

The Invasion of Ukraine

Anarchist Interventions and Geopolitical Changes

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The current war in Ukraine is difficult to grapple with and not only for those of us with friends and comrades who are over there, fighting or surviving, or who have already fled and now find themselves homeless, many of them for a second time, in the case of the many refugees who had taken shelter there over these last several years.

It is also difficult to know how to position ourselves, given that this overwhelmingly appears to be a conflict with only two sides, and both sides—NATO and Russia—are systematically involved in torture, murder, repression, exploitation, racism, and ecocide domestically and around the world.

As anarchists, though, when we look at the world around us, we have to be aware of the campaigns of states and the structures of capitalism, but to also always create room in our analysis for the needs and actions of people outside of and against those forces.

Anarchists Interventions

As we often do, many anarchists in Ukraine and surrounding countries are focused on providing support—by building up resources and sharing them in an empowering way—with people who have been injured and those made homeless, as well as with the one million refugees produced by the war.

Many anarchists are also choosing to fight against the Russian invasion, even though that requires some level of collaboration with Ukrainian government forces. It is significant, though, that many of those fighting are Russians who had already fled their country as Putin's regime became more totalitarian.

Revolutionary experiences from the Makhnovschina and the Mexican revolution a hundred years ago to Kurdistan today have shown us that states do not leave us any terrain in their conflicts. It is in their interests that their conflicts are always between slightly different versions of the state. Since for a long time now there has been no large territory of total statelessness to defend, an anarchist positionality means carving out our own space, fighting alongside state forces willing to offer us an alliance against other state forces that would annihilate us in a moment. The historical lesson seems to be that in these situations, we need to maintain as much autonomy as possible, to continuously think about a revolutionary, transformative horizon, and not place any naïve trust in the decency of state allies. We also learn that revolutions, subordinated to the needs of pure warfare, wither and die, but sometimes, for mere survival, people need to engage in warfare and fight back. In the Spanish Civil War, even disciplined individualists supported engaging with the imperfections of the situation rather than running away to maintain their bubbles of purity.

This can be a hard lesson to affirm, because in all other moments our position of not making alliances with political parties or other governmental structures has proven correct. As far as I know, the false pragmatism that justifies such alliances—with this new law in place, with that new government in power, our revolutionary movements will be stronger—is never borne out.

But we have also seen that when a major social conflict erupts, we need to find a radical position within it, even and especially when the mainstream framing of that conflict leaves no room for anarchist positions. Staying home as the proper anarchist thing to do nearly always facilitates centrists or the far Right taking over such conflicts.

War is the health of the state and war is where revolutions die, but ignoring them is not an option as they threaten our individual and collective survival, destroy social movements, and crush communal infrastructures. In situations of warfare, anarchists have no easy answers; we must balance the conflicting needs of short-term survival and a revolutionary horizon, the conflicting lessons of always making space for anarchist positions in a conflict, never trusting states, and not being able to act from a place of purity and isolation.

I would suggest another lesson. We have not done an adequate job of analyzing the failings of anarchist movements throughout the 20th century. It has been vital to remember our dead, but often that has translated into romanticizing a collective death wish. We need to acknowledge how the deaths of our collectives has caused a grave interruption to the continuity of our struggle. This resulting loss of memory and intergenerationality has set us back. The lesson is that we really do need to place more value on survival.

Winners and Losers

Those who lose the most in any war are people and the land, and those who are oppressed in one way or another are the most vulnerable to the violence unleashed. No matter who wins or loses, the bravery of fighting back to defend the collective should be celebrated, but war itself should not be.

On the contrary, we should condemn war and its instigators, while also trying to understand each war's particularities. How will the outcome of this conflict affect ongoing geopolitics, shaping the wars to come, both cold and hot?

I think that whether or not a Western-oriented, democratic government in Ukraine survives this war, we can already say with a fair degree of certainty that among states, the losers will be the United States and Russia, and the winners will be China, India, Saudi Arabia, and other mid-range states. And among capitalists, aside from the obvious observation that arms companies will make a killing, we can single out energy companies—both fossil fuel and renewable—as the big winners.

Russia will lose any of its remaining sparkle as a superpower and nearly all of its regional leverage if it fails to oust the Ukrainian government, though if it manages to take Odessa and with it the entirety of the Ukrainian coast, it will have acquired a significant consolation prize. But even if Russia wins in Ukraine, it will have accelerated the expansion of NATO along its borders and isolated itself from most other states and international bodies. It will also hasten the decline of its major economic lever on the world stage, its fossil fuel output, second only to that of the US but a much larger portion of its GDP (over 50%, in fact, which is to say Russia has no economy without fuel exports).

