

Class System Theory Analysis of the War in Ukraine

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Abstract

In Russia and the United States, politics are controlled by the economic elite, therefore a comprehensive understanding of foreign affairs is impossible without the interdisciplinary class system theory of analysis. The current conflict in Ukraine is a result of similarly motivated capitalist blocs in the East and West competing for imperial domination of oil and other resources in foreign markets. Russia's occupation of Ukraine has granted their domestic bourgeois access to the largest oil pipeline in Eastern Europe and lucrative untapped oil reserves in the Black Sea that were previously in Ukraine's maritime zone. The United States criticizes Russia's aggressive foreign affairs but fails to acknowledge its own unparalleled imperial aggression. In efforts to maintain hegemony, the US continues to expand its influence in the East through the addition of NATO nations bordering Russia. Both nations are motivated to gain control of foreign markets and natural resources because of financial incentives from their domestic bourgeois. This imperialist warfare to increase wealth for multinational corporations, such as Russia's war in Ukraine, is evidence that the global political economy has entered the final stage of capitalism.

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The Soviet Union faced tremendous economic and political instability in the post-World War two era, and its demise was ultimately brought to fruition by the coup against President Mikhail Gorbachev. The division of the Soviet Union's territory after it collapsed in 1991 resulted in the formation of fifteen supposedly sovereign nations. These newly born nations' economic, political, and cultural interconnection to current Russia has resulted in numerous conflicts over the past 32 years. After gaining independence from the former USSR, nations were tasked with transitioning from a command economy. Former Soviet Union or FSU nations such as Ukraine opted for a partial free market to participate in the global capitalist economy. Ukraine's agricultural capacity and oil could have fostered the economic growth of this independent nation, but Russia has repeatedly encroached on its sovereignty through political and military warfare. The years of conflict in eastern Ukraine have advanced into Putin's full-scale "special military operation," which began in February 2022. The class system theory of analysis provides a holistic understanding of international relations and, therefore, the war in Ukraine because it addresses the relationship of capitalism to geopolitics and imperialism. Russia's war in Ukraine has once again raised tensions between the East and West as the United States strives to gain and maintain its own imperial domination.

Recent History of Russia and Ukraine: Euromaidan

The Ukrainian Euromaidan Protests in 2013 and 2014 is a prime example of Russia and the United States utilizing Ukraine as a battlefield for their opposing political interests. In November 2013, Ukrainian civilians began peaceful protests in Kyiv's Independence Square after former president Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an EU trade agreement that would further align the nation with the West rather than Russia (Winter on...2015). The CIA was responsible for funding pro-revolution nongovernmental organizations and media within the region to support regime change. On January 16th, during the third month of demonstrations,

repressive laws restricting civil society and the right to protest were instated, and police violence drastically increased. Ukrainian government enlisted the Titushky, non-military trained criminals, to enforce the civil restriction and on January 22, the lives of Ukrainian protesters were taken. The civilian death toll continued to rise as the Euromaidan protests pressed on into late February. On February 22, Yanukovich fled to Russia (Ukraine on...2021). The West claims that the Ukrainian parliament stepped in to regulate the presidential election of Oleksandr Turchynov, and Russia claims the overthrow of Yanukovich was a coup orchestrated by the United States and the European Union.

On February 27, only days after the election of Oleksandr Turchynov, Russian soldiers seized essential buildings and the peninsula of Crimea. The following month Russia held a referendum to determine the Crimean population's desire to secede from Ukraine. On March 18th, a deal was signed in Moscow claiming that Crimea was now Russian territory. The annexation of Crimea was deemed illegal by Ukraine and the West (Understanding Ukraine... 2019). The London School of Economics and Political Science conducted field research regarding the ethnic identities and political alliances of Crimea's population prior to its annexation. Their study concludes the majority of the ethnically Russian population did not desire political ties with Russia and that another substantial majority identified as Crimean alone. Furthermore, the youth of the region held a closer identification with Ukraine (Knott, 2022). These findings show the illegitimacy of Russia's claim that pro-Russian nationalists who desire to secede comprise the majority of Crimea's population. Russia's motivation for annexing Crimea is to maintain control of its naval port and to expand the Russian Black Sea maritime zone to control Ukraine's oil reserves.

