

The myth of Russian imperialism: Why neutrality on the Ukraine war is wrong

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With the onset of the war between Russia and Ukraine, a politics of “neutrality” has been commonly defended by the left, justified by a reference to Lenin and the politics of the Bolsheviks during the First World War. These references are mistaken. Russia cannot possibly be taken as an “imperialist” state on the basis of any Marxist framework and certainly not based on the perspective put forth by Lenin on imperialism. On the other hand, let us for a moment grant, for argument’s sake, that Russia is imperialist, the politics of “neutrality” would still be an erroneous course of action from the Leninist perspective. Revolutionary Marxism (a.k.a. Bolshevik-Leninism) analyzes each and every war by the principles based on the interests of the local and international working class, and not by abstract dogmatic criteria.

Leninism rejects the politics of neutrality in war

First and foremost, when Lenin and the Bolsheviks identify both warring blocs as “wrongful” and “predatory” in a war between two imperialist blocs, they do not conclude with a policy of neutrality for the working class. Lenin states that in the First World War, it is difficult to ascertain whether the victory of any one of the leading states of imperialist blocs, the British or Germans, is better for the proletariat. The interest of the working class is in revolution. The war will transform into re-

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volutions naturally on a national scale. The working class faces its own plundering bourgeois government within the nation. Therefore, Lenin contends that the proletariat should not be neutral in its nation's unjust war but actively desire the defeat of its bourgeois government and fight for it. Hence, Lenin proposes a "lesser of two evils" policy and that for the proletariat of each state this lesser evil is the defeat of its own bourgeois government. Hence, the essential issue for Lenin is to be able to use the conditions created by the existing war in the best manner for a proletarian revolution. The slogan is not "take no sides in an imperialist war" or "there's no lesser evil in this war", definitely not a pacifist wish like "we side with peace" but "turn the imperialist war into a civil war".

Neutrality in a NATO member state amounts to being on the side of NATO

The meaning of this political stance for Turkey, a member of NATO, is clear. We must seek the defeat of NATO, which is undeniably using Ukraine as a proxy in this war, and fight for this defeat. We repeat, even if Russia were an imperialist power, it is mistaken to hold a neutral stance in this war with a reference to Lenin. At best, this is a misreading of Lenin, not as a result of being unable to understand what is being read but as a result of looking at the world not from the perspective of Marxism but from the perspective of bourgeois academia under the hegemony of Western Imperialism. And this is at best. Taking into account the fact that the politics of neutrality in the NATO member Turkey objectively means the support of NATO, we must not underestimate the activities and the prevalence of EU-funded NATO propaganda.

Was Russia imperialist back then?

How are we to look at this war from the perspective of the interests of the world proletariat? Here, the analysis to determine whether Russia is imperialist is very important. Those who claim that since Lenin described Russia as imperialist even back in the First World War, it must be even more so today, are misreading him and distorting his arguments. Because Lenin described Russia then as a backward economy with lingering feudal relations, a warehouse providing soldiers to the imperialist bloc under the hegemony of Britain and France, and not as an independent imperialist state. In this sense, Russia was not equivalent to Germany but to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Ottomans occupied an even lower status as a semi-colony. Yet the Ottomans were also a side to an unjust war hand in hand with the Germans. Indeed, the war policy of the Bolsheviks changed after the 1917 February revolution. Russia's war together with British imperialism remains unjust but the policy of fighting for the defeat of Tsardom and turning the war into a civil war is different from the policy followed after the February revolution that sparked the civil war, and it focused on winning the civil war itself. We studied these subjects in greater detail in our article ["The Character of War in 21st Century: Are China and Rus-](#)

sia a target or a side of the war?”), also published in the same source in Spanish under the title “El carácter de la guerra en el siglo XXI: ¿Rusia y China son un objetivo o un bando de la guerra?”

Is Russia an imperialist country today?

Now let us discuss the question of whether Russia is an imperialist power today. As is well known, Lenin defines imperialism as a worldwide system. The distinctive feature of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism is the dominance of the export of industrial capital and finance capital (over the export of commodities!). These features enter all the domains where capitalism has developed. For example, as a young country developing capitalism Turkey skipped the era of competitive capitalism and moved directly to the stage of monopoly capitalism, immediately with the foundation of Isbank as a finance capital organization that combined banking and industrial capital. Likewise, South Africa and Nigeria are the countries with the highest capital export in Africa.

No corner of the world is free from capital circulation under the imperialist system. The bourgeoisie of all countries export capital to a certain extent. What matters is not quantity but quality. Therefore monopoly, finance capital, export of capital, etc. are not indicators of an imperialist power by themselves. What it means for a nation to be an imperialist power is the finance capital owners of that country to enter the fight for the global control of markets and resources and the state to fight for colonies and zones of influence worldwide. Worldwide! Not regional! Not across borders! Not even continent-wide!

