies in ruins. The NATO powers have used every concession and hesitation by the Kremlin to escalate further.

This is an explosive situation. A Russian strike on a NATO-linked logistics hub in Ukraine, the death of NATO personnel operating under cover as advisers or contractors, a maritime clash in the Baltic or Black Sea, a confrontation around Russia’s “shadow fleet,” or sabotage against European rail, port, energy or arms facilities could trigger a rapid escalatory spiral. The ruling classes speak casually of a future war with Russia “within years” or “by the end of the decade,” but their own actions are creating the mechanisms through which such a war could erupt far sooner.

Air attacks on a nuclear power bring with them the danger of nuclear escalation. NATO itself is moving ever more openly to prepare for nuclear war in Europe. Finland’s parliament has voted to repeal the country’s ban on nuclear weapons, removing legal obstacles to the deployment of NATO nuclear bombs and missiles on a country that shares a 1,300-kilometre border with Russia. This follows Macron’s proposal to extend the French nuclear umbrella across Europe and the expansion of NATO military infrastructure throughout the Arctic, Baltic and Nordic regions.

Germany plays a central role in this. On June 22, the 85th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius visited Lithuania to take part in the first major exercise of the Bundeswehr’s Armoured Brigade 45 stationed there. By 2027, around 5,000 German soldiers are to be permanently stationed near the borders of Russia and Belarus.

The symbolism could not be more provocative. On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, the greatest war of annihilation in history. At least 27 million Soviet citizens were killed. Now, 85 years later, German tanks and troops are again moving toward Russia’s borders. German imperialism is reviving its old *Drang nach Osten* (Drive to the East) under the banner of NATO, democracy and European security. As in the First and Second World Wars, Berlin is making Ukraine central to its strategy of domination in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

The working class is to pay for this policy twice: with social cuts, wage freezes, longer working hours and job losses—and, if the ruling class has its way, with its blood.

The war has exposed the bankruptcy of the pseudo-left organisations and what remains of the official anti-war milieu. Some of these forces openly support the NATO war against Russia. Others formally oppose it, but refuse to mobilize the working class independently against the governments, parties and trade union bureaucracies that are prosecuting it. Instead, they adapt themselves to pro-war parties, promote illusions in diplomatic pressure and parliament, and subordinate opposition to war to the national interests of their own bourgeoisie. Their “anti-war” phrases are therefore a fraud: they serve not to stop the war, but to block the development of a genuine socialist anti-war movement in the working class.

In Germany, the Left Party functions as a political defender of the Merz government and German imperialism. Where it is involved in state governments, it has backed military support for Ukraine and enabled war credits and rearmament measures. The Greens are among the most aggressive advocates of NATO escalation, while the trade unions support the war economy and subordinate workers to “national security” and “competitiveness.” The official left defends capitalism, the nation-state and the imperialist interests of its own bourgeoisie.

The escalation against Russia is one front in the global imperialist redivision of the world. The same ruling classes that are driving the war in Ukraine are arming and politically backing the Israeli genocide in Gaza, waging a war of aggression against Iran, and are building up their military forces against China in the Indo-Pacific. A third world war is not merely being prepared for the future; it is already unfolding through

interconnected fronts in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific. The danger of a direct NATO-Russia war must therefore be understood as part of a global eruption of imperialist violence rooted in the crisis of capitalism.

The fight against the madness of war also requires the rejection of the reactionary policies of the Putin regime. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was not a progressive or anti-imperialist response to NATO encirclement. It was the desperate response of a capitalist oligarchic regime that emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. It has served only to divide the Russian and Ukrainian working class and to provide US and European imperialism with the pretext to massively expand the war.

From the beginning of the war, the International Committee of the Fourth International has fought to unify the workers of Ukraine and Russia in opposition to both NATO imperialism and the Putin regime. In its first statement after the invasion, the ICFI denounced the Russian military intervention and declared: “Despite the provocations and threats by the US and NATO powers, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine must be opposed by socialists and class-conscious workers.”

This remains the essential position. The working class can oppose NATO’s war only on the basis of socialist internationalism, not Russian nationalism.

The NATO-backed regime in Kiev is no more democratic than its imperialist sponsors. It has outlawed opposition parties, suppressed independent trade unions, imposed martial law, prolonged Zelensky’s rule beyond the end of his legal mandate and incorporated fascist forces into the state and army. It glorifies the OUN and UPA, organizations that collaborated with Nazi Germany and participated in the Holocaust and massacres of Poles and Jews, while jailing socialist opponents of the war.

The arrest, frame-up and imprisonment in Ukraine for more than two years of Bogdan Syrotiuk, a leading member of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, underscores the reactionary character of the war and the NATO-backed regime in Kiev. Syrotiuk has opposed both the Zelensky dictatorship and the war, calling for the unity of Ukrainian and Russian workers against their respective capitalist governments. For this, he has been charged with high treason.

The ICFI and the WSWS are carrying out a global campaign demanding Bogdan Syrotiuk’s immediate and unconditional release. His case expresses the central political issue in the war: the struggle to unite Ukrainian, Russian and international workers against nationalism, imperialism and capitalism.

The danger of a direct NATO-Russia war gives this campaign and this perspective the utmost urgency. Workers in Germany, Britain, France, Poland, Italy, the United States, Russia and Ukraine have no interest in killing one another for the profits and strategic ambitions of their ruling classes. Their common enemy is capitalism, which drives humanity toward war, dictatorship and social catastrophe.

The struggle against war must be rooted in the workplaces, schools and universities. It requires the building of rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union bureaucracies, the mobilization of workers against military production and arms transport, and the unification of struggles against layoffs, wage cuts, austerity and repression with the fight against war.

Above all, it requires the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of the international working class. Only the international working class, armed with a socialist program, can stop the descent into a devastating European and global nuclear war.



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