

# THE UKRAINE WAR: AN INTERNATIONALIST APPROACH

Saturday 2.30 – 6.30

Thirty years ago, the world's capitalists were rejoicing at the collapse of the USSR, celebrating "the end of history". Since then, history has given its own riposte, in the shape of the deepest slump since the 1930s, the deadliest pandemic since 1918, the first European wars since 1945 and the closest threat of nuclear armageddon since 1962.

There is a direct connection. It was that very same blinkered triumphalism that created the perfect conditions for the current war: first by inflicting on Russia the most humiliating defeat since Versailles; then by helping hoist to power over it a caste of crazed gangsters; and finally by provocatively pushing right up to its very borders a hostile military alliance. The responsibility for this and any subsequent wars rests squarely on the ruling class worldwide.

War for socialists is the greatest test and challenge. As in 1914, this war has sent shock waves through the labour movement and sharply divided opinion. At such times above all we need to keep a clear head.

This war is a bloodbath. Already 120,000 Russian and 70,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed, with overall military casualties estimated at half a million. By comparison, US military deaths in the entire fourteen years of its involvement in the Vietnam war totalled 58,000. This leaves out of account the toll on Ukrainian civilians, amounting to some 10,000 deaths, 17,000 wounded and more than 14 million displaced (including abducted children).

The UN secretary-general has predicted that the war could ***"tip tens of millions over the edge into food insecurity, malnutrition, mass hunger and famine, in a crisis that could last for years"***. And the USA's director of the CIA William Burns has warned that ***"none of us can take lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low-yield nuclear weapons"***.

Yet again, as in the Balkan wars at the beginning and end of the twentieth century, the local population find themselves plunged into a nightmare by the cynical machinations of rival great powers. Of all the satellites and former constituent countries of the USSR, none has been more unstable than Ukraine, which over three decades has suffered economic collapse, coups and counter-coups, secession, annexation, civil war and now a full-scale war.

## Ukraine

Ukraine is the largest country wholly within Europe, and the fifth-largest by population. Potentially, it could be one of the continent's richest countries, with abundant resources of coal, iron, gas, rich agrarian land, and skilled labour; but in fact it is the poorest country in Europe. In the thirty years before the current war, its population had already fallen from 52 to 44 million. Historically carved up by rival imperialist powers, in the twentieth century it had then suffered two world wars and a civil war; Stalinist forced collectivization followed by breakneck industrialization; the Nazi occupation; and the holocaust, in which 1.5 million Jews were slaughtered – one quarter of the total Jewish death count.

Ukraine was divided from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, with the East and South being part of the Russian empire, and the West incorporated first into the Polish/Lithuanian commonwealth and then split between Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg empire. At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War it was fought over by nationalists, anarchists, White Russians, Bolsheviks, Austria, Germany, Poland, Romania and France; and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War it became once again a battlefield between Germany and Russia.

Of all the satellites and former constituent countries of the USSR, none has been more unstable than Ukraine. Over three decades it has suffered economic collapse, coups and counter-coups, secession, annexation, civil war... and now a full-scale invasion. Twice in the last two decades pro-NATO governments have been installed in power by right-wing uprisings – first the “orange revolution” of 2004, and then the Maidan protests in 2014.

The extreme instability of Ukraine has its origins in its divided history over the centuries as a battleground not only between rival empires of East and West, but also, superimposed on that for seventy years, between rival economic systems.

What is the nature of this war? Naturally, imperialist powers never admit to fighting wars in their own interests; they always claim to be coming heroically to the rescue of innocent defenceless victims: little Serbia, little Belgium, little Poland, the poor Falkland islanders... And Britain in particular only ever fights against cartoon-cutout pantomime monsters: the Kaiser, Hitler, General Galtieri, Milosevic, Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, Saddam Hussein... This time once again, the whole war is presented simply as a matter of little Ukraine needing our protection against the evil Vladimir Putin.

## **Russia**

Yet for socialists, recognition of the hypocrisy of their own ruling class cannot justify condoning the crimes of its rivals. Those who argue that as a weaker power Russia must be defended against US imperialism are repeating the blunder of those “social-chauvinists” in 1914 who used similar arguments to justify their defence of backward Russia against the might of German imperialism. By contrast, Lenin and Trotsky defiantly upheld the banner of proletarian internationalism.

