

American Imperialism and the Crisis in Ukraine

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Abstract

The aftermath of the Cold War has seen a fundamental restructuring of international politics in eastern Europe. The American-led military alliance NATO has expanded eastward into the territory of the former Soviet Union, inflaming tensions with the Russian Federation. Ukraine, a strategically vital country, has emerged as the focal point of these tensions. American interference in Ukraine, including a coup in 2014 that overthrew Ukraine's government, caused a political crisis and civil war in the country that escalated into war between Ukraine and Russia in 2022. American interference in Ukraine's affairs and promotion of NATO expansionism are the result of its capitalist, imperialist economic structure dominated by a wealthy ruling class. The demands of capital, in particular the American arms industry, for the maintenance of existing imperial hegemony and relentless conquest of new markets have been the driving force of American aggression and militarization in Ukraine and eastern Europe. A Marxist analysis is the most powerful tool for comprehending the current crisis and its origins in underlying economic and class structures.

American Imperialism and the Crisis in Ukraine

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has made headlines around the world. Coverage of Ukraine in American media has been prolific, and the economic and political fallout of the Ukrainian crisis has been significant globally. Concerns have even been raised over the possibility of nuclear war.

A complex and important event such as the Ukrainian crisis must be analyzed in its proper historical context. The next section is dedicated to providing this context. A brief explanation of Marxist theory is then presented, followed by an analysis of the situation utilizing the concepts and methods discussed.

Historical Context of the Ukrainian Crisis

Ukraine and Russia are independent countries today, but this was not always the case. The shared history between these two nations means that questions of Ukrainian and Russian identity are complex and deeply interlinked. For several centuries prior to 1917, the lands comprising modern-day Ukraine were part of the Russian Empire. Most Ukrainians (and Russians) during the feudal imperial period lacked a national identity, and many Russian elites viewed Ukrainians and Russians as a unified ethnic group. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, a nascent Ukrainian nationalist movement had formed and gained traction, facing suppression from the Tsarist authorities. During the Russian Civil War that followed the October Revolution of 1917, Ukrainian separatist militias fought for independence, in opposition to the Marxist Bolsheviks, monarchist Whites, and anarchist groups which were also belligerents in this war (Figes, 1998). The Bolsheviks ultimately prevailed, and both Ukraine and Russia became part of the Soviet Union. Far from continuing the ethnic-chauvinist policies of their predecessors, the Soviets instead granted Ukrainians, and many other ethnic minorities, substantial political

autonomy and legal protection. The Soviets expanded the territory of Ukraine to include many areas inhabited by a Russian majority, including the Crimean peninsula and the areas that now comprise eastern Ukraine (Leupp, 2022).

The Soviet Union's adversaries, however, sought to leverage internal ethnic discord to weaken it. During the Second World War, the vast majority of Ukrainians supported the Soviets, but small ultranationalist groups such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) allied with Nazi Germany and fought against the Soviets, and were complicit with (and in some cases supportive of) Nazi genocide of Jewish, Roma, and Russian inhabitants of Ukraine (Meysan, 2022). Despite Soviet victory in the war, the OUN persisted, and during the Cold War it received substantial material support from the American CIA to undermine the Soviet government in Ukraine (Madsen, 2016). In the 1980s, the U.S. government-backed news outlet Radio Liberty aired coverage praising Ukrainian Nazi collaborators, including SS members (Parry, 2014).

By 1990, the Soviet Union was on its last legs, and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev entered negotiations with the American-led military alliance, NATO. An agreement was reached that Germany, which had been divided into NATO-aligned West Germany and Soviet-aligned East Germany, would be reunified into a single country. In exchange, NATO would not expand "one inch eastward" towards the Soviet Union. Gorbachev received repeated promises from then-U.S. President George H.W. Bush and other important NATO members, such as the United Kingdom and France, against NATO expansion (Cohen, 2018).

The subsequent year, the Soviet Union was dissolved, and Ukraine and Russia (in addition to 13 other nations) emerged as independent states. NATO's expansion promise was soon broken, despite warnings from Russia that it would perceive expansion as an aggressive and escalatory act, with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (all former Soviet allies) being

added to NATO in 1999. NATO has since continued to expand, adding its most recent member in 2020 (Greene, 2022b).

Concurrently, the collapse of socialism and the rise of neoliberal capitalism in the post-Soviet states were having devastating effects on local populations. New capitalist leaders across the region, while claiming to democratize their countries, violently seized power by disbanding parliaments, ruling by decree, outlawing and censoring opposition parties, and manipulating elections. These new free-market, right-wing leaders were supported financially and organizationally by U.S. government organizations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy (an organization tied to the CIA), as well as international financial institutions such as the IMF. State-owned enterprises were privatized, and major western corporations established a stranglehold on many post-Soviet economies. The result was a drastic increase in mortality, malnutrition, and homelessness, a rise in organized crime, political corruption, and far-right extremism, and a fall in productivity and living standards (Parenti, 1997).

