Putin, the War in Ukraine, and the Far Right

July 14, 2015



Putin's Russia is an imperialist state dominated by a capitalist oligarchy that controls the state and that has developed a bellicose attitude toward its neighbors, whom the oligarchy reproaches for having taken advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to escape its century-long tutelage. Embracing an ultra-nationalist ideology that gives a good deal of space to racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia, its authoritarian neoconservatism has become a veritable standard for the European extreme right. For those of us dedicated to fighting Western imperialism, be it American or European, an understanding of the Russian state's imperial nature, of its expansionist tendencies, and of the real nature of its contest with the West is essential.

In Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation is supported by important sectors of the extreme right such as Attack, in Bulgaria; the National Party, in Slovakia; Jobbik, in Hungary; the National Democratic Party, in Germany; the National Front, in France; the Freedom Party of Austria; the Northern League and the New Force, in Italy; the Flemish Interest Party, in Belgium; and so on.[1] On March 22, 2015, at the Holiday Inn in Saint Petersburg, the Russia Patriot Party organized an International Conservative Forum involving a large number of these movements, with participation from Eastern Ukraine military leaders linked to fascist groups. That network will strengthen the connection among European nationalists who support the Russian Federation's foreign policy against Brussels and Washington.

Which Russian Imperialism?

Some people nostalgic for the post-Stalinist Soviet Union close their eyes to this reality, forgetting that the denunciation of Russian imperialism was always at the heart of Lenin's thought and action. Did he not advocate the defeat of Russia in 1914? On December 12 of that year, Lenin wrote,

The Great Russians cannot "defend the fatherland" except by desiring the defeat of Czarism in any war, this as the lesser evil for nine-tenths of the inhabitants of Great Russia. For Czarism not only oppresses those nine-tenths economically and politically, but also demoralizes, degrades, dishonors, and prostitutes them by teaching them to oppress other nations and to cover up this shame with hypocritical and quasi-patriotic phrases.[2]

Replace the word "Czarism" with "oligarchy" and Lenin's judgment remains completely true today.

Russia is a unique imperialist power because as it colonized the non-Russian people of its empire, at the same time it brutally repressed and virtually enslaved the mass of Russian and non-Russian peasants inside Russia, generally from the seventeenth century onward, a process that resembled those perpetrated by the European powers in their far-flung colonies. With the emergence of capitalist imperialism in the last third of the nineteenth century, Russia sought to compensate for the relative weakness of its economic and financial monopolies by the exclusive military control of a vast territory and, as Lenin suggested in 1916, by "special facilities for robbing minority nationalities."[3] In this way Russia could try to play in the big leagues, as a junior partner of France and England. Not understanding this, some Marxists refer to Lenin in order to call into doubt the imperialist nature of today's Russia, pointing out the relative weakness of its finance capital sector.

But this only shows that they do not understand Lenin's characterization of Russian imperialism before 1917.

Great Russian Chauvinism and Soviet Russia

While finance capital's monopoly was shattered by the October Revolution, leading to the creation of the Soviet Union, Great Russian chauvinism and the privileges associated with it remained. That is why Lenin in his last writings proposed affirmative-action measures for the oppressed nations and gave cardinal importance to the struggle against social-nationalism, not hesitating to confront Stalin regarding his report on the Georgian Communists and accusing him of being a "vulgar Great Russian bully."[4] After Lenin's death, this battle would be lost and the theory of "socialism in one country" would mask the triumph of Great Russian chauvinism over the rights of other nationalities. This largely explains how "atmospheric" violence (to take a word from Franz Fanon) of the Stalinist order of the years from 1930-1940 can be compared to that of the colonial world: massive expropriations, work camps, deportations and exterminations, forced Russification, and so on.