Tsarist Russia was subject to domination by stronger imperialist powers, its proletariat exploited by British, French and US capitalists; yet at the same time it was itself, in Lenin’s words, a “**prison house of nations**” ruling over a huge empire of its own. Pedants who recite unthinkingly from century-old textbooks overlook the complexities of capitalist relations. Every capitalist power subjugates and exploits oppressed nationalities and subject nations of its own: regional imperialist powers like India, Brazil, South Africa, Australia... and Russia.

Russia is today a secondary regional imperialist power. Four of its corporations are numbered in the world’s top 100, two in the top 50, and one bank in the top 100. It is a global player in military exports, amounting to 22% of the world total. Yes, a very minor power: but, as in Tsarist times, a nascent capitalist country vying for scraps in the scramble for markets and spheres of interest.

Putin started by justifying the invasion on the grounds of “**defence of the right of the peoples of Donetsk and Lugansk to self-determination**”. This pretext was always utterly

cynical; after all, tens of thousands of Chechens had died fighting Putin's forces for precisely that same right. Then his declared war aims shifted to regime change in Kyiv: if not outright annexation, then at least its permanent partition, and the incorporation of its most productive and economically developed provinces into Russia, alongside the installation of a compliant puppet regime in the west.

It was not long before he was resorting to Russian Orthodox medievalism by rubbishing Ukraine's very national identity, dismissing it as an artificial construct "***created by Bolshevik Communist Russia***" – a reference to the Bolsheviks' policy after the revolution of liberating the enslaved nations of Tsarist Russia and granting them statehood and autonomy, up to and including the unconditional right of secession. (They had even created the first alphabets for languages that had up to then been exclusively vernacular.) Behind Putin's menacing message "***we are ready to show you what genuine de-communisation means for Ukraine***" lies the threat of extinction of Ukraine as a nation, in the ugliest traditions of Tsarist tyranny.

Putin is desperate to assert his waning authority as it begins to crumble at home, alarmed by the recent full-scale uprisings he has only barely succeeded in suppressing in Belarus and Kazakhstan, Russia's two closest satellites; and at the growing mood of discontent within Russia itself, which he rules solely by thuggery and fear.

His timing is prompted by two factors. First, by the conspicuous decline of US imperialist power, as demonstrated by its eventual defeat in Iraq (Iran being now the dominant power there); its abstention from involvement in the Syrian civil war; and, most graphically, by its spectacular rout in Afghanistan. Putin correctly calculated that NATO would not directly confront Russia militarily in Ukraine, any more than it had in Chechnya, Georgia or Crimea. Putin knows that in this war the West will fight... to the last Ukrainian.

Putin had expected to achieve a lightning victory, as in Georgia in 2008. His failure has fatally undermined his authority. The mutiny in June by the mercenaries of the Wagner Group directly challenged the official defence hierarchy, and by implication Putin's personal rule. His swift and barely disguised act of murderous revenge exposes the political instability of his regime. These signs of discontent, including cracks within the general staff itself, are ominous warning signs. Incipient splits at the top are always evidence of a coming groundswell of discontent from below. Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese war was followed by the 1905 revolution; its catastrophic losses in the first world war by the 1917 revolution; and its humiliating retreat from Afghanistan by the collapse of the USSR. Putin's adventure in Ukraine could ultimately prove just as catastrophic to his rule.

### **The USA and NATO**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a crime; but it is not irrational. The people of Ukraine are innocent victims in a vicious strategic power game which, without the worldwide overthrow of capitalism, can only ultimately end in a new world war.

This war is not an isolated accident; it can only be understood in the context of diplomatic and military relations over the entire period since 1991. Contrary to widespread expectations at the time, the collapse of the USSR did not herald a new era of peace. On the

contrary: Russia in the 1990s suffered a collapse rarely paralleled in history: a 65% drop in GDP and a drop in life expectancy from 65 to 58. And the USA and its allies seized the opportunity to impose on Russia a humiliating defeat.