Ukraine was no exception to the pattern of American influence. Independent Ukraine initially enjoyed good relations with Russia, but American intervention soon moved Ukraine towards the American sphere of influence. The initial victor of Ukraine's 2004 presidential election was Viktor Yanukovich, who wished to establish friendly relations with both Russia and the West. However, interference by the U.S. government, including \$14 million in financial assistance to the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko, forced a re-run of the election, in which Yushchenko was proclaimed the winner (Dubovyk, 2022). This event, called the "Orange Revolution", was just one example of a U.S.-backed "color revolution" that installed pro-Western leaders across eastern Europe. Yushchenko followed in the footsteps of other post-Soviet leaders: he "implemented a program of austerity, reduced social spending, bailed out large

banks, deregulated agriculture, advocated for NATO membership, and repressed the rights of language minorities like Russian speakers” (Dubovyk, 2022).

The subsequent Ukrainian presidential election, in 2010, was won by Yanukovich. International observers deemed the election fair and democratic (Parry, 2014). Yanukovich pursued a neutral foreign policy, seeking cooperation with both Russia and the west. The International Monetary Fund and European leaders pressured Yanukovich to accept neoliberal pro-capitalist reforms, such as eliminating wage regulations, cutting back on healthcare and education spending, reducing fuel subsidies for the public, and other such measures intended to make Ukraine more hospitable for foreign corporations. Yanukovich declined, and instead started trade negotiations with Russia in 2013 (Greene, 2022a).

Large-scale protests against the Yanukovich government began in late 2013. Anti-Yanukovich sentiments were largely fomented by American intervention. American officials, such as then-Senator John McCain and then-Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, visited the Ukrainian capital Kiev in support of the protests in early 2014. Leaked phone calls later revealed that Nuland was in contact with key opposition figures, played a role in orchestrating the protests, and handpicked a desired successor to Yanukovich, Arseniy Yatsenyuk (Sterling, 2021). American government agencies such as the NED and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funneled resources into anti-government efforts, with Nuland estimating an expenditure of \$5 billion between 1991 and 2014 to influence Ukraine’s politics. Far-right and neo-Nazi groups such as the paramilitary Right Sector and Azov Battalion played a critical role in lending military muscle to anti-government ouster; these groups, too, were supported by the United States (Greene, 2022a).

The protests against the Yanukovich government came to a head in February 2014. The aforementioned far-right militias perpetrated a bloody massacre of 49 protesters in Kiev's Maidan Square on February 22, an atrocity that was blamed by western governments on Yanukovich and was used as a justification to recognize the opposition as the legitimate government of Ukraine (Katchanovski, 2022). The Ukrainian parliament subsequently voted Yanukovich out of power in a constitutionally questionable process, causing him to flee the country. Yatsenyuk assumed the office of Prime Minister on February 27, completing the coup, known as the Maidan Revolution (Greene, 2022a).

The new government moved quickly to suppress dissent, banning opposition political parties and further restricting the rights of ethnic minorities in Ukraine. The coup government also intensified its collaboration with the far-right: it integrated militias such as the Azov Battalion into its armed forces, glorified WWII-era fascist collaborators such as OUN leader Stepan Bandera, and utilized far-right militias to crack down on the political opposition, such as in the case of the massacre of 48 anti-coup demonstrators in Odessa in 2014 (Dubovyk, 2022). Considerable suppression of information has also occurred, with the coup government banning "anti-Ukrainian" literature and intimidating and attacking journalists. Antisemitic sentiments have increased greatly, and far-right militias have engaged in violent attacks against Roma and LGBT Ukrainians (Golinkin, 2019). Collaboration with the European Union and the IMF heightened as well. After introducing some of the desired austerity measures, the coup government received \$27 billion from the IMF. The United States has continued to support the coup government, sending \$2.5 billion in arms to the Ukrainian military, including its far-right components, and pursuing the country's integration with NATO (Greene, 2022a).

Crimea, a majority-Russian region of Ukraine, held a referendum in 2014 in which it voted to join Russia; Russian forces soon entered the region and established control. The Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, also majority-Russian, declared independence from Ukraine as well, precipitating a civil war that started in 2014 and continues in 2022, pitting local separatists against the Ukrainian armed forces and their far-right allies. Over 13,000 people were killed during this eight-year period of fighting (Dubovyk, 2022). During this period, the Russian government repeatedly declared its disapproval of NATO expansion, U.S. involvement in the 2014 coup, and the deployment of Western weapons in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for instance, warned NATO in December 2021 that further expansion in NATO and intervention in Ukraine would be perceived as aggression, and that specific actions could precipitate a Russian invasion of Ukraine (Roth, 2021).

On February 21, 2022, Putin declared that Russia recognized the sovereignty of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics. The following day, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, commencing the present phase of the conflict in Ukraine (Sullivan, 2022).

With the historical context of the Ukrainian crisis understood, it becomes necessary to develop a framework to systematically analyze it. The following section, dedicated to an explanation of Marxist economic and political thought, supplies the necessary theoretical framework.

An Introduction to Marxism

Marxism does not consist of a simple, immutable collection of doctrines and beliefs. Rather, it is more accurately described as a science – a method of examining evidence and drawing conclusions from it. Marxists emphasize the importance of viewing events holistically and in-depth, investigating the interplay of structures and dynamics underlying seemingly

disconnected political, economic, and social phenomena. Just like all other sciences, Marxism is in many ways imperfect and incomplete. Nevertheless, its explanatory power greatly exceeds all other models of socio-political analysis, in large part due to its focus on the fundamentally important issue of class struggle, which many other worldviews de-emphasize (Parenti, 1997).