After World War II, the Soviet Union reigned again over its empire and its claims on an area that extended from China to Iran (Azerbaijan) to Turkey.[5] Beyond that, in July 1945 Stalin even proposed establishing a Soviet protectorate over Tripolitania (Libya) in North Africa. When Great Britain took a position in favor of the independence of Libya, Soviet diplomats took the fallback position of proposing a protectorate of the four great powers (United States, England, France, and Russia). Finally, when the Soviets perceived the possibility of a Communist Party victory in the 1946 election in Italy, they turned to the suggestion of an Italian protectorate, but unsuccessfully.[6] That little-known attempt of Moscow to revive for its own benefit the League of Nations' mandates that had been established after World War I says a lot about its Great Power politics toward colonial people. Nevertheless, the Soviet Russian Empire's hour of glory would last less than half a century and would be followed by an unprecedented collapse after 1991, with the loss of 14 non-Russian republics (some 5.3 million square kilometers of territory).

The Reunification of Great Russia?

Today the Russian Federation still has 21 non-Russian republics which comprise 30 percent of its territory. Reconstituted finance capital, the relative fragility of which is once again compensated for by the support of a powerful state apparatus, now becomes the first recipient of profits from the exploitation of the natural resources of Siberia and the Far East. Once again this is organized in a colonial fashion: Resources flow to the center, which returns a small part of them to the various regions for their own development. At the same time, this system encourages Moscow to adopt an expansionist policy toward neighboring states, which ultra-nationalists present as an effort at "the reunification of Great Russia." For Aleksandr Dugin, one of their current main ideologues and a follower of the "war between the continents," the integrity of its former dominions can only be guaranteed if they agree not to leave the Russian orbit. He proclaims that "Every State [in] the post-Soviet space, if it decides to violently oppose Russia, cannot exist except in a truncated form." (*Liberation*, April 27, 2014).

We have the same story from Igor Strelkov, a Russian military man who was engaged on the side of the separatists of Transnistria (an area between the River Dniester and the eastern Moldovan border with Ukraine), with the Serbs in Bosnia, and with the pro-Russian forces during the two wars in Chechnya, before leading combat units in the Eastern Ukraine. Then Strelkov became the Minister of Defense of the self-proclaimed Peoples' Republic of Donetsk until mid-August, 2014, when he was removed from power by the Kremlin in obscure circumstances. "I believed that Moscow would quickly annex the Donbass region as it had Crimea after the referendum," he told *Der Spiegel*. "Kiev

is a Russian city. I want a new Russian domination, which is historically justified. The Ukraine has been and remains a part of Russia. My dream is that Russia re-establishes its natural borders as they were in 1939." [7] One wonders if he means before or after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of that year.

With the rise of Great Russian ultra-nationalism, the racist and anti-Semitic ideologies in the tradition of the Black Hundreds that formed in reaction to the Revolution of 1905 have once again found fertile ground. The Islamophobic campaigns against the peoples of the Caucasus and of Central Asia, of course, occupy first place. In November 2013, Moscow's Mayor Sergei Sobyanin (a right-wing nationalist) announced that the city would not be constructing any more mosques for the capital's 1.5 to 2 million Muslim inhabitants. To that one must add the right-wing propaganda against immigration of people of color, in particular Africans who have recently become the victims of a record number of aggressions. Jews, too, are once again in the sights of anti-Semitic groups operating openly through social networks and in the street.

When the Devil Gets Out of His Box

After Moscow's military intervention on the side of the Ukrainian separatists, the call for a sacred union justified the increase in political repression. According to Olga Miryasova, the sociologist and militant Moscow civil rights advocate, the number of imprisoned activists rose from 1,500 in 2013 to 2,500 in 2014. A law against "inciting social hatred" allows the government to prosecute any criticism of police behavior.

Judicial harassment is particularly ferocious in Crimea, where any protest against the Russian annexation is systematically repressed. Such is the case of the student unionist, environmentalist, and anti-fascist Alexander Kolchenko, who was arrested in Simferopol last May 17 and transferred to Moscow, in spite of his Ukrainian nationality, together with other activists falsely and bizarrely accused of belonging to an extreme-right terrorist network.