Ever since the disintegration of the USSR, the USA's policy has been to claw back the political and diplomatic losses it had sustained throughout the cold war: to bleed Russia dry.

Successive presidents have consistently followed this line. Bush senior refused to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty; Clinton refused Russia's offer to cut nuclear arsenals to 1,500 bombs each; Bush junior broke the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; Obama blocked Russian proposals for a mutual ban on weapons in space; Trump pulled the USA out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, unilaterally terminating the provision of reconnaissance flights to verify compliance with the Open Skies Treaty. Biden's current proxy war is a logical outcome of this approach.

The reunification of Germany in 1990 had been conceded by Gorbachev solely on the basis of a promise not to extend the territory of NATO beyond the borders of a united Germany. James Baker, US Secretary of State at the time, formulating what was at the time the common position of the entire Western diplomatic establishment, had promised that NATO would expand ***"not one inch eastward... Not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction."***

Since then, NATO has grown from 12 countries to 32, and short-range nuclear-capable missile bases have been installed in Poland and Romania, only 100 miles and twelve minutes' flight-time from Moscow. And in June/July 2021 NATO/Ukraine held joint naval exercises involving 32 countries.

Emphatic warnings against the expansion of NATO into former Soviet satellite states, and specifically into Ukraine, had been sounded by almost the entire US diplomatic establishment, including former defence secretaries, former US ambassadors, and such eminent cold-war "hawks" as Henry Kissinger, George Kennan, Robert McNamara, Paul Nitze, Richard Pipes, Robert Gates, even the current CIA director William Burns. They spelt out that ***"for the Russians what happens in Ukraine is an existential matter... What would we do if the Russians... established a force in Mexico?... Everything we are doing... seems to be aimed at prolonging the fighting... We will fight to the last Ukrainian for Ukrainian independence... Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era... the beginning of a new cold war... a tragic mistake"***.

NATO's encirclement of Russia was calculated to provoke just the same reaction as that of the USA to the siting of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962. (In that case, the USA had wisely agreed to a deal under which its own missiles were discreetly withdrawn from Turkey.)

In impatient disregard of these warnings, and in flagrant violation of the undertakings made in negotiations with Gorbachev in 1991 as a ***quid pro quo*** for the reunification of Germany, NATO has expanded over a thousand miles eastwards over the last thirty years. It has placed antiballistic launch systems on Russia's borders and conducted countless military exercises. It has swallowed up former Warsaw Pact countries and even former constituent parts of the

USSR, fourteen in total, bringing a hostile military alliance right to the edge of Russia's borders.

As early as 1997, the former national security adviser Brzezinski called Ukraine the **"geopolitical pivot"**. The objective of Ukrainian membership of NATO was formally adopted in 2008, reaffirmed in 2014, and repeated both in August 2021, when Biden and Zelensky formally declared the admission of Ukraine to NATO as **"the immediate aim"**, and again in November 2021, when NATO announced: **"We reiterate the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest summit that Ukraine will become a member of the Alliance"**.

The planned incorporation of Ukraine itself was the immediate **casus belli**. When the Russian ambassador to the USA warned that the plan was **"extremely dangerous"** and constituted **"an existential threat for Russia"**, the US Secretary of State's dismissive retort was: **"There will be no change."**

Putin called this **"a serious provocation. What happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact?"**

### Warnings

George Kennan, the USA's leading expert on Russia and the architect of its strategy towards Russia throughout the Cold War, called the eastward expansion of NATO **"the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era... A tragic mistake."**

And William Burns, currently head of the CIA and the USA's most perceptive contemporary diplomat, who had warned presciently against the invasion of Iraq and headed peace negotiations with Iran, had predicted already in 2008 that any move to bring Ukraine into NATO would **"split the country and cause civil war"**.

This reckless approach to US/Soviet diplomacy was entirely consistent with NATO policies towards Ukraine: its covert involvement in the Maidan coup; its dismissal of the Minsk peace agreements brokered by Germany and France; the arming and training by NATO of the Ukrainian army in a civil war. The USA and NATO have consistently blocked any attempt at a diplomatic settlement.

