

## 'Imperialism' and changing the subject



**IMPERIALISM** is a portmanteau term. A great many things can be crammed into this particular bag. Consequently, it is worth starting off with some common denominators. The imperialist power must be more powerful militarily and economically than

those it seeks to dominate. This is because 'seeking to dominate' is another key feature of any nation that may be called imperialist. Exploitation is often present, but not necessarily so, because countries of little account economically may be dominated for strategic reasons rather than economic ones. Indeed, it can be the case that the imperialist power is a net loser in the domination of a particular territory, but finds it advantageous regionally to take control of an unprofitable territory.

These considerations loomed large in the era of colonialism and physical conquest. [They clearly inform Vladimir Putin's present-day calculations in Ukraine as he destroys that country's economy.] However, imperialist domination can take economic form in investments and manipulation of financial systems. For example, Argentina was never a colony of Britain, but after 1882 it was effectively run by British investors from the Jockey Club in Buenos Aires until the mid-nineteen thirties, when the baton was passed on to the Americans.

Today, the influence of large wealthy countries like Britain or the United States, Australia, Canada, France, or Germany is wielded by investors, by trade policies, and by military means. There are residual colonial elements, of course, but the major forms of domination spring from finance, trade, intimidation, invasion, and military deployments.

From this point of view, it is possible for anybody on the left of the political spectrum to label radically different states, "imperialist". China is imperialist in some ways, but not others. The USA and Britain can be said to be imperialist in a host of ways, extending from investment, trade and aid policies, to invasions and armed intimidation. Russia, with her weak economy, dependent largely on the extraction of oil and gas, is interested in projecting its military might, as an adjunct to territorial expansion and regional domination.

From this it will be seen how advantageous the term "imperialism" is for those who want to role very

different countries into one all-encompassing category. Despite the manifest differences of the political, economic, strategic, and military conduct displayed by powerful states, it is possible to roll them all into a handy ball, like strips of different coloured plasticine, so that they all end up the same dark khaki colour.

An example of this process of homogenisation can be found in the Georgian publication *Napertskali*, [named after the journal founded by Vladimir Lenin, *Iskra* or *The Spark*], which described the present Russo-Ukrainian War in the following terms:

Our support, and now, condolences too, lie with the working classes of all countries, who are the victims of the geopolitical games of various imperial powers, as they are sacrificed senselessly to shoot at each other and die meaningless deaths for the money-bags of tie-wearing politicians and businessmen. We refuse to take a stance between either Moscow or Washington. We eschew this false dichotomy of the Kremlin or NATO.

It is notable that Kyiv is not mentioned, but is rolled up into Washington and the 'West'. [Also, it is unclear what the role of President Volodymyr Zelensky is, given that he is rarely seen wearing a tie.] This publication acknowledges that "the primary goal of the Ukrainian people is fending off blatant imperialist aggression". They go on to argue:

Naturally, Russia, as the main and initiating aggressor and a capitalist-imperialist power, will also be completely uninvolved in the process of Ukrainian self-determination and liberation. We, therefore, arrive at the only real, clear solution: the creation of truly free and liberated Ukraine has to be done under the revolutionary banner of Socialism, by the broadest masses of class conscious proletariat, with the guidance of local Communist Parties and Organizations.

Then, with a final flourish they say:

Only this can promise the actual and possible accomplishment of lasting peace and harmony, as only socialism strives to settle and abolish exploitation and oppression through authentic action and people's genuine movement.

In realizing this future and standing on the path of true liberation, of which we are the most fervent supporters, we stand with the Ukrainian people, in solidarity and in support.

This is the kernel of the arguments deployed by those socialists who ardently express support for Ukraine, and just as ardently, damn NATO and all its works. The fact that the elected leader of Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky, while acknowledging that Ukraine cannot join the alliance, thanks NATO for the delivery of 'lethal aid', and repeatedly calls for more and more assistance from NATO is utterly disregarded by those committed to the fantasy-socialism team.

This is because using the rubric of "Imperialism" they choose simultaneously, to recognise and deny the *national character* of Ukraine's struggle. Clearly, the government and state based in Kyiv has the overwhelming and active support of its citizens, from workers to capitalists, from the professional middle class to the pensioners and the unemployed, in the great national effort to repel and defeat the invader. They are not engaged in the class struggle, but in a struggle for *national survival*.