V. I. Lenin, in the essay *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, identified three central pillars of Marxism. These are the philosophical outlook, known as dialectical materialism, the economic aspect, and the political aspect, known as scientific socialism (Lenin, 1913). While extreme complexity and nuance exists within Marxism, far greater than can be explained by a short outline, an overview of these three component parts can provide a workable understanding of this powerful and invaluable method of analysis.

Marxist Philosophy: Dialectical Materialism

The philosophy of Marxism is dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism is a philosophical method of analysis that can be applied to economic, social, political, and many other types of issues. As the name might suggest, dialectical materialism consists of two parts, dialectics and materialism.

In order to understand dialectics, one must first analyze the philosophical outlook that preceded and stands in direct opposition to it: the metaphysical outlook. The metaphysical outlook views different things as more or less static and isolated from one another. It views phenomena in binaries that are mutually exclusive, and it views change as due to external stimuli, rather than internal evolution. The metaphysical worldview dominated pre-industrial society and still exerts considerable influence today. It was serviceable in the period before the development of natural science, although in modern science, it has largely been superseded (for example, in creationist theories giving way to theories of evolution) (Engels, 1880).

Nevertheless, metaphysics still reigns supreme in liberal analyses of politics. The liberal view of capitalism, for instance, is that its most fundamental characteristics have always been present in human societies (feudal, slave, and tribal, in addition to capitalist), and are perhaps the product of a constant and unchanging human nature (Mao, 1937).

The dialectical viewpoint stands in opposition to the metaphysical viewpoint. Dialectics emphasizes the inherent interconnection between apparently dissociated phenomena, promoting a holistic rather than an atomized worldview. Instead of viewing a world of static objects and systems, dialectics views the world as being in a constant process of evolution and change. Instead of change being caused primarily by external factors, dialectics holds that internal contradictions between mutually opposing parts, rather than external stimuli, are the primary cause of evolution, and that external stimuli (while still being important) become operative only through internal contradiction (Engels, 1880).

There are several salient features of contradiction that must be understood. The first feature, the universality of contradiction, is that contradiction is present in all objective phenomena, and is present from the start to the finish in every process of development. Examples abound: in calculus, the derivative and the integral, in chemistry, the bonding and dissociation of chemical substances. It is the study of these mutually opposing contradictions that forms the nucleus of these sciences; likewise, it is the study of contradiction in society which forms the nucleus of Marxism (Mao, 1937).

The second feature is the particularity of contradiction. Each contradiction has its own particular attributes, and is qualitatively different from other contradictions. In addition, each of the two aspects within each contradiction have their own particularities as well. Different contradictions resolve and develop in different ways: for instance, the contradictions in

American capitalism and Russian capitalism differ, and therefore the course of development of these two systems differ as well (Mao, 1937).

The third feature is the principal contradiction and the principal aspect of a contradiction. Not all contradictions are created equal, and some are more important than others. In the examination of a particular phenomenon, only one contradiction assumes a principal role, dominating the nature and evolution of that phenomenon. The two aspects of each contradiction are also unequal, and this inequality constantly changes, but one is always principal and the other subordinate (Mao, 1937).

The fourth feature is the identity and struggle of the aspects of a contradiction. While the aspects of a contradiction conflict, neither one can exist in isolation without the other, and therefore the two form an identity. The struggle between the aspects of contradiction is what creates change. In some circumstances, this change is merely quantitative, while in other circumstances, this change is qualitative, and the whole nature of the thing changes – for instance, the struggle of the bourgeoisie and nobility in feudal society developed into a class antagonism which ended feudalism and replaced it with capitalism (Mao, 1937).

With dialectics understood, it must now be followed with a discussion of materialism. Materialism is the philosophical outlook that the material world, the world of physical things and physical matter, births the world of abstract thought and ideas, rather than the other way around. (The inverse viewpoint is called idealism). Thus, in order to understand a particular phenomenon, one must understand its material basis – in order to understand French impressionist art, for instance, an examination of French society, politics, and economics of that period would be requisite. A materialist would, acknowledging that must produce food and shelter to survive, argue that the modes of social organization that a given society takes is based

fundamentally around the means and methods used to produce. Ideology and politics are therefore heavily affected by the economic basis of society (Engels, 1880).

Marxist Economics

Marxist economics is a dialectical materialist analysis of economic issues. Marxist economists seek to understand the contradictions within the current mode of production, capitalism, in order to understand how it works, how it develops, and how it evolved from its predecessor, feudalism.

As mentioned before, Marxism is a materialist philosophy. Therefore, a Marxist investigation of economics begins with the realization that humans have certain material requirements in order to live, such as food, water, and shelter. In order to obtain these necessities, and in order to advance science, technology, and culture, we must produce things by engaging in labor. The way that labor is organized and the way that objects are exchanged and distributed defines any particular economic system, and has broad-reaching consequences into other social domains (Engels, 1880).