Just five weeks into the war, both Kyiv and Moscow were optimistic about the chances of a negotiated settlement. According to the former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, a participant in early negotiations, Russia and Ukraine had agreed to sign up to an immediate ceasefire on the following terms: Russian military withdrawal; recognition of the Russian language; and a permanently neutral, non-aligned and non-nuclear Ukraine, to be internationally guaranteed; with the question of Crimea's status deferred for 15 years pending a definitive resolution.

This draft peace plan was welcomed by Zelensky. But the agreement was torpedoed when Biden made a speech defining his objective as "regime change", saying of Putin: **"For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power!"**. A few days later, Boris Johnson flew into Kyiv with the explicit message from NATO to stop talking to the Russians and defeat them militarily. **"The UK will not be party to any agreement with the war criminal Putin."**

Kyiv immediately backtracked from any commitment to peace talks, and subsequently blacklisted Henry Kissinger himself, calling it a **"stab in the back of Ukraine"** when even this

notorious former warmonger had proposed a deal requiring Ukrainian neutrality in exchange for a return to the territorial ***status quo*** before the invasion.

Even the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley called for a negotiated settlement before being brought to heel when Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin corrected him: ***“The US goal is to weaken Russia”***. The ***Washington Post*** – always an authoritative outlet for State Department policy – has written: ***“Ukraine’s choice to join Europe... will be a critical step towards regime change in Russia itself”***.

### **A proxy war**

Over the decades, the USA had waged countless coups, invasions and wholesale wars to impose regime change on countries throughout the world from Guatemala to Vietnam to Iraq; and the EU had brazenly encouraged the break-up Yugoslavia at the cost of massacres, ethnic cleansing and civil wars.

The motive of the Western powers in meddling in Ukraine is not just to swallow up its rich agricultural, industrial and energy resources; it is a vital component in a global strategy in preparation for an inevitable future war with China: to encircle, weaken and drain the resources of China’s nuclear-armed super-power ally.

US officials have openly called this a proxy war between the US and Russia, whose goal is to weaken Russia in preparation for a future confrontation with China. Among others, the former CIA director and former secretary of defence Leon Panetta has admitted that ***“the USA, backed by the whole of NATO, is in a long proxy war with Russia, with Ukraine as the battlefield”***. If Panetta recognises that the USA is involved in a proxy war in Ukraine, who are we to deny it?

In 2017, the Ukrainian parliament adopted legislation calling NATO membership ***“a strategic security objective”***, and in 2019 a corresponding amendment was written into the Ukrainian constitution.

One prominent visitor to the Maidan protests was the former Republican presidential candidate McCain, who openly scoffed that Russia was ***“a gas station masquerading as a country”***. Trump further extended military aid to the post-Maidan government, jeering that ***“Obama sent you pillows, I’m sending you anti-tank weapons”***.

The war has of course given a huge boost worth billions of dollars to US weapons manufacturers. US military aid to the Kyiv government rose from \$3.8 billion in the 23 years from 1991 to 2014, to \$2.4 billion just in the seven years from 2014 to 2021. The USA, UK and Canada trained tens of thousands of Ukrainian troops, and the CIA trained the Azov battalion and right-wing paramilitaries.

None of these acts justify Russia's invasion, any more than the Versailles treaty justified Hitler's annexation of the countries of Europe. But it is impossible to understand this war without acknowledging the USA's record of calculated provocation. The USA is conducting a protracted covert proxy war, just as it did when Russia was at war in Afghanistan during the 1980s – with deadly consequences that backfired disastrously when their surrogates proceeded to turn their weapons on them.

## **Maidan**

In a number of countries formerly within Russia's sphere of influence – Serbia, Georgia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and twice in Ukraine (in 2004 and again in 2014), popular revolts against governments enjoying Russian patronage had been encouraged by the USA and EU in the so-called "colour revolutions".

In Ukraine, an election in 2004 had been won by Yanukovych, the political godfather of the eastern oligarchs who controlled the heavy industries of Donbas. His election precipitated the "Orange revolution", which deposed the elected prime minister and brought to power Yushchenko, who had been governor of the central bank during the Western-backed privatizations of the 1990s. Both were oligarchs steeped in corruption, but they had rival diplomatic allegiances. Yushchenko's authority rapidly ebbed away; by the time of the 2010 election, his party scored just 5.5%, and Yanukovych was voted back into power.