This is a huge problem for many on the left, who dislike national struggles, as opposed to class ones, and often hark back to the outbreak of the First World War in order to denounce the situation in which workers were required to slaughter each other "in the interests of tie-wearing imperialists". They go back to 1914, because 1939 and 1941 do not work so well as dates from which to declare "the enemy is at home."

The fact that this class-based approach has never worked is effaced by their enthusiasm for it. Even in the midst of the German revolution of 1918-19, the Bolsheviks were fighting ferocious wars to

retain control over Georgia, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic States. The Council of Commissars was boldly defending the right of self-determination while their Red Army attempted to trample it underfoot, only to be defeated by nationalist forces in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland, where workers and peasants in solidarity with landowners, merchants, and capitalists, defended the right of their nations to sovereign independence.

History is vital to understanding the present predicament of both Russia and Ukraine, but history does not repeat itself. It is clear that globalisation and the integration of economies through trade and aid have altered what sovereignty and self-determination means. It is not 1914, nor is it 1939, because the cause of this war in 2022 is the desire of Ukraine to join the European Union. Putin is, I suspect, more frightened by the prospect of Ukraine's membership of the EU, than he is of NATO, because economic integration with the West threatens his antique autarkical conception of Russia's imperial expansion and development.

We are threatened by the Kremlin clique's desire to live in the past. In invading Ukraine, Putin and his circle are attempting to recreate a world that vanished in 1989-91. Easy parallels with the past, with the cold war, with the nationalism of the first half of the twentieth century are appealing, but radically false. The nationalism of Volodymyr Zelensky is not that of Stepan Bandera. In the nineteen thirties and forties the fascist Bandera wanted to create an ethnically pure Ukraine by murdering Poles and Jews. Today's Ukrainian nationalists are fighting for independence and to be allowed to join the European Union and integrate their nation fully into the European and global economy. They are steadfast in their refusal to join the Russian historical fantasy of expanding self-sufficiency and autarky.

Consequently, it is imperative for the left and for the socialist movement more generally to abandon false historical parallels and wholeheartedly support

the Ukrainian struggle to defend their national independence with aid from Western imperialism in the form of NATO. Prattling on about the class war and the need for revolution in order to “release the nationalist masses from their false-consciousness” helps no one.

The Russo-Ukrainian War is a thoroughly modern conflict created by leaders in the Kremlin who are without doubt living in the past. Imperialists they may be, but they have a radically different view of the economic and social development of Russia insulated from the world economy and from bourgeois democracy; selling oil and gas for gold and dollars, but otherwise keeping themselves to themselves. This is why they, and the dictator in Belarus, find it threatening, and simply intolerable, to have open democratic societies along their borders acting as an enticing beacon of modernity to ordinary Russians and Belarusians.

This is plainly difficult for many people on the left to understand. The idea that capitalism or commercial society has appeal simply does not compute. With its crises, its deindustrialisation, its austerity, its bloody violence, and its disregard for the millions at the mercy of the ‘free market’, it is counter-intuitive to believe that Western commercial society, Western imperialism, Western democracy, is attractive. Yet it is, far more attractive than Putin’s autarkical dreams or Beijing’s ‘harmonious’ development commanded by Xi Jinping.

This is why we must reject the *whataboutery* emerging on the left. The desire to talk about the criminal irresponsibility of NATO, the duplicity of the Western powers in denouncing the iniquity of Putin while they cosy up to the bleak and bloody tyrannies of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Attempting to change the subject from the Russo-Ukrainian War in this way, to focus upon the West’s inglorious record of extensive co-operation with wretched tyrants, is fruitless. By equating Russia to NATO, Moscow to Washington, they efface the radically different kinds of

imperialism in play, and obscure why one is more progressive, and yes, more attractive than the other.

Bourgeois democracies and the modern forms of nationalism they endorse are not merely worth defending, their preservation is essential if socialism or *militant democracy* is ever to have a hope of taking root. Socialist democracy that would seek to extend mass participation from ordinary political spheres to the management of workplaces and the regulation of economic life cannot even be thought about if the tyrants in Moscow and Beijing prevail. The future of socialism of *militant all-encompassing democracy* must emerge in struggles waged in free bourgeois democratic societies.

This is because the struggle for socialism is simply unimaginable in the dictatorships of Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang. These regimes offer us nothing more than the future imagined by George Orwell – *of a boot stamping on a human face – forever.*

This is why we must throw our lot in with Volodymyr Zelensky, with Ukraine, and with Western imperialism.