The dominant way that labor is organized in modern society is called capitalism. In capitalism, there are two classes of people: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production (factories, machinery, agricultural land, etc.) as their private property, and the proletariat, people without private property who are employed by the bourgeoisie to perform work using these means of production. Conventional logic holds that the proletarian workers sell their labor to the capitalist bourgeois for wages, but this is not precisely true. What the capitalist actually buys from the worker is not their labor (the definite product of their work), but rather their labor-power (the capacity to perform work), and the actual product of the worker's labor is appropriated from them by the capitalist. Labor-power has thus become a commodity, a thing

that can be bought and sold, and the wage that the worker receives is the price of this commodity. This labor relation between the worker and the capitalist is known as wage labor. The worker is forced into wage-labor, forced to sell their labor-power to a capitalist, because the workers are deprived of ownership of the means of production, and have no other way to secure their necessities. While a worker can leave one capitalist for another, the workers as a class are shackled to the capitalists as a class (Marx, 1847).

Labor power, just like all other commodities, has its price determined through the laws of the market, through competition. Buyers compete among each other to gain possession of the desired commodity for the lowest price possible, and sellers compete among each other to obtain market share and command the highest possible price for their goods. These contradictions within competition cause prices to fluctuate constantly, but at the core, the value (and therefore the equilibrium price) of a commodity is its cost of production, which is determined by the average amount of socially necessary labor time which created it. The value of labor-power, therefore, is the amount of labor needed to sustain and train the living laborer. Upon closer examination of labor-power, we find that it has very peculiar characteristics, namely the ability to create value. When labor-power is consumed (when the laborer does work), the value of the labor is greater than the value of the labor-power that was expended. Labor-power therefore has a unique *value-forming* capability. The difference of value between the labor and the expended labor-power is termed surplus value, and it is the expropriation of surplus value, termed profit, from the worker by the capitalist that forms the nucleus of the capitalist mode of production (Marx, 1847).

It now becomes necessary to define what capital is precisely. Capital is not merely a lump of accumulated labor (such as tools, raw materials, or sums of money); rather, it is an amount of

accumulated labor that has the power to expand itself through the employ of labor-power. A sum of raw materials, machines, and money only becomes capital when its capitalist owner uses it to employ a laborer to produce a product with it. The worker works with the materials to produce a product, and is paid a wage; the product's value exceeds the initial materials' value by the surplus-value, thus increasing the size of the accumulated labor (Marx, 1847).

Capitalists and workers are thus locked in a reciprocal relationship. The capitalist must give a part of their capital to a worker as a wage to hire their labor-power to generate profit. The worker must exchange their labor power for wage in order to live. Yet, this reciprocal dependence belies a deeper contradiction between capitalist and worker: that wages and profits are inversely related. The worker seeks to keep a larger share of their surplus-value, but the capitalist seeks to expropriate a larger share of the surplus-value to increase profit. The conflicting interests of capitalist and worker are a dialectical contradiction that creates class antagonism. It is this class antagonism which is the primary contradiction in capitalist society, and which plays the primary role in determining the course of capitalist evolution (Marx, 1847).

There also exists contradiction within the capitalist class itself. Various capitalists are locked in constant competition with each other, and endeavor to capture greater market share by selling their commodities at lower prices. The commodity's price can only be lowered by reducing the amount of socially necessary labor time required for its production, in turn requiring innovation and investment in more sophisticated and expensive machines and methods. The resulting commodities are cheaper, but to recoup the costs of investment, the capitalist must sell a greater number of these commodities. The other capitalists are either driven into obsolescence (in the case of smaller producers) or quickly emulate the new innovations, thus creating an immense glut of commodities (a crisis of oversupply) which must find a new market or suffer an

extreme crash in prices. The industry in crisis thus enters a recession; workers are laid off; productive capital finds a new home in other, more profitable industries until the oversupply is soaked up by the market, increasing the rate of profit and starting the cycle anew, this time with the capital concentrated in the hands of fewer, larger enterprises which are closer to monopoly. We thus see a contradiction between the social character of production in each enterprise and the anarchic character of production as a whole. Despite having the capacity to meet humanity's needs, capitalist production fails to do so, creating constant exploitation, crisis, and unemployment. A reserve army of unemployed workers is always present, in constant competition with one another, and wages are continually depressed to extract additional profit (Marx, 1847).

Marx's economic philosophy was expanded upon by V. I. Lenin in the book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Lenin described a phenomenon known as imperialism, in which the ruling political and economic bourgeois interests of advanced capitalist nations dominate the world economy, expropriating the land, labor, and resources of poorer countries and dividing the world among themselves. Lenin acknowledged the natural tendency of capitalist industry to concentrate around a few large monopolies, as smaller enterprises are unable to compete and are driven from the field or subsumed. Monopoly also extends to banking, as the wealth of advanced capitalist nations becomes increasingly controlled by a few large banks, who control all avenues of credit and come to dominate industrial capital. A fusion of industrial and bank capital into finance capital is thus effected, and these new organizations of finance capital come to form monopolies over their respective industries, control the domestic politics and economies of their countries of origin, and participate in speculation (Lenin, 1917a).

