



## **Hands Off Ukraine!**

## **Down with Russian Imperialism!**

**I OFFER THESE SLOGANS** to the Stop the War Coalition for their forthcoming mobilisation in defence of the democratic aspirations of the Ukrainian people and the democratic posture of the Ukrainian state.

Well . . . not really . . . because I don't expect them to rally in defence of any Western democratic cause. This is because the STWC is resolutely opposed to all Nato initiatives and generally favours the actions of elective dictatorships like Russia, or party-states like that in Beijing and Hanoi. This posture has led them to support Russia's bombing campaign in Syria, and will in all likelihood result in a *resounding silence* at any further Russian attacks on Ukraine.

It is true that Turkey is a member of Nato, and Erdogan's regime is most certainly a dictatorial one; an electoral dictatorship like Russia's, and similarly a thorough-going tyranny. However, despite Turkey's membership, Nato is largely a military alliance of bourgeois democratic states pledged to defend each other, and to promote democratic politics and

arrangements wherever it can. Now, it is common on the left to blame Nato for Russian 'paranoia', and guardedness. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have joined Nato. Poland has also joined, which together with Ukraine's pivot to the West in 2014 in response to a mass democratic movement has led to Russia feeling rather hemmed in.

Now Russia must surely understand that given the Bolshevik invasion of Poland in 1918, and the Soviet Union's second invasion and annexation of half of Poland in 1939 (this time in alliance with the Nazis), continues inform nationalist opinion in the region. This wretched history, taken together with the invasion and annexation of all three Baltic states in 1940, makes the contemporary fear of Russia and the need to seek the protection offered by Nato membership self-evident.

Vladimir Putin and a large swathe of the British left choose *amnesia* in favour of depicting Nato's aggressive intentions. The Russians seem to have forgotten not only the Bolshevik-Polish War (1918-1921), but also the struggle of Ukrainian nationalists for independence on the collapse of the Tsarist empire. The chaos and antisemitism of Ukrainian and Polish nationalists and the manner in which their leaders, Symon Petliura and Józef Pilsudski, were at each other throats, in the midst of the Russian Revolution, should not be allowed to obscure the passionate drive amongst the Ukrainian peasantry in support of the Ukrainian Peoples Republic (1918-1921).

The experience of Soviet domination is bitterly remembered in the Ukraine, not only in the suppression of Petliura's republic, and the mass of killings and deportations that followed. But also, the *Holodomor*, the confiscation of food and other property from peasant households by communist 'combat' organisations in 1932-33, which resulted in the terror-famine in which millions of Ukrainian peasants died of starvation.

This brutal history of red terror and annexation informs the desire for national independence in both Poland and Ukraine, which resurfaced strongly with the collapse of the Soviet Union. By 1991 the communists had been roundly defeated in Warsaw by the Polish working class in league with the Roman Catholic Church; they saw off both the Communist Party and Wojciech Jaruzelski's military dictatorship, which the communists in their desperation had sought to impose upon the Polish people.

In Ukraine this anti-Russian, and anti-Stalinist, mood found expression in the mass democratic movement spreading out from Kiev which forcefully rejected Russia's attempt to hold on to the Ukraine by political manipulation and skulduggery.

During what became known as 'the Maidan events' from November 2013 to February 2014 great masses of people occupied the centre of Kiev demanding that president Victor Yanukovich sign a free trade deal with the European Union in association with the Baltic States. President Yanukovich, Putin's proxy in Kiev, responded with repression and mass shootings. Eventually, both the President's and Russia's position became unsustainable, and Yanukovich fled to Moscow. A new government was installed and the agreement with the EU was signed.

The clique in the Kremlin responded first by destabilising the eastern provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, supplying separatists with weapons, training, and logistical support, and finally in late February 2014, brazenly annexing Crimea – seizing control of Sevastopol and of the entire province. In an attempt to legitimate their invasion of the territory and Russia's military *fait accompli* Putin staged a referendum, which of course he won with a landslide.

Consequently, there cannot be much doubt that the Russian objective in any future military action will be to consolidate their position in Crimea by invading and occupying, at the very least, whole of Luhansk and Donetsk.

Putin's defence of what he calls "ethnic Russians" will be deployed to justify his invasions and annexations in Ukraine. In 2008 he did this in Georgia in the Southern Caucasus. This involved seizure of two Georgian provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These territories represent one fifth of Georgia, and although Moscow insists that they are both independent republics, they are Russian annexations in all but name.

Moscow's rationale is that they need to defend the interests of ethnic Russians from the local nationalists whenever tension and conflict arises. This means that Putin thinks that Russia has a claim on all its surrounding territories, because the Soviet Union over the years seeded them all with large number of Russians, ensuring that all three Baltic states and Ukraine are ripe for Russian intervention. In this sense Putin's policy is like that of Hitler's in relation to the Sudeten Germans. [In the late nineteen-thirties the ethnic Germans of the Sudetenland found themselves 'trapped' in a Slav state with its capital in Prague, and needed to be reunited with the German homeland.]

Without suggesting that Putin is a Nazi, or anything close, he is definitely engaged in an atavistic policy which associates territorial aggrandisement with the security and well-being of the Russian state. He'd be better occupied considering how to improve productivity and prosperity in Russia, rather than planning military adventures. But if he insists in pursuing nineteenth and twentieth century territorial disputes it will inevitably bring him face-to-face with Nato. God knows where this will lead us, nowhere good that's for sure.

Despite this daunting prospect, defending Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, and the independence and integrity of Ukraine must be something that all democrats, of whatever political stripe must support.

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