The economic sanctions levied by Western institutions will not bring the Russian government to its knees. As effectively detailed here they have not accomplished that goal in Iran, and Russia is much better insulated against such sanctions. But they do serve to limit Russia's possible global alliances and economic leverage, and they might even encourage some of Russia's capitalist class to imagine a government without Putin.

The cancellation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that was set to bring more Russian gas to Germany and the European market is a far greater loss than a friendly government in Ukraine could ever make up for. My only guess is that Putin made this miscalculation because he was

spooked by the recent uprising in Kazakhstan, another country Moscow sees as its backyard. As a statist and, what's more, one with a background in intelligence services, Putin is prone to the paranoid and unrealistic view suffered by government leaders everywhere, that people are not smart enough to rise up on their own and only ever do so as puppets. He probably misread the Kazakhstan uprising as Western interference, a step towards the final dismantling of the Russian Empire, created by the tsars in centuries of bloody warfare against hundreds of Indigenous peoples, expanded by the state capitalists of the USSR, and inherited in diminished form by Putin, who is an explicit revanchist.

The reason the US government will be a loser is more subtle but extremely important. First, though, let's look at what the US has won. The US has positioned itself in a conflict with relatively little direct risk, in which it is all but guaranteed to play the role of good guy. What's more, this is a conflict that drastically increases European unity, reviving Euro-nationalism, and plying Germany and France away from their budding friendship with Russia. This can only be a good thing, from NATO's point of view. What's more, the US has increased its credibility, much damaged after the years of Bush and Trump.

A week before the invasion, I was sure that Russia would not attack Ukraine, almost entirely because the US government said it would. The daily reports quoting anonymous intelligence officials seemed lifted from the playbook used to prepare for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It turned out, though, the US government has multiple playbooks, and this time they were telling the truth. In a less typical use of information warfare, the US government seems to be broadcasting accurate intelligence culled from the communications of the top echelon of the Russian government in order to spook Moscow with how much they know.

This faulty prediction was a big error on my part, because it constituted falling back on a liberal critique of government. As anarchists, we don't oppose governments because they lie, we oppose them because their very existence is an assault on all of us, and whether they lie or tell the truth, it is based on a calculation of their interests to maintain power over everyone else.

So, for now, the US gets to be the poster boy of honesty, decency, and peace; a huge change from its media image since the end of the Clinton days.

However, the new gleam on the much tarnished brand of the US government can do nothing to reverse the most important result of this war, in geopolitical terms. And that is the acceleration of the emergence of a multipolar world in which no one state exercises hegemony. Because of their need to still access Russian energy and pay for those transactions, and their awareness of their own potential vulnerability to sanctions, countries like China and India are quickly developing alternatives to Europe's SWIFT system for bank transactions and alternatives to stock and commodity markets that rely on the dollar as the common currency.

Even if Russia loses this war or becomes a total pariah, the US is quickly losing its perch as the world superpower. This is in large part because US hegemony was never based primarily on its military power, though that was a necessary ingredient. But raw US military power was only ever enough to maintain allied/occupied governments in western Europe and Latin America. Washington's force projection was hit or miss everywhere else in the world, as demonstrated in China, Korea, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan...

It is the fact that nearly all economic activity in the world, even in so-called socialist countries, has relied directly or indirectly on its currency and its financial institutions, that made the US the most powerful country in the world. And that reality is coming to an end. It was already ending, as I pointed out in *Diagnostic of the Future*, but all the sanctions around the ongoing

war are speeding things up rather than slowing them down. The US is using its most potent economic weapons at a time when it is in a state of diplomatic tensions with many of the world's mid-range powers, motivating those governments to create effective defenses even as the bulk of world economic activity shifts out of NAFTA and the EU.

As far as capitalist winners, this war gives us another tragic reminder of how renewable energy and fossil fuel energy are by no means opposed; on the contrary, they have always grown in tandem and what is good for one tends to be good for the other.

Case in point, Europe is being forced to realize how dangerous its high dependence on Russian gas is. Fully half of Europe's gas comes from Russia, and between a fifth and a quarter of Europe's total electricity generation comes from gas, with many homes also heating themselves and supplying cooking stoves with gas.