However, these monopolistic entities cannot be confined to their home countries for long. Capital is no longer able to find productive areas of investment, as the domestic economies have been saturated. Capital must therefore be exported to other, poorer countries to establish control over their cheap labor, natural resources, and markets, and the profits gleaned from this control are expropriated by the monopolies. The imperialist nations thus find themselves locked in a titanic struggle to divide the world amongst themselves. Imperialism is thus the exploitation and control of a colonized country by its capitalist hegemon for the purpose of bulwarking the hegemonic economic power of the bourgeois ruling class. It is an inevitable result of the contradictions inherent within capitalism, and represents the highest stage of the development of capitalism. It is a parasitic relationship, one in which poor nations are bled dry for the consolidation of profits of the imperialist ruling class (Lenin, 1917a).

Marxist Politics: Scientific Socialism

Marxist analyses of politics analyze how the class contradictions within a capitalist society largely determine its modes of political organization. They explain how the political and social superstructure in society depend heavily on the configuration of the economic base. The modern state is merely another instrument used by the capitalist bourgeoisie to maintain their class dictatorship over the proletariat, with the entire military, political, and bureaucratic might of the state apparatus constantly applied towards this end. The economic monopoly of the bourgeoisie finds itself transformed into political supremacy. Far from ending class antagonism, state power amplifies it by curtailing political democracy, suppressing working-class resistance, and maintaining the exploitative labor-relations of capitalist production. It must be concluded that class struggle is the principal contradiction behind political as well as economic transformation (Lenin, 1917b).

The class contradictions within capitalism can only be solved through working-class revolution, which abolishes the bourgeois state apparatus that oppressed it and establishes a new state apparatus that consolidates political power against bourgeois counter-revolution. The new workers' state cannot simply inherit the institutions and structures of its predecessor, because those structures were configured for the purpose of serving capital. Instead, the new state must rely on democratic modes of organization, with local workers' councils electing representatives for national government and the masses possessing the absolute right of recall for any public official. Economically, the means of production are seized by the new democratic state and become managed socially, in the workers' interest. Bourgeois tyranny gives way to workers' liberation, thus achieving socialism, a transitional stage in the ultimate development towards communism, a classless, stateless society configured around collective, democratic control over production and all other economic and socio-political functions. Such an arrangement represents the decisive abolition of class contradiction within society (Lenin, 1917b).

Social phenomena, too, must be understood within the lens of class struggle. Racism within capitalism, for instance, does not comprise solely of racist sentiments held by individual people – it is not an accidental outcome of a benign system. Racial oppression is, in fact, largely perpetrated by ruling-class institutions (including the state) seeking to divide the working class along racial lines and to keep racial minority sections of the working class vulnerable to economic exploitation (Parenti, 1997). News media also play an important role in consolidating bourgeois dominance, and must also be analyzed through the lens of class. The 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent* by political scientists Herman and Chomsky outlines a “propaganda model” of corporate media. Structural factors in the organization of corporate media outlets, such as ownership and control by bourgeois interests, dependence on advertising, and dependence on

state approval, largely dictate these outlets' behavior and output. Ruling-class interests thus dominate mass-media news coverage. Mass media serves as merely another tool to entrench ideological orthodoxy, delegitimize opponents of the ruling class, and "manufacture consent" among the public for the policies of the bourgeoisie (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Analysis of the Crisis in Ukraine

Marxist dialectical materialism, economics, and political thought provides a comprehensive insight into the current crisis in Ukraine. The American government's imperialist actions are thoroughly explained by an examination of the class structure and capitalist economic system of the United States.

American Imperialism and Ukraine

An analysis of the politico-economic structure of the United States reveals that it is the world's leading imperialist power, and that its intervention in Ukraine is an imperialist action that benefits corporate and ruling-class interests.

Finance capital had already assumed a dominant role in the American economy in the time of Lenin. Lenin wrote in *Imperialism* that "the United States... [is] in the front rank as regards rapidity of development and the degree of extension of capitalist monopolies in industry" (Lenin, 1917, p.61). This tendency has persisted to the present day, and corporate monopolistic domination in the 21st century is nothing short of a "systemic feature of the [American] economy" (Stewart, 2020, para. 3). Corporate economic domination has, predictably, been transformed into political control, as campaign finance and lobbying have emerged as important tools of the corporate capture of American politics. The result has been the near-complete dissociation of public policy from public opinion. A 2014 study found that the American federal government's policies closely match the policies desired by affluent voters, while the concerns of

average Americans had a minimal effect (Gilens & Page, 2014). The present administration of President Biden has been staffed with pro-plutocratic insiders who have played a central role in the perpetuation and strengthening of capitalist ruling-class domination (Shoup, 2021).

American monopolies have proceeded in the way that Lenin predicted. American firms now offshore a high proportion of their manufacturing, taking advantage of “superexploited” laborers in impoverished countries. Surplus value and raw materials are ruthlessly expropriated from the Third World, perpetuating and intensifying unequal development. The American politico-military apparatus has been a loyal servant to capitalist interests, conducting itself in an unfailingly imperialist manner and crushing any resistance to capitalist world domination. America’s annual military spending totals \$813 billion (Greve, 2022), larger than the next 11 countries combined; this military possesses over 800 foreign bases (Knight, 2022), with colossal naval, air, and nuclear assets with unrivalled capabilities. Over the past century, this military has been used, both directly and indirectly, in countless invasions and coups d’état, overthrowing any and every government and popular movement with interests that run contrary to the capitalist class. Invasions and coups were perpetrated in Iran, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Vietnam, Korea, Mozambique, Indonesia, East Timor, Guatemala, Iraq, Haiti, Panama, Nicaragua, and many other countries (Parenti, 1995), causing tens of millions of deaths from war, political repression, genocide, and famine in what amounts to a “free-market world holocaust” (Parenti, 1997, p. 25). American political, economic and military domination of the world has no peer or precedent, making the contradiction between American imperialism and its opponents the primary contradiction in the international relations of today.