Imperialism is the worldwide struggle for partition

In other words, if the monopolies, finance-capital organizations, and the quality and quantity of the capital exports of a country are not sufficient for it to enter a fight for inter-imperialist partition of the world, that country cannot be called imperialist. Of course, armies and military power are also important factors. It is well known that Russia is the second largest- military power in the world following the US. But since Russia is not imperialist, meaning that the opportunity to obtain exorbitant profits by exploiting the world is foreclosed to it due to domination of the US and its allies, its military expenditure is one tenth of US expenditures and its 61 billion-dollar military budget is even smaller than those of Britain and France. And it is merely 15 billion dollars larger than those of Germany and Japan, which are both under de facto military dominions of the US as a result of losing World War II. Finally, the only Russian military base outside of the former Soviet states is in Syria, whereas the US has about 800 bases of various sizes in 172 countries and has 320 thousand troops stationed outside its borders.

Nuclear weapons? Yes, Russia’s nuclear inventory can match that of the US. But this only acts as nuclear deterrence against NATO. Zones of influence, market conquests must be supported by navies and armies, not nuclear missiles. On this score, the farthest range Russia can aim for is Africa! Even there Russia is unable to attain

an independent zone of influence without a pragmatic alliance with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It has already lost half of its zone of influence in Syria, the east of the Euphrates, to the US. Ukraine is a matter of resistance to its domination by NATO, it is not about expanding Russia's own influence.

The myth of Russian imperialism from an economic perspective

When it comes to economics, the situation gets even more dramatic. Those who claim Russia is imperialist prate about its national income, hydrocarbon reserves, its balance of payments surplus and large amounts of foreign currency reserves. We also see those trying to invoke Lenin by stating Russia's considerable export of capital. If we take these arguments more seriously for a moment, we see they are not only wrong but also ridiculous.

A symptom of poverty as evidence for imperialism

National income is primarily an indicator of the size of a state and not its economic power. A densely populated but poor country may seem big in light of its national income despite its poverty. Therefore, it is a misleading indicator. You can better see the league of wealthy nations of the world by national income per capita. Russia is the 11th largest economy in the world in terms of national income but it falls to approximately 50th rung in national income per capita. In the same way, Turkey falls from 21st to 76th place. It is all crystal clear! But since the intention of some is not to see reality as it is but to justify their neutrality stance, they now resort to using purchasing power parity (PPP) to shove Russia into the imperialist basket. In this calculation, which is indexed to the local prices of a list (or "basket") of reference goods and services, Russia is now in the 6th position, whereas Turkey is 11th. The leading position belongs to China.

This statistic is even more misleading. Because even though it has "purchasing power" in its name, getting higher on this list actually implies poverty rather than high purchasing power. The reason is clear. Goods and services are together in the list of reference commodities used in the calculation. Most industrial goods have their prices determined internationally but the prices of services that are local in nature are cheaper in poorer countries. For example, a smart phone costs more or less the same in Britain and in Turkey; but going to a barber shop to get a haircut or getting your house painted is cheaper in Turkey. The reason for this is not because the labour of barbers and painters is more efficient in Turkey, but because their labour is cheaper and the purchasing power of the people is lower in Turkey. Thus, it is laughable to do global power analysis based on purchasing power parity statistic.

In the age of imperialism underground wealth is not conducive to control but being controlled. The whole history of imperialism has taught us that abundance of underground resources do not result in a global hegemonic position, but, on the contrary, it makes one an object to be fought over and controlled. Indeed, this is

most apparent today when we see the petroleum and gas reserves of Russia cannot make it a hegemonic power but merely provides some leverage against sanctions. Dramatically, those who claim that Russia is engaging in imperialism with its hydrocarbon resources do not once mention that 20% of the shares of the Russian oil monopoly Rosneft is owned by British Petroleum, and likewise 16.7% of the shares of the natural gas monopoly Gazprom is owned by American capital through the Bank of New York Mellon. The oft-mentioned dollar reserves of Russia proved not that Russia is an imperialist country but its submission to it. Russia has been keeping a big part of these reserves in Western imperialist centers as a pledge for remaining in the global imperialist system, and as a result lost access to 400 billion dollars of its 634 billion-dollar reserves in the immediate aftermath of war. Just look at this Russian imperialism!