The response of European governments has been to simultaneously accelerate the shift to renewable energy, with a 40% reduction of fossil fuel use by 2030, while also increasing their importation of gas to be stored before next winter and pushing for new pipelines to bring non-Russian gas into Europe. These new pipelines would probably carry north African gas through Spain. Incidentally, the Russian military, through the Wagner Group, is engaged in several bloody wars in northern Africa, as is France, one of the longtime colonizers of the region.

And though the US remains the world's number one oil producer and is not dependent on Russian production, it is dependent on a world economy that relies on cheap fuel and can be thrown into a tail spin by a sudden rise in prices. We have yet to see if the war in Ukraine will have any effect increasing the push for renewable energy, given how backwards the US is in both politics and infrastructure, but we have already seen how Washington is lobbying OPEC to increase oil output.

Borders and Refugees

One of the most important areas for anarchist action—and a site of a great deal of organizing from the beginning—is around the problem of borders and refugees. The Russian invasion produced a million refugees in just a week and that number keeps growing. Those are people who need access to housing, healthcare, resources or jobs, and affection and support. This is something anarchists wasted no time in helping to organize from Poland to Spain.

We have also added our voices to the rage about the white supremacist hypocrisy that characterizes how white Ukrainian refugees are received compared with refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and northern Africa, as well as racialized people fleeing Ukraine.

We can, perhaps, focus this rage in a more effective way. We can drive home how mainstream media and political parties that sell themselves as progressive are also responsible for reinforcing the colonial dynamics at the heart of capitalism, and we can push NGOs and other institutions that consider themselves a part of the Left to end their racist double standards and dedicate more resources to the ongoing refugee crises in other parts of the world. Anarchist projects that create safety, autonomy, and housing for and by migrants will continue to operate from Greece to the Netherlands. But if we can intervene to push leftists with access to far more resources to share those evenly, and not just with white refugees, it will make a huge difference in many lives and limit both the way the Right and the Center are encouraging nationalism in the present conflict and mobilize xenophobia in response to racialized refugees.

Another thing we can do in the present situation is to realize again how important direct relationships are for international solidarity along anarchist lines. In real time, anarchists in at least some areas have mobilized just as much for Kurdistan, Hong Kong, Chile, Chiapas, or Oaxaca as they have for Ukraine, even though the media was largely silent around many of the former wars and repressive crackdowns. The enthusiasm of our mobilization does not come down to racist double standards, fortunately, but to the global relationships a particular radical scene enjoys, which largely comes down to global patterns of migration and solidarity trips that lead to personal relationships spreading beyond borders.

We need to get more strategic in building and collectivizing international relationships in order to increase the flow of information and support with other areas of the globe that are facing wars or repressive crackdowns. For example solidarity, and even reliable information, around the ongoing wars in Sudan and Ethiopia are far less widespread.

Tankies Gonna Tank

Sadly, we have to dedicate some time to the awful takes coming from authoritarian leftists, who have once again seen fit to cheer the tanks sent by Moscow, as they did in 1956 and again in 1968. The only reason they are still relevant is because they provide a simplistic, Manichean framework that is highly compatible with statist politics. Compatible in the sense of not at all subversive.

So let us start with some facts that we should be able to discuss without falling into a mind-numbing, dualistic worldview. From the perspective of the government in Moscow, their invasion of Ukraine is in fact an act of self-defense. Since the '90s, Russia has been increasingly surrounded by NATO bases, NATO being a military alliance founded specifically to oppose Russian power. In 2014, a pro-Russian government was swept out of power by a popular movement in Ukraine, and replaced with a pro-Western government, and just a few months ago another popular uprising almost did the same in Kazakhstan, one of the few countries still more or less in Russia's orbit.

When you're a government, you don't believe in the legitimacy of popular movements. They're either bland side dishes to elections or irrelevant and annoying forms of expression that stand outside of the channels of government. If you're a democracy, they're window dressing that prove the citizens are free, as long as they don't try to actually do anything, and if you're not a democracy, they're minor forms of treason. When protests cross the line to direct action, they become criminal affairs that need to be stamped out. In those cases, they are probably acts of hybrid warfare orchestrated by your enemies, because if you are a government, your existence is predicated on the belief that people are incapable of organizing themselves.

So, yes, some of the information Russia is acting on is fact (NATO bases) and some of it is paranoia (foreign powers being the architects of all the protest movements since 2011), but all the same, the Russian government is acting in self-defense.