Any understanding of the Ukrainian crisis, therefore, must acknowledge the hegemonic influence of the United States in that country. American imperialism is so pervasive that this

contradiction has superseded the domestic class struggle between the Ukrainian bourgeoisie and proletariat as the primary contradiction in Ukraine's politics. The Yanukovich government's rejection of IMF policies and trade negotiations made it an opponent to American capitalist interests, and thus a target for the American government's regime-change efforts. The immediate subservience of the coup government to the demands of foreign capital served to bolster the position of capital. More directly, the politically powerful military industry in the United States (and Western Europe) stands to benefit greatly from escalations in the crisis in Ukraine, through increased arms sales to the coup government (Ng, 2022).

The events in Ukraine, however, cannot be understood in isolation. They must be analyzed dialectically, in the wider context of American imperialism and its interactions with the world. The post-Soviet foreign policy of the United States, as articulated in 1992 by Paul Wolfowitz (then-Undersecretary for Defense), centered around NATO expansion into formerly Soviet-aligned nations with the intent of preventing Russia from becoming a great power and challenging U.S. imperial hegemony. Ukraine acquired immense importance in this plan. It was viewed as the "geopolitical pivot" which, if brought into NATO, would weaken the position of Russia so much that it, too, could be subject to American control, and American capital could enjoy unhindered expansion throughout all of Europe (Foster, 2022). Arms industry lobbyists, in particular, promoted this policy, sensing opportunities for massive arms sales to newly subservient eastern European NATO members (Ng, 2022). All subsequent presidential administrations have adhered to this plan. The Clinton administration commenced the expansion of NATO into eastern Europe, the second Bush administration continued the expansion and carried out the Orange Revolution, the Obama administration continued the expansion and

perpetrated the Maidan Revolution, and further escalatory moves and expansion were committed by the Trump and Biden administrations.

Why did these five administrations, three Democratic and two Republican, so rigidly stick to the same plan? It is because imperialism is not merely a policy – it is an inherent demand of advanced capitalism, carried out faithfully by the political executors of the capitalist class.

Aggression against Russia serves to bolster American economic interests and political leverage over western Europe. American adversaries Russia and China have demonstrated little aggressive intent towards western European nations, and in fact have offered overtures of economic cooperation. Western European nations, through trade with Russia and China, stand to lessen their dependence on the United States and thus weaken American hegemony. American sanctions on Russia have severed these nascent co-operations, hurt European economies, and restored American hegemony, the most visible example being the American effort to block Germany from spending \$1 billion on infrastructure to import natural gas from Russia (Hudson, 2022). The manufacture of a Russian threat lines the pockets of the arms industry, as well. Peaceful relations between western Europe and Russia would leave European nations little reason to purchase American arms, but hostility heightens demand. Between 2015 and 2019, weapons exports from the United States increased by 23%, spurred in large part by European NATO members' purchases of American-made arms (Ng, 2022).

The United States, in sum, meets all of the characteristics of an imperialist power. Its finance capital assumes a monopolistic position in its economy, dominates its politics, and engages in export of capital and exploitation of the Third World. The American intervention in Ukraine is best understood through this lens: it is an imperialist intervention designed to advance the power of capitalist enterprises and the capitalist ruling class, exploit the workers of Ukraine,

weaken and ultimately topple any Russian resistance, and tighten the grasp of American capital over western Europe.

Russia: Capitalist but Not Imperialist

Analysis of Russia's role reveals that Russia is a capitalist nation, but not an imperialist power. Its intervention in Ukraine does not represent a ploy to dominate Ukraine for economic advantage, but rather represents a response to NATO encroachment for the purpose of ensuring domestic security.

It is necessary to first differentiate the imperialist core of highly developed capitalist countries from the imperial periphery and semi-periphery. Not all imperialized nations are uniformly de-developed by imperial exploitation, and some peripheral nations are home to a limited degree of industrial development, above that of the most exploited regions of the world. These semi-peripheral nations are nevertheless subordinate to advanced imperial nations, being excluded from the most profitable and technologically advanced economic sectors. They are reliant on the sale of raw materials and cheap manufactured goods and the purchase of technologically intensive goods and services at prices determined by the advanced imperialists, in an exploitative process known as unequal exchange (Clarke & Annis, 2016).