Yanukovych engaged in serious negotiations with the EU for accession, but pulled out at the last minute when presented with an ultimatum which imposed grossly unfavourable terms including wholesale privatisations.

Plagued by mass unemployment and bleak educational and cultural prospects, the hopes of the youth had been pinned on entry into the EU. The sudden breakdown of negotiations dashed their hopes in the prospect of freedom to travel and work in Western Europe. Starting in November 2014, there was an upsurge of protest. This precipitated the prolonged occupation of the Maidan square, which soon acquired the name "Euromaidan". By December, the crowd had swelled to anywhere between 400,000 to 800,000 participants.

But what had begun as a genuinely popular occupation was soon taken over by outright fascist parties. These included the Pravyi Sektor (Right Sector), which sported swastikas and swore allegiance to the wartime Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera; it was a direct descendant of Bandera's Ukrainian Insurgent Army, the paramilitary arm of his Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, which had killed thousands of Jews and Poles in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Another fascist outfit was Svoboda, whose vote swelled to over 10% in the elections, and in the western city of Lviv to 38%, which had launched a paramilitary force called the Patriots for Ukraine. These parties played an ever more dominant role in the occupation.

The Azov Battalion – now redesignated an official regiment of the Ukrainian army – had been founded by an extreme neo-Nazi splinter from the Right Sector, and it now became a hub for neo-Nazi networks around the world (see below).

The protest was actively encouraged by the EU, NATO and the USA, and greeted in person by prominent visiting US politicians such as Victoria Nuland (since promoted to Number 2 in the State Department), and the former Republican presidential candidate John McCain. There is even an authentic recording of the conversation in which Nuland and the US

Ambassador hand-picked between them Yanukovych's successor as prime minister, the unelected Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

At a crucial point, the demonstration was the scene of a bloodbath in which 85 civilians and 18 police and security forces were killed. The crime was ascribed to the Yanukovych government; but according to independent observers from the USA and Canada it "***was committed by members of Svoboda, Right Sector and other armed militants***". They concluded that the post-coup Yatsenyuk regime "***covered up the leading role of fascist elements in shooting demonstrators***".

As the Maidan grew increasingly violent, anti-Maidan protesters fought back, and counter-protests grew around the country, with thousands taking to the streets in support of the deposed government of Yanukovych's Party of the Regions. Over a hundred people were killed in the ensuing street fighting. The police withdrew, and the by now twice-deposed president Yanukovych fled the country, to be replaced by NATO's imposed nominee.

The post-coup government launched a programme of privatisations and drastic cuts, in return for a \$40 billion bailout from the IMF. As a result, the entire Ukrainian GDP was cut by a quarter from 2012 to 2016. Public-sector jobs, salaries and pensions were slashed.

Across the whole of Ukraine, opinion polls showed that only 51.2% accepted the legitimacy of the new government. Even excluding Crimea, the figure was still only 53.5%, and anti-coup protests spread across the east and south.

## **Minsk**

Peace talks were held in Minsk in September 2014 and February 2015, brokered and mediated by France and Germany, which concluded with agreements providing for an immediate cease-fire; the creation of a secure buffer zone; the reciprocal release of prisoners; the autonomous status of the eastern provinces; legitimate and internationally monitored referenda and elections; recognition of the Russian language with equal status to Ukrainian; and control by the Ukrainian government of the border with Russia. If they had ever been implemented, these could have been a viable basis for peace.

However, the promised elections and autonomous status in the eastern provinces of Donbas never materialized. When elections were unilaterally held there on the province's own initiative, the results were not internationally recognized; and when a truncated autonomy bill was eventually passed, it was hastily abandoned after violent protests by the far right to which the then prime minister Poroshenko capitulated. Massive military aid and training immediately followed, and the Azov regiment received special US military training.

The Kyiv government had violated the terms of the Minsk agreements guaranteeing autonomy to the Russian-speaking peoples of Donbas; encouraged the incorporation into the Ukrainian army of the Azov battalion and other fascist paramilitary forces; and let them loose on the inhabitants of Donbas. Ukraine is the only country to recruit, arm and mobilise violent Nazi street gangs and deploy them as autonomous fighting units of their armed forces in a civil war.