The annexation of Crimea increased Russia's maritime zone in the Black Sea from 26,000 square miles to 62,000 square miles. Russia's acquisition of these 36,000 square miles granted them access to explore and exploit extremely lucrative oil reserves in the Black Sea (Broad, 2014). Given that the global economy is powered by oil, controlling this natural resource

is critical in determining the world's wealthiest nations. The transfer of this potential wealth infringes on Ukraine's ability to grow its independent economy and grants Russia even more power over the region. An additional incentive for control over Crimea is its long-standing history as a Russian port. Furthermore, Russia now has the ability to construct a direct pipeline to pump Black Sea oil to Europe without adding costly detours to avoid Ukraine's territory. Considering these monetary benefits that the Russian elite gained from annexing Crimea, it is apparent that the accumulation of capital for the owning class is a factor that has motivated Russia's imperialist policy in Ukraine.

The Rise of Capitalism in Russia

During the rule of the Soviet Union, the wealth of the top 1% was roughly 4-5 higher than that of society as a whole (European Parliamentary... 2018). After the collapse of the USSR, the Russian government implemented the loans for shares scheme, which they claimed would transfer state assets to citizens and transition the nation from a planned economy to a free market economy. Political corruption and nepotism from the former USSR carried over into the Russian nation-state, and members of the elite-owning class were able to obtain shares of state-owned companies in exchange for donating a portion of their profits to the government. Additionally, the owning class exploited workers understanding of the voucher system, which exacerbated the concentration of national wealth into the hands of a small number of affluent individuals. Factory owners would even suspend wages, so workers would become desperate for money and sell their shares to their managers (Cioci, 2016).

Wealth disparity and class inequality skyrocketed after the socialist USSR transitioned to Russia's capitalist economy through the corrupt privatization of state assets. Russia's socioeconomic stratification has some of the most drastic wealth disparities among the world's major economies, with the wealthiest 10% of Russians owning 87% of the wealth (Philipp, 2020). These figures do not account for the estimated 75% of Russia's GDP hidden in offshore accounts for benefit of the domestic bourgeois (European Parliamentary...2018). Oligarchs

exacerbate wealth inequality by utilizing their economic strong hold over politics to implement policies that favor the rich such as removing wealth taxes, keeping wages low, and preventing redistribution. Because the government is a political tool of the capitalistic bourgeois, protests regarding wealth disparity are not well received, and policies that favor the working class are rarely implemented. According to Carl Marx, the economic elite gaining control of the government and implementing policy outcomes that benefit their interest of capital accumulation is an inevitable progression of capitalism. Marxist analysis of the geo-political system accurately reflects the motivations and actions of Russia and other dominant nations in the globalized capitalist economy, such as the United States.

East vs. West: The United States, NATO, and Russia

The conflict between East and West can be partially attributed to the opposing political, cultural, and religious ideologies of the geographic regions, but military aggression from either side can always be traced back to economic interests. Capitalism has an insatiable incentive for growth. The oligarchs and multinational corporations in control of major political powers, such as Russia and the United States, wage imperialist wars to obtain natural resources to reduce production costs and increase capital accumulation for their owning class. The true incentives for these wars are often hidden by the government-regulated mass media and portrayed under the guise of advancing the freedom of a specific group or protecting national security interests. These government rhetoric's to disguise imperialistic wars are applicable to Russia's current "special military operation" in Ukraine and the 2003 "Operation Iraqi Freedom" waged by the United States, which enlisted NATO military support. Within a global capitalist economy, claims of freedom and security should always be carefully considered.

With the US Department of Defense possessing roughly 750 military bases in 130 countries and having deployed its armed forces more than 100 times since the last official declaration of war in 1945, the United States' imperialist foreign policy is undeniable (Cloward, 2016). The United States Department of Defense budget for the 2022 fiscal year was around

\$801 billion dollars. The US military budget is larger than that of China, India, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and South Korea, which spent \$777 billion in 2022 on defense combined (U.S. Defense...2022). Western politicians and media continually condemn Russia for its aggressive imperialist foreign affairs but fail to highlight the prevalence of this same issue in the US Department of Defense. Since 1945 the CIA has attempted to overthrow at least 30 foreign governments and assassinated or attempted to assassinate 50 foreign leaders. Sovereign nations on the receiving end of CIA "special military operations" include but are not limited to; Sierra Leone (2000); Nigeria (2000); Philippines (2002); Georgia (2003; 2008); Haiti (2004); Kenya (2004); Ethiopia (2004); Lebanon (2006); and Ukraine (2015) (Cloward, 2016).