The Russian economy is characterized by commodity exports not capital exports

When it comes to capital export, Russia also exports capital just like other countries, but what dominates the Russian economy is commodity export. This is a distinguishing factor for pre-imperialist and imperialist eras. Russia is a net capital importer. So Russia is not in a position to exploit the world but instead it is exploited by imperialist capital. And there is even more to this. Russia's current capital export figures are inflated. About 20 billion of Russian capital exports (two thirds of the total amount) are the so-called "round tripping" investments into tax havens (Cyprus alone standing for 30% of this amount!) that go right back into Russia. Just like the Isle of Man investments which used to be talk of the town for a while in Turkey... When we look at real capital exports, we observe that Russian oligarchs must always be accompanied by US, British or Italian imperialist partners (investments of the private oil monopoly Lukoil is typical in this regard). Imperialist capital shapes the economic and even the political landscape in the places it goes to. Yet in the current situation, the imperialist monopolies showed the Russian capital who the real masters are immediately after the war. Those oligarchs who lost their bank accounts and shares as well as their luxury yachts had to go straight back to Russia.

The political implications of the non-imperialist character of Russia

We started this article by asking what if Russia were an imperialist power. But at this point we see that Russia is not an imperialist power from a Marxist and scientific perspective. The political outcomes of the war further affirm the theory in practice. It means that we need to go further than the absolute essential tasks required by being citizens of a NATO member country like Turkey. In this war between imperialist NATO forces and Russia, the defeat of NATO is not only in the interests of the proletariat in NATO member countries but the entire world. The reason is obvious. War is the domain in which politics takes its sharpest expression and where

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in which instruments of violence come into play. The side that loses in a war cannot just go home, as a football team consoling itself that it will win the next game. It faces dire consequences. It has to foot the political bill, involving consequences of various dimensions and layers. The relationship between Germany losing the First World War and the 1918 November revolution is clear. The same relationship holds between the Chinese revolution in 1949 and Japan losing the war. Speaking about examples closer to Balkan peoples, the failure of the Ottoman state against the guerilla war waged by the Macedonian revolutionaries led the way to the so-called “Freedom Revolution” of 1908. What is more, the military success of the National Struggle in Anatolia resulted in the resignation of the Lloyd George government in Britain in 1922, the main organizer of this war, and led to the fall of the monarchy and the creation of a republic in Greece that waged the proxy war in the name of Britain!

Now if we discuss turning the war into a civil war or, in other words, turning it into a revolution, we need to look at the different outcomes of this war in the war-front by anticipating their political implications based primarily upon the interests of the working class. The military defeat of NATO will be a huge blow to the bourgeoisie all over the world, and will lead to positive conditions for the working class not only in the countries subjected to imperialism but even in the imperialist centers. Today the forces of the proletariat are weak in Russia. There is no strong left party other than the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). For its part, this party is merely the party of the old state bureaucracy pandering to Putin. Therefore, Russia’s defeat will not even yield positive results in Russia and will most likely lead to the oligarchic regime turning itself to a semi-colony resembling the Yeltsin era, instead of moving in the direction of socialism.

For these reasons we can say that in this war the defeat of the only imperialist power, NATO, is to the benefit of the world proletariat; unlike in the First World War where both sides were imperialists. Even though Russia’s, or Putin’s, victory will be a defeat for the imperialists, this will not be its ultimate defeat as a global order. The road to this finality is the world revolution. Therefore, we do not support the capitalist restorationist oligarchic regime of Putin when we call for the military defeat of NATO. The world revolution cannot be relayed to any party other than the national and international revolutionary parties of the proletariat. That said, for those who fight for the world revolution, or those that claim to, to not understand the reality of imperialism in its scientific and political basis, to follow a politics of neutrality towards NATO, to call for hollow and meaningless peace demands, and in doing so to support imperialist propaganda from within the ranks of the left is either complacency or treason. And we should not forget that complacency may eventually lead to treason.

Issue 50, our very special issue

Revolutionary Marxism Editorial Board

Our issue No. 50 is a milestone in the 16-year journey of the journal. To learn about its birth story, let's see the first paragraphs of the piece written by the Editorial Board to mark the 10th anniversary of *Devrimci Marksizm*:

Devrimci Marksizm is 10 years old now. It met the masses on May Day in 2006. As a journal of militant theory it first saw the light of day on the streets, so to speak. Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is its core tenet: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it". The consciousness that Marxism is a guide for the working class and all other social classes and strata to annihilate capitalism has always been its leading principle.

The journal of *Devrimci Marksizm* embarked upon its journey with a small Editorial Board, alongside an advisory board which has later loosened and become unfunctional. That small Board, which has shouldered the Journal perseverantly for so long, later expanded and became institutionalized. We are now about to take a second leap forward. The journal is once again wrapped in a large discussion and advisory network. Fresh blood pumped into its veins reinvigorates the Journal. We believe that it will draw even more intellectuals, especially young ones, into its ranks.¹

That expectation has been realized since then, with the Editorial Board doubling its capacity by including new comrades of younger generations. Our expansion,

¹ Editorial Board, "Devrimci Marksizm'in 10 Yılı—devrimci Marksist teorinin 30 yılı", *Devrimci Marksizm*, No: 28-29, Fall-Winter 2016, p. 14-15.