The 2014 and 2015 Minsk agreements had secured a ceasefire and guaranteed autonomous status within Ukraine; but these were unilaterally torn up by Kyiv. The Maidan revolt triggered the break-up of Ukraine. The Russian language – the first language of some half the population – was outlawed by decree. Thousands were killed in a civil war in which fascist militias played a prominent role.

Let us add yet again: that is no justification for Russia's brutal and reactionary invasion. It does, however, help explain it.

### **Donbas and Crimea**

Donbas was the industrial powerhouse of the USSR, and its inhabitants mostly Russian-speaking descendants of workers historically transported there from elsewhere in Soviet times.

The population of Crimea are mostly Russians who suddenly found themselves Ukrainian citizens within a unified Soviet Union due solely to the whim of a capricious Khrushchev, who personally gifted it to his Ukrainian satraps in 1954.

The upheavals in Maidan immediately triggered the secession of Donetsk and Luhansk; the civil war in the East; the clandestine infiltration of undercover Russian troops; and the annexation of Crimea.

The conflict in Donbas began as a classic civil war. Its population were mostly ethnic Russians whose ancestors had been relocated in Soviet times as labour fodder for the booming industrial enterprises of the region. Now a regime had taken power in Kyiv which relied largely on far-right anti-Russian forces spouting the accumulated poison of the Bandera legacy, which identifies only with the population of the western Galician half of Ukraine and is intent on stamping out the culture of the Russian-speaking population. In Bandera's eyes, the only true Ukrainians were Galicians; and Galicia had been a part of Poland or Austria for more than a millennium, while the population of the east and south were Russian speakers, many of them recruited or drafted from all over the USSR to work in heavy industry. These forces have stripped the people of Donbas of their rights as Ukrainian citizens to justify their suppression.

Many of the insurgent militia personnel were former members of the Ukrainian Army who had defected when ordered to open fire on their compatriots in Donbas. NATO analysts estimate that 70% of the Ukrainian Army deserted or defected rather than fight for the Maidan regime; and they took their weapons with them. The new Kyiv government had already announced its intention to retake the Donbas territory and Crimea, and before the Russian invasion had amassed 130,000 troops on the Donbas border.

According to authentic United Nations statistics, 14,000 people were killed and 28,000 wounded in the civil war, largely at the hands of Nazi death squads officially incorporated into the Ukrainian army, including Aidar, Tornado, and what was now officially designated the Azov Regiment. Among the atrocities of that period was the torching of the trade union building in Odessa in which demonstrators against the coup had taken refuge, 48 of whom were burned alive.

Another massacre took place in Mariupol. A local uprising had successfully resisted Azov fighters, but with backing from the Ukrainian state they returned in June, their forces bolstered by foreign mercenaries and a column of armoured vehicles. Many people were incarcerated in dungeons staffed by STPs and SBU (Ukrainian intelligence units) and subjected to gang rape, looting, extortion, torture and murder.

The Crimean peninsula had been part of Russia ever since 1783 and had been a famous battleground in the nineteenth-century war between Russia and Britain. As an integral part of Russia, it naturally became part of the USSR after the Russian revolution and, since the genocidal expulsion by Stalin of its indigenous Tartar population, it was populated almost exclusively by Russians. It had been arbitrarily transferred from the Russian to the Ukrainian Soviet republic only on the personal capricious whim of Khrushchev, the Soviet leader at the time, who in 1954 unilaterally presented it to Ukraine as a personal gift. At the time this was just a token gesture, since Ukraine was an integral part of the Soviet state, and many Ukrainians had held high office in it, notable among them having been Khrushchev himself, Brezhnev, and the half-Ukrainian Gorbachev.

At the time of the break-up of the USSR in 1991, the population of Crimea had voted overwhelmingly, by a margin of 94% to 6%, for independence from the newly separated Ukraine as an autonomous republic of the short-lived post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States. When that entity disintegrated in 1995, the Crimean population found itself absorbed unwillingly into an independent Ukraine.