An aspect of neocolonialism is nations' external focus on controlling the internal economy of another country; the US is the primary offender of this imperial domination. A notable example of this neocolonial foreign policy is the 2003 occupation of Iraq. Politicians rallied support for the war by spreading rhetoric that Iraq was manufacturing weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the US attempted to morally justify the invasion by claiming its primary aims were to liberate Iraqi citizens from the corrupt government, combat terrorism, and spread democracy. As the war pressed on, the true economic motivations to control Persian Gulf oil became increasingly evident. Former chairmen of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan concisely explained that, while it may be "politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: The Iraq war is largely about oil" (Cloward, 2016).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many eastern European nations opted to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, resulting in NATO countries directly bordering Russia. Given the United States' current position as a global hegemon due to its massive economy and military-industrial complex, this Western nation and its ideals greatly influence NATO nations and the actions of the alliance. Vladimir Putin has cited the expansion of NATO as a threat to national security and a primary reason for initiating the "special military operation" in Ukraine. In 2008,

the West proposed plans to include Georgia and Ukraine in the alliance. Putin expressed that advancing these plans would be a red line issue because in the event that these countries chose to join, nations supported by the United States military would practically surround Russian borders (Leupp, 2022). After announcements were made claiming that these nations could join the alliance regardless of Moscow's opposition, Russia invaded Georgia from August 1-12 under the veil of a "peace operation" to prove the severity of their concern regarding the Eastern expansion of NATO.

The Minsk Accords

After the Euromaidan protests in 2014, conflict in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian troops grew increasingly violent. The subsequent Minsk Accords was an attempt at political diplomacy between Russia and Ukraine to resolve the war. In September 2014, the Minsk Protocol and Memorandum, which contained agreements to ceasefire and halt the war in Donbas, was signed by Russia and Ukraine. Minsk I was supported by the OSCE, and Minsk II was preceded by French and German leaders. This agreement reduced the conflict for roughly two months before its collapse. In February 2015, Minsk II was signed with the intention of reviving Minsk I. Ukraine's desire for entering into the agreement was to halt Russian advances and regain control of its occupied territories. Russia's motivation for signing the Minsk Accords was to increase its diplomatic appearances in hopes that the EU and the USA would lift economic sanctions placed on them after the annexation of Crimea (Zoria, 2022). Unfortunately, the peace agreements have been to no avail, and the constant Russian war in Eastern Ukraine has escalated into Putin's full scale "special military operation" enacted in February of 2022.

The War in Ukraine: Nationalist Propaganda vs. True Motivations Russian Propaganda

In Russia and the United States, the government dominates the mainstream media and uses this power to spread its preferred narrative of the motivations regarding the War in Ukraine. Within Russia, Putin claims that the intent behind the invasion is to support Russian

separatists in Eastern Ukraine and facilitate the integration of ethnically Russian Ukrainian territory. He also promotes the narrative that the “special military operation” aims to liberate Ukrainian people from the neo nazis that control the nation’s politics. Furthermore, Putin has adopted a tactic used by many politicians attempting to instate hyper nationalism in their countries. The aforementioned strategy fixates on the nation’s “great” history and advocates for regression to reinstatement policies, and international treaties haven't been legally recognized for years. For example, the 1654 Treaty of Pereiaslav recognized the Ukrainian Cossack’s pledge of allegiance to the Czar of Russia during the Polish- Lithuanian Common Wealth Wars (The Ukraine...2023). Russian politicians will cite this irrelevant unifying treaty and the countries' similar ethnic identities as eastern Slavic to legitimize its aggressive advances and support its claim that the two nations should be a unified front against the West. Lastly, Russia cited Ukraine’s increased diplomacy with Western neo-imperialist organizations such as NATO and the EU as threatening Russian national security because of the two countries' geographic proximity.