Russia is a semi-peripheral nation. Its form of production is unmistakably capitalist, and it possesses several large monopolies tightly controlled by small cadres of politically influential bourgeois elites. Yet, this monopolism did not emerge from a high stage of capitalist accumulation, but instead is the successor to the large state-owned enterprises of the Soviet era (Clarke & Annis, 2016). In addition, these monopolies do not even approach the scale of their American counterparts. Russia has just 4 corporations in the world's largest 100. Its banks are minuscule, with only one in the top 100. Its accumulation and export of capital for productive

purposes is extremely minor (Smith, 2019). Russian corporations are not finance-capital behemoths that gain the upper hand in unequal exchange. Rather, the vast majority of corporations are involved in the oil & gas industry or other sectors of raw-materials processing, such as mining. While advanced imperialist countries are often characterized by an export of sophisticated, high-value goods and services, Russia's exports comprise largely of raw materials (71.5% of the total in 2013), and it is forced to import high-value goods and services from more advanced imperial powers at monopoly prices. Far from being an imperial hegemon benefiting from unequal exchange, Russia is an economically weak semi-peripheral state being plundered by it (Clarke & Annis, 2016).

Russia therefore cannot be classified as an imperialist country. Nor can its invasion of Ukraine be characterized as imperialism. Russia has little to gain from conquest of Ukraine, and the political and economic fallout mean that attempts to do so actually damage Russia's economy (Hudson, 2022). The security concerns cited by the Russian government, upon further investigation, seem credible. The Russian government has repeatedly protested NATO expansion, fearing encirclement (Greene, 2022b). The United States has pursued a nuclear strategy known as counterforce, advocating for the deployment of weapons that could knock out all means of Russian retaliation in a decisive first strike. Deployment of American nuclear weapons in Ukraine, on Russia's border, could establish American nuclear primacy, leading to justified concerns within the Russian government about NATO expansionism and nuclear war (Smith, 2019). The conduct of Russian forces within Ukraine also refutes notions that Russia seeks to conquer the entire country. Russian forces have withheld a large proportion of their strength, with cruise missiles being deployed in a limited capacity for targeted strikes on military installations. Civilian casualties have been low compared to the American invasion of Iraq in

2003. Approximately 1,000 strikes were carried out in the first 24 days of the invasion, less than the number carried out by American forces on the first day of the 2003 invasion (Arkin, 2022).

These factors do not justify the Russian invasion, which is an escalatory and dangerous act that harms Ukrainian civilians and risks nuclear war. The Ukrainian working class, already reeling from American intervention in Ukraine, is only further harmed by Russia's actions. The invasion has, as of the time of writing, killed over 900 Ukrainian civilians (Arkin, 2022) and caused over 5 million refugees to flee the country (UNHCR, 2022), in what amounts to a dire humanitarian crisis. Fundamentally, though, Russian motives in Ukraine are not imperialist, and the 2022 invasion was precipitated primarily by American aggression and encroachment. The crimes of the American and Russian regimes in Ukraine are far from equivalent.

Fascism Serves Capitalism

Far-right and neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine have received consistent support from Ukrainian billionaires, the Ukrainian government, and the United States. A prime example is the neo-Nazi Azov battalion, founded in 2014, which has been bankrolled by Ukrainian energy tycoon Igor Kolomoisky. The far-right Dnipro and Aidar battalions have also received funding from Kolomoisky, a top campaign contributor to current Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, and many of these militias have been officially incorporated into the Ukrainian armed forces (Rubinstein & Blumenthal, 2022). American, Canadian, and Israeli military trainers have been deployed to assist the Azov battalion, with photographs of trainers meeting battalion members surfacing in 2017. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion in 2022, the United States has sent over \$350 million in military equipment to the Ukrainian military, much of it ending up in the hands of neo-Nazi militias (Norton, 2022).

Fascist militias receive support from the Ukrainian bourgeoisie and the United States because their military muscle serves capitalist interests. The Azov battalion has been used to violently crack down on Zelensky's political opposition, raiding the home of opposition figure Viktor Medvedchuk in 2019 and firing upon members of Medvedchuk's political party in 2020 (Rubinstein & Blumenthal, 2022). Left-wing, feminist, and pro-LGBT individuals and organizations, as well as Jewish, Roma, and ethnic Russian Ukrainians, have been the victims of hate crimes and repression carried out by these groups (Golinkin, 2019). More broadly, fascist militias played a major role installing the present pro-western government in 2014, and provide crucial military forces fighting pro-Russian forces and Russian separatists. The extreme racial chauvinism, anti-Semitism, anti-Roma, and anti-Russian racism promoted by these militias divide Ukraine among ethnic lines, shattering any chance of broad-based resistance to American imperialism in Ukraine. A convergence of interests has emerged between Ukrainian fascists and American imperialists. Fascism serves capitalism, and thus support for fascist militias is a rational policy for the United States.

The Media and Ukraine

Corporate media outlets in the United States consistently misrepresent the Ukraine crisis, presenting a narrative that blames Russian aggression and downplays the role of American imperialism.

Key omissions are consistently made in American corporate media coverage of Ukraine. The expansion of NATO after the Cold War and United States covert support for regime change in 2014 are frequent targets of omission. So, too, is crucial information about the scale of far-right extremism in Ukraine. Coverage of an Azov Battalion training exercise in mid-February 2022 appeared in the BBC, MSNBC, and ABC news, with no mention of the neo-Nazi leanings

of the group, or of United States sponsorship of it (McEvoy, 2022). Media coverage of Russian president Vladimir Putin consistently questions his sanity, portraying him a mentally ill, aggressive “madman”. Such coverage delegitimizes valid Russian concerns over NATO expansion and prevents the United States from attracting any scrutiny over its provocative track record (Cho, 2022).