Following the Maidan coup, the Crimean parliament held a new referendum in which, on a turnout of 81%, 97% voted to secede and reintegrate with Russia. The authenticity of this vote has been questioned, but it corresponds to the Russian ethnicity of the local population, and accords with the similar vote recorded in an earlier referendum at the time of the break-up of the USSR in 1991, which voted overwhelmingly for secession from Ukraine as an autonomous republic.

Now as a result of the great-power games played by great powers above their heads, the people of Donbas find themselves helpless victims trampled underfoot by a brutal conflict between rival occupying armies, and those of Crimea by a forcible re-annexation to Russia. New referenda conducted under neutral independent supervision might well opt, in the case of Donbas, either for independence, or for genuine autonomy within either a reunified Ukraine or even as part of Russia; and, in the case of Crimea, perhaps for a reversion to the independent status it had briefly enjoyed in the early 1990s. After the horrors of the wars in Donbas and the Russian reoccupation of Crimea, the only democratic solution must be for lie with them alone, by a free vote.

### **The far right**

Anti-semitism is deeply ingrained in Ukrainian culture. Jews living in the eastern provinces under the Tsarist regime had suffered repeated mass pogroms by rampaging mobs on a horrific scale; and under the German occupation Ukrainian Jews alone had made up one quarter of the total number of Nazi holocaust victims: 1.5 million.

The far-right forces have stripped the people of Donbas of their Ukrainian identity to justify their annihilation. In Bandera's eyes, the only true Ukrainians were Galicians; and Galicia had been a part of Poland or Austria for more than a millennium, while the population of the east and south were Russian speakers, many of them recruited or drafted from all over the USSR to work in heavy industry.

Now, as civil war loomed ahead, the new government created the Special Tasks Patrol (STP), drawn largely from the fascist militias, the most famous of which was the Azov Battalion, founded by a neo-Nazi splinter from the Right Sector. Originally called Patriots of Ukraine, this outfit had been founded in 2005 by Andrei Belitsky from a merger of several Kharkiv-based far-right groups recruited from Ukraine's soccer hooligan gangs. Officially incorporated into Ukraine's National Guard in 2014 and now redesignated an official battalion of the Ukrainian army, the Azov Regiment constitutes its own battalion with an estimated 800 soldiers and has become a hub for neo-Nazi networks around the world. In addition, foreign mercenary gangs like Mamuka Mamulashvili's U.S.-backed Georgian Legion have joined the fighting.

There has been a rehabilitation of former Nazi collaborators and holocaust perpetrators, with streets and monuments commemorating Stepan Bandera; the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, which collaborated with the Nazis in the slaughter of Jews; and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) which massacred tens of thousands of Jews and Poles. For instance, Andriy Melnyk, a former Ukrainian ambassador to Germany who was sacked for having repeatedly defended Bandera, was promoted in November 2022 to deputy foreign minister in Zelensky's government.

## **Zelensky**

The political regimes established following both the 2004 and 2014 coups proved spectacularly unpopular at their first test. In the presidential election of 2010, the incumbent Yushchenko managed to scrape together just 5.4% of the vote. Then again, in the 2019 election Poroshenko – the president installed following the coup of 2014 – scored a pitiful 24% against a massive 73% for the new president Zelensky, running on an anti-corruption peace ticket.

Ukraine's unlikely current president Zelensky won the presidency in 2019 on a landslide vote of 73% to Poroshenko's 24%, promising to make peace with Donbas, uphold Russian language rights, start peace talks, tackle corruption, and stand up to the oligarchs. He is a former comedian who had played the role of a disgruntled citizen in a popular television programme. The show was brilliant satire, but it conveyed a mood of nihilistic iconoclasm which could easily be exploited to refashion him as a populist idol. He had gained popularity with his mockery on television of the political establishment, with jokes such as ***"Obama is the real president of Ukraine"***, and ***"I can't get a copy of Mein Kampf because it is sold out in Ukraine"***. People voted for his popular TV profile; but his platform was ***"no promises, no disappointment"***.