However, what the Cold Warriors and Stalinists don't understand is that you get the exact same results if you privilege the perspective of any other state. All states are acting according to their self-interests. The Ukrainian government is also clearly acting in self-defense when it tries to get closer to the West because, undeniably, from Afghanistan to Chechnya, Russian power poses a threat to its neighbors. For the same reasons, Poland and Lithuania and all the rest were acting in self-defense when they asked to join NATO. Even the US is acting in self-defense when

it tries to get rid of Putin because Putin is hostile to the US and possesses a nuclear arsenal capable of wiping the US off the map.

That's one of the problems with states. They inevitably create warfare and conflict because their self-interests are mutually exclusive with those of other states. They think they are defending themselves when in reality they are all locked into a dynamic that forces them to either try to conquer the world, subordinate themselves to another state with a better chance of conquering the world, or they collapse. That's why we don't give a damn for the self-interests of states, and instead we seek to destroy them all. Institutions should not have a right to survival that surpasses (and tramples) the survival needs of people and the planet.

So the Stalinists wave the flag of Russia's legitimate interests while ignoring the interests of other states. They talk about US imperialism, but ignore Russian imperialism. In fact, Stalinists and the far-Right often end up with a similar analysis, because Stalinism is a right-wing ideology. Stalin explicitly linked the expansion of the USSR with the Russian empire. Talk of "the Fatherland" was as prevalent in Russia after World War II (and it is prevalent again today) as in Germany during the '30s. Under the tsars, under the Soviet Union, and under Putin, Russia has been a racist empire engaged in genocide and founded on the lands of hundreds of slaughtered non-white and Indigenous peoples. In the vast majority of its territory, Russia can accurately be described as a settler state. Minus the boats, white people live in Irkutsk and Vladivostok by much the same means white people live in Des Moines and San Francisco.

We are told that Russia is not imperialist because it has not yet reached that level of capital accumulation; the US is the biggest imperialist and therefore the only imperialist, and therefore we must side with Russia against the US (Ukraine here and its inhabitants disappearing from the analysis as mere puppets). This framework, so simplistic it is insulting, is a gross simplification of Marxist-Leninism, itself a gross simplification of Marx, and what's more, based on one of the parts of Marxism that is falsifiable and, in retrospect, false: predictions around how the accumulation of global capital would advance progressively and lead to world socialism.

It is a theoretical framework with no validity. Its only use is as a sort of system of flash cards to tell people who don't want to think about the world they live in which side they should support in conflicts that are too complex for them to engage with. (Do people still know what flash cards are? It's a study tool with the questions on one side and the answers on the other. Non-virtual cards that exist in three dimensions. Nevermind, forget about it.)

Perhaps the best argument against this tankie analysis is that the tankies themselves don't use it when push comes to shove. When the USSR tried to dominate the Chinese Communist Party during that country's revolution, Mao rebuffed Soviet imperialism and allied with the United States. Oops! When fighting off the French and then US occupation of Vietnam, amidst intense imperial violence that killed millions, Ho Chi Minh warned that Chinese imperialism was a greater long term danger to the region than US imperialism. Likewise, the Vietnamese communists acted in a colonial or imperialist manner when they suppressed the Hmong or supported the Cambodian monarchy against the Cambodian communists.

So honestly, who the fuck are these tankies trying to fool?

I can think of an even better argument against these authoritarians who claim to be socialists, communists, or anti-imperialists, but in actual practice are just right-wingers supporting the same old colonial dynamics. Famous authors and academics who build their careers on Native movements fighting the violence of the US and Canada help to silence the hundreds of Indigenous and racialized peoples continuously brutalized by the Russian state. Authoritarians who

claim to care about the the victims of US wars in Iraq or Afghanistan don't care at all about the people suffering right now under Russian bombs. In fact, the question of "what should people in Ukraine do now that they have been plunged into war?" cannot even make an appearance in their analysis. Simply because Russia is a somewhat shorter range imperialist than the US, Ukrainian war victims must disappear from view.

The people who use this framework violate the most minimal standards of solidarity and decency, and they will say anything to justify their preconceived notions.

In opposition, both to those who justify Russian imperialism and to those who loudly decry it while giving NATO wars a free pass, I would dust off the old slogan, *no war but the class war* and modify it to *no war but the war against the State*, understanding the State in all its dimensions: capitalist, colonial, white supremacist, patriarchal, and ecocidal.

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