It is in this context that Boris Nemtsov was assassinated near the Kremlin on February 27. A young physicist from Nizhny Novgorod and a neoliberal, he was elected to the Supreme Soviet in 1990, later appointed governor of the region, then an adviser to Boris Yeltsin in 1996 for his second term, along with Vladimir Putin, who became president in 1999. Since then the fate of these two young, neoliberal reformers (Putin age 47 and Nemtsov, 40) diverged. Nemtsov, out of power, criticized the corruption of the other in a series of publications with titles that left no doubt about his views: *Putin and Gazprom*, *Putin and the Financial Crisis*, *Putin and Corruption*, and so on. In 2009, when he was running for mayor in the town of Sochi to denounce the business deals surrounding the preparation of the Olympic Games, he was physically assaulted.

Nemtsov was particularly hated by the ultra-nationalist milieus because of his Jewish background and his critique of the wars carried out against non-Russian peoples within the Federation. Recently, he announced the publication of his last report on the implications of Moscow's involvement in Ukraine, after having posted on Facebook an explosive article that the press had refused to publish. The post read in part:

Putin has declared a war of brother against brother in the Ukraine. This bloody folly by a crazed KGB man will cost Russia and Ukraine dearly: once again the deaths of young boys on both sides, bereft mothers and wives, children turned into orphans. An empty Crimea, which tourists will never visit. Billions, tens of billions of rubles taken from old people and children and thrown into the furnace of the war, and then after that even more money to prop up the thieving regime in Crimea. … The ghoul needs a war. He needs the blood of the people.[8]

Ukraine, the Oligarchs, and Fascism

In the Russian media, whose analyses are often complacently relayed by Western left groups of Stalinist origin or by those who place the question of national sovereignty of Russia (but not the nations it subordinates) above all, Putin and the separatists of southeastern Ukraine are today combatting a "fascist junta" and its policies that discriminate against the Russian-speaking population of the country's East. None of that, however, corresponds to reality, even if the Kiev authorities are dominated by conservative nationalist parties with ties to powerful capitalist monopolies.

In truth, in both the East and the West, Ukraine is ruled by several dozen oligarchs who have got their hands on the essential economic resources of their region, who control the media, political power, and the police force, when they do not have their own powerful, private militias. In the East, these monopolies are particularly concentrated and exclusive, most notably those of Rinat Akhmetov, the veritable baron of Donbass. According to the Russian nationalist *Sputnik & Pogrom* website, Akhmetov recently persuaded the separatists and their Russian supporters to give up trying to occupy the neighboring port of Mariupol enabling him to continue to export to Italy—he couldn't do this from Odessa because that port is controlled by another oligarch—in exchange for providing emergency food assistance to the population of the Peoples Republic of Donetsk (RPD). The former RPD Prime Minister Alexander Borodai, a Moscow man, justified this deal in the name of the defense of a national revolution, or rather an "imperial revolution" in favor of Great Russia, which should not in any case be confused with a social revolution.[9]

While Akhmetov supports separatists to defend his own privileges, other oligarchs support the government of Kiev that emerged after the May 2014 elections. The president, Petro Poroshenko, took advantage of the privatization of the confectionery sector to make a fortune in chocolate ($1.6 billion, according to *Forbes*). That said, the rule of the oligarchs is more fragile in the West, because they have smaller monopolies, they oppose each other, and they face a degree of popular mobilization and independent political expression. Moreover, the Kiev powers endorsed an elementary democratic demand—the integrity of the Ukrainian nation—against the age-old oppression of the Russian Empire, which was made manifest again by a wave of repression in annexed Crimea. Finally, if the far right is present in Ukraine, its popular support is significantly weaker than in Russia and in most European countries. If its activists have been very active on the barricades of Maiden, their political influence remains marginal. For example, Dmitry Yarosh, head of Pravy Sektor (Right Sector), which Moscow denounces as omnipresent in Ukraine, received only 0.7 percent of the votes in the presidential elections of May 25, 2014.