As a symbol of resistance to corruption, Zelensky won an unprecedented share of the popular vote. However, he also enjoyed the covert patronage of the tainted billionaire

Kolomoisky, a shady operator who was simultaneously sponsoring the Azov battalion. Once in office, Zelensky found himself trapped within the militarised state machine, a helpless hostage caught in a war between two irreconcilable enemies, prevented from pursuing his initial policy of rapprochement and negotiation, and even subjected to public death threats. He soon capitulated, and until the outbreak of the war, his ratings soon fell to 17%.

Where Poroshenko had banned the Communist Party; Zelensky has banned all left parties. The labour code has been amended to introduce zero-hours contracts, and under the new Law 5371 all union rights have been scrapped. And under Zelensky's rule, the entire economy has been privatized, presenting US monopolies with hundreds of billions of assets.

### **Internationalism**

What is the right attitude for socialists to take to this war? We can't expect to find ready-made off-the-shelf slogans in the writings of past teachers; but in any sudden crisis, rather than risk falling prey to panic, it is helpful to look for historical precedents.

We support unconditionally the right of self-determination and the right of any people under attack to defend themselves. This war is partly a simple conflict between a small independent sovereign nation under brutal assault by a nuclear-armed great power. It is also a proxy war in which that same small nation is being cynically exploited by another equally voracious and even more formidable rival great power, its population used as cheap expendable cannon-fodder in a global "great game". The situation is still further complicated by the simultaneous waging of an internal civil war and the oppression of a large nationally oppressed minority.

This is not the first imperialist war fought on the pretext of defence of the rights of small nations. Perhaps the closest historical analogy to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Then too, an operation that had initially masqueraded as defence of the right of self-determination for an ethnic minority – the German-speaking population of the Sudetenland – soon turned into the annexation of an entire nation. At the time of the Munich agreement, correctly predicting an outcome that Neville Chamberlain was manifestly incapable of anticipating, Trotsky wrote: ***"It may be argued that after separating the Sudeten Germans... Hitler will not stop before the enslavement of the Czechs themselves."*** There too the analogy holds: the survival of the Ukrainian nation too is at stake.

Trotsky went on to disavow a policy in that case of mere support for their "struggle for national independence", warning that ***"an imperialist war, no matter in what corner it begins, will be waged not for 'national independence' but for a redivision of the world in the interests of separate cliques of finance capital"***; that Marxists are not concerned with ***"episodic shifts of military fronts during a new brawl of the imperialists, but with the uprising of the proletariat and its victory over all the imperialists"***. Now as then, workers everywhere need to guard against the risk that their fully justified outrage at the brutal attacks of a Hitler or a Putin against smaller nations will be exploited by their equally rapacious imperialist rivals and perverted into support for an imperialist war conducted in pursuit of objectives that are far from benign.

Trotsky was addressing his advice to revolutionary cadres, emphasizing that for socialists “the main enemy is at home”. This is an elementary principle. Workers’ unity, socialist internationalism and the overthrow of the class enemy offer the only conceivable way out of the nightmare facing all of us. The task of socialists is to expose the truth: that this war is just one expression of the crisis of world capitalism; that our only allies are the workers of Russia, Ukraine and the world, and that the best help we can give them is to overthrow our own capitalists.

As workers we are outraged at the criminal brutality of the Russian invasion, and at the cynical exploitation of the long-suffering Ukrainian people by the USA as cheap surrogate cannon-fodder in a global great game threatening a worldwide bloodbath. The common enemy of the workers of the world are the ruling oligarchs of Russia, the Ukraine, the USA and Europe; and our common allies are the workers of Russia, Ukraine and the world. And the best help we can give them is to overthrow our own capitalists.

This war could easily have been avoided by the simple formulae of the Minsk agreements. It can be ended tomorrow on the basis of the following democratic principles:

***Russia, hands off Ukraine - immediate withdrawal of occupation forces.***

***Solidarity with the people of Ukraine in defence of their democratic rights.***

***Self-determination for the peoples of Donbass and Crimea on the basis of a genuinely democratic referendum.***

***Guaranteed Ukrainian neutrality.***

***Mutual demilitarisation of the border territories on either side.***

***Unity of the workers of Russia and Ukraine in a common struggle to overthrow their corrupt reactionary oppressors.***

**Roger Silverman, August 2023**