A study of media coverage during the week of February 21-27, 2022 (the first week of the Russian invasion) found that Fox News, the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, and MSNBC ran 1,298 stories about Ukraine. On the other hand, Saudi airstrikes on Yemen, Israeli attacks on Syria, and American airstrikes in Somalia, three U.S.-backed military actions which also occurred in the same time period, were only covered by these sources in 3 stories. These five media outlets uniformly opposed the Russian invasion, utilizing emotionally charged rhetoric intended to generate sympathy and outrage, while also downplaying the simultaneous suffering of civilians in the aforementioned U.S.-backed wars (MacLeod, 2022). Recent op-eds in the Washington Post, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal uniformly advocate for American escalation in Ukraine, including the establishment of a no-fly zone which would lead to direct combat between American and Russian forces and, potentially, World War III (Shupak, 2022). Overall, media coverage blames Russia as the aggressor, downplays American provocations, and drums up public approval for further American intervention (Greene, 2022a).

From a Marxist perspective, the genuflection of corporate media to American capitalist interests is unsurprising, continuing patterns observed by Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*. In line with the predictions of the propaganda model, news coverage of the Ukrainian crisis has presented a skewed, biased image, supporting American imperialist narratives and demonizing opponents of American expansion. Media plays a crucial role in the

manufacture of consent for American imperial intervention, thus serving to strengthen the supremacy of the bourgeoisie.

Conclusion: What Should Be Done?

In summary, a Marxist analysis of the crisis in Ukraine reveals that it is best understood as a contest between American imperialist expansionism and Russian retaliation, with American imperialism being the primary aspect of this primary contradiction. American imperialism is the necessary and inevitable result of the development of advanced capitalism, satisfying the inherent demand of the system and its ruling class for constant expansion and exploitation of untapped sources of cheap labor and raw materials.

As Marxist theory demonstrates, it is capitalism and the class contradictions inherent to it that create imperialism. The only durable rebuttal to American imperialism in Ukraine (and indeed, globally) is the overthrow of the American capitalist regime and the establishment of a truly democratic, socialist alternative. This, however, is not a goal that is immediately attainable. Bourgeois ruling-class dominance within the United States is still a fact of life, and revolutionary Marxist political activity is minimal. While socialist revolution is a long-term goal that should be worked towards, it is unlikely that the current crisis in Ukraine will be resolved by a revolution in the United States.

The more immediate goal should be the creation of an international anti-war and anti-imperialist movement, with the aim of achieving U.S. withdrawal from Ukrainian affairs, peace negotiations, and a general de-escalation of the crisis. This is the policy being carried out by left-wing political parties in the United States, such as Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL), which calls for an “independent program of peace and solidarity and anti-imperialism” (PSL, 2022, para. 18), and by the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), which supported the peace

movement in a statement of its own. Such a movement must emphasize international solidarity and cooperation between American, Ukrainian, and Russian workers, all of whom suffer from this conflict. Workers from these three countries share a common interest in stifling American ruling-class aggression and creating peace in Ukraine (CPUSA, 2022).

It is the workers of Ukraine who suffer the most from the present war, and their struggle deserves solidarity and support from American comrades. Efforts must be made to help Ukrainian refugees evacuate from war-torn regions, and humanitarian aid must be provided to those who need it. It is important to note that, while fascist elements are politically powerful in Ukraine, the vast majority of Ukrainians do not support fascists, and, in fact, are their victims.

Observing the Ukraine situation dialectically reveals that American aggression vastly outweighs Russian retaliation as the prime cause of the conflict. However, recognition of legitimate Russian concerns on the part of the anti-imperialist movement must not evolve into any form of support of Russia's invasion. The CPUSA maintains a principled position, acknowledging that "Russia's invasion of Ukraine . . . was wrong and in violation of international law. War between states is never an acceptable solution and must be rejected in the strongest terms" (CPUSA, 2022, para. 3). The Russian invasion of Ukraine harms the Ukrainian working class, causing civilian casualties and a massive refugee crisis, and only serves to further escalate the risk of nuclear war. While the bulk of anti-war efforts should focus on the primary aggressor, the United States, Russia's invasion must also be opposed.

Anti-war action can take many forms. Protests and demonstrations can raise attention and garner support for the anti-war cause. Organized labor has a role to play as well, such as in an incident on March 12, 2022, when Italian airport workers of the USB labor union refused to load a cargo plane with weapons destined for Ukraine (Arena, 2022). Independent news media is also

crucial in providing a balanced view of the conflict, free from interference by the corporate ruling-class interests that dominate most large media outlets. Many of the outlets cited in this essay, such as Mint Press News, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), and the Monthly Review, provide more left-wing and radical perspectives, often outing dishonest coverage from corporate sources.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of anti-war and anti-imperialist action. The war in Ukraine is a confrontation between two nuclear-armed powers, the United States and Russia. Nuclear war has the potential to claim hundreds of millions of lives if the imperial aggression of the United States is permitted to continue unchecked.

American imperialism must be resisted. The future of the world may depend on it.

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