Russia's True Motivations

It is true that the expansion of NATO alliances into nations bordering Russia does encroach on its power, but the invasion and occupation of Ukraine were sparked by capitalistic motivations to control eastern Europe’s oil supply. The largest oil pipeline used throughout Russia, Ukraine, and neighboring countries dependent on the Caspian Sea Oil infrastructure is 48 inches in diameter. This pipeline runs from Russia into Ukraine just north of Lyman and has the capacity to transport 1,660,000 barrels of oil a day (Russia and...2018). As of March 7, 2023, the territory of Russia’s occupation in Ukraine flawlessly aligns with the pipeline. Russia’s territory of occupation in Eastern Ukraine also encompasses an oil refinery in Lysychansk. According to statistics calculated by the US Energy Information Administration, this pipeline has the capacity to provide enough oil to satisfy the daily barrel consumption of Ukraine and ten other surrounding countries. Barrels of oil consumed per day: Ukraine 262,000; Romania

215,000; Bulgaria 94,000; Georgia 34,000; Greece 268,000; Armenia 13,000; Belarus 135,000; Hungary 183,000; Slovakia 93,000; Lithuania 66,000; Austria 253,000. (U.S. Energy...2021)

Under a globalized capitalistic economy powered by oil, the control of this natural resource is how nations maintain power and control.

USA and NATO Propaganda

The Western analysis of the current war claims that Russia launched an unprovoked attack on Ukraine, instigating the largest war in Europe since World War II. This is an imperial war of conquest waged by Putin that aims to reincorporate the sovereign nation of Ukraine into the Russian empire (Dickinson, 2022). Putin has never recognized the legitimacy of Ukraine's independence because he regards former Soviet nations as "Historical Russia" and regards these now independent nations as Russian property. He spreads this propaganda throughout Russia to promote support for this unjustified imperialist war. Furthermore, he fears that a democratic Ukraine aligned with NATO would threaten his autocratic regime because the Russian citizens would desire the same freedoms (Nagourney, 2022). Putin's claims that the expansion of NATO threatens Russian security are merely an excuse for the invasion. Seeing as Russia has been responsible for using direct military force against Ukraine, killing innocent citizens, and stealing land and resources for years, it is apparent that Putin and Russia are to blame for the war in Ukraine.

USA True Motivations

The war in Ukraine has created a serious problem for the expansion of United States imperialism and threatened its hegemony. An increasing domestic distrust of the US democratic integrity and imperialist foreign policy poses an internal threat to the hegemony that the United States has maintained since the end of World War II (Beal, 2022). Reverting to World War II and Cold War Tactics, US politicians are using propaganda machines such as state-controlled media and news outlets in attempts to pin the East against the West to increase nationalism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has strategically used the expansion

of NATO to advance its imperialist goals. The Department of Defense, under the Biden Administration, claims to have sent Ukraine \$400 million worth of military aid. In reality, this denomination gets funneled into the military-industrial complex, and then the US sends Ukraine just enough supplies to promote its “generous aid” for political theater. The US wants to support Ukraine’s military enough to maintain appearances but not enough to stop Russia's invasion. The continuation of the current conflict is in the interest of the United States because if Russia exhausts its military resources in Ukraine, they become less powerful and, therefore, less of a threat to US hegemony.

Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism

Within the globalized capitalist system, international relations are motivated by multinational corporations' desire to exploit the wealth of other nations to increase profits. The state and domestic bourgeoisie are inseparably interconnected under capitalism. The elite-owning class receives tax breaks, monopolistic government contracts, and policies that benefit their corporations in exchange for massive campaign contributions. This results in the mother state, such as the United States and Russia implementing imperialistic policies that serve the capitalist interests of the domestic bourgeoisie rather than the interest of the working class. The immense wealth inequality among nations is a result of the transnational owning class buying political influence over powerful nations' military forces with the intent of waging imperialist wars to dominate poorer nations' natural resources and exploit them for profit. Proponents of liberalism international relations analysis claim that capitalism encourages cooperation and interdependence between nations, which is true to an extent, but more often than not, these trade relations are exploitative rather than mutually beneficial. Corporations based in mother countries increase company profits and global wealth inequality by outsourcing production to periphery nations to decrease production costs by exploiting workers. The transnational ruling class is the primary actor in international relations. The transnational ruling class can be defined as; a small group of billionaires that control the wealth of multi-national corporations. Nation-

states are important actors in international relations, but the domestic bourgeois manipulate foreign affairs by purchasing influence over politicians (Lenin, 1920).

Vladimir Lenin was a revolutionary and leading political thinker of the 20th century. Drawing from Marxist theory and numerous other political philosophers, Lenin developed a theory that addressed the relationship between modern capitalism and imperialism. He expanded on this relationship in his famous book, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Lenin's theory of international political economy declares that by nature, the system of capitalism results in competition between capitalist nations or blocs, with cooperation being scarce and situational. Once a nation accumulates a surplus of domestic finance capital, it has reached the stage of monopoly capitalism. In this stage, nations export capital into foreign markets where "profits are usually high, for capital is scarce, the price of land is relatively low, wages are low, raw materials are cheap" (Lenin, 1920). As multiple nations accumulate a surplus of finance capital, they clash while attempting to export into foreign markets and maintain a monopoly over natural resources. This clash results in large wars because nations that have reached this stage of capitalism often have powerful military forces. Lenin provides five key factors that define an imperialist geopolitical system. The current tensions between Russia, China, and the United States in relation to the current crisis in Ukraine can be better understood by analyzing the prevalence of these five factors in modern society.

Key Factor #1

"The concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life" (Lenin, 1920).

In other words, monopolies control the means of production and block out competition. Nations that have reached the monopolistic stage of capitalism exploit vital natural resources and labor from other nations to maintain monopolies. This plays a decisive role in economic life because it hinders other nations' economic capacity for progression. The US War in Iraq and

Russia's current war in Ukraine are examples of monopoly nations competing to dominate oil reserves in foreign markets for domestic corporations.

Key Factor #2

"The merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this "financial capital," of a financial oligarchy" (Lenin, 1920).

The financial oligarchy stems from the interconnection of multinational corporations and nations' politics. Governments provide tax breaks, subsidies, and preferential legislation for monopolistic corporations in exchange for massive campaign donations. This merging of bank and industrial capital creates a bourgeois oligarchy that supports policies that increase the wealth of massive corporations and, therefore, themselves. In Russia, oligarchs hold direct political positions. In the US, oligarchs' political influence is less direct in the form of campaign donations.

Key Point #3

"The export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance" (Lenin, 1920).

Monopolies export production to less-developed nations to exploit their land, labor, and resources. Decreasing the cost of these production factors allows corporations to increase profit. The commodities are then exported to more affluent nations so companies can sell for higher prices. This system does not benefit the economy of the nation producing the goods because factory workers are not correctly compensated for their labor. As monopolistic nations compete to enter the same foreign markets, conflict arises. The insatiable desire for capital and expansion motivated Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these same imperialist desires could cause a disastrous war between East and West.

Key Point #4

"The formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves" (Lenin, 1920).

Transnational class coalitions value the accumulation of capital over the best interests of society. The international bourgeois manipulate policy to benefit themselves at the expense of the working class. Marx believes that class inequality and exploitation are unsustainable because of dialectical materialism. This theory explains that the downfall of capitalism is inevitable because of its propensity to create drastic wealth inequality, which ultimately leads to a revolution. In Marxian terms, the thesis collides with the antithesis and creates synthesis. The economic system of serfs and lords collapsed due to revolution, and Marx believes the same will inevitably occur with the bourgeois and proletariat, with the synthesis being socialism. Furthermore, the current economic system is unsustainable because of its dependence on scarce natural resources, such as oil.

Key Point #5

“The territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed” (Lenin, 1920).

The world currently has 195 nations, but the biggest capitalist powers control the wealth of many smaller nations. In this scene, the territorial division of the whole world is not yet complete, but many believe the world is on the brink of global conflict that would bring this imperialism domination to fruition. As capitalist blocs in the East and West continue to clash while attempting to dominate foreign territory, tensions rise between the two blocs as opposed to containing the conflict to smaller nations. The destruction caused by recourse wars in smaller countries is undeniably devastating, but a direct conflict between capitalist blocs such as Russia and the United States would bring unparalleled tragedy because of military capacity, economic stronghold, and nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine and many wars that have come before are a result of geopolitical conflict for resources and wealth that are bound to occur within a globalized capitalist system. The antagonists of imperialist wars spread propaganda throughout nations to encourage

nationalism and support for foreign conflict, however after taking a closer look, the true economic motivations of monopolist nations' foreign aggression become apparent. Russia and the United States continually attempt to place blame on one another, but it is important to recognize that both nations are guilty of waging imperialistic wars of conquest. Regarding Russia's war in Ukraine and countless other international conflicts, the true motivations for aggression are often linked to control over the key to capitalism, oil. As Marx and other class system theorists have expressed, the solution to resolving conflict in the globalized political economy lies in the hands of the working class recognizing its power and unifying across nations for the common good of humanity.

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