The Western Imperialists and the Ukrainian Crisis

Of course, the Western powers, above all Germany, France, and England, but also the United States on a global scale, attempt to profit from the Ukrainian crisis. Historically, the twentieth century has demonstrated how the Ukraine, like Poland, is an area of confrontation between Russian and German imperialisms, the latter being at this time the dominant force in the European Union. The Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, the predecessor of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or OSCE), has been an expression of Germany's Ostpolitik (eastern policy) project since the end of the 1960s, aimed at bringing about the reintegration of Eastern Europe, Ukraine, and Russia in the world capitalist economy through rapprochement rather than confrontation.

After the fall of the Soviet bloc and the Dayton Accord of December 1995 that brought about the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and brought it under the tutelage of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the CSCE gave birth to the OSCE. It aimed to promote representative democracy and market economies in the former Soviet bloc while at the same time attempting to

prevent war. Its goal was to contain the social and political tensions caused by the implementation of brutal policies of liberalization and privatization. The time after the fall of the Soviet bloc was the OSCE's moment of triumph, during which it managed to quintuple its annual budget, raising it from 32.4 million in 1995-1997 to 155.8 million in 1998-2000, at a time when Russia was prostrate, its GDP falling by over 50 percent (!) from 1990 to 1999.

In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became members of NATO; then in 2001, it was the turn of the Baltic states, as well as Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Between 2003 and 2005, all of these countries joined the European Union. For Russia, the prospect of European security based on the central role of the OSCE was illegitimate, while at the same time Russia gradually returned to the economic level of 1990 and finally surpassed it in 2005. At that point, Russia's ambitions for power seemed less and less compatible with the interests of the Western powers, so that in December 2004, at the OSCE Ministerial Conference in Sofia, Russia criticized the OSCE's "bias and double standards." The following year, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated the view of his country: "NATO deals with security matters and the EU economic affairs, while the OSCE is content to control the adoption of values of these organizations by countries remaining outside the EU and NATO." In 2007, in Munich, Putin again criticized the OSCE as "an instrument of a group of countries at the expense of another."

Anti-capitalists' support for resistance by people who are already under the tutelage of Russian imperialism, or are threatened by its expansionist conduct, should not lead those supporters to underestimate the aggressive expansion of Western economic interests in Eastern Europe. Such investments have indeed always needed political and military guarantees that the alliance with the major EU powers and the United States within NATO provides. In Ukraine, foreign direct investment (FDI) is still very limited because of the instability of the country, but it already attests to the dominance of Western capital: from 2006 to 2010, Russian FDI accounted for only 10 percent of the total, against 12 percent each for Germany and the U.S., 8 percent for France, 6 percent each for Switzerland and Poland, and 4 percent each for Sweden, England, and Austria.[10]

Which Side Are We On?

Putin has certainly won the battle in the Ukraine, but probably not the war. The price for this has been the strengthening of Russia's most reactionary nationalist sectors. Last December, in the largest stadium in Grozny, in front of thousands of armed men, Razman Kadyrov, pro-Russian head of the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation, presented his men as the president's special battalions: "We know that the country has an army, a navy, an air force, and nuclear warheads," he said, "but we also know that there are missions that can only be performed by volunteers." In mid-February, the Night Wolves, the Russian equivalent of the Hell's Angels, who are close to the Orthodox Church and to Putin, held a rally in Moscow under the slogan "There will be no Maidan in Russia."[11]

Those within the Western left who accept as legitimate Putin's claim that Russia supports the struggle of the peoples of the Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine against the "fascist junta Kiev" (actually a conservative nationalist government) are, in fact, providing cover for the ongoing offensive of Russian imperialism on its western margins. This is all the more serious as they often adopt as well the bellicose and racist phraseology of Moscow. Consider the bravura of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the Left Party in France, who argued that the Russian Army is "the people in arms" and will not be intimidated by the bands of poor Chicano devils from the U.S. Army, and who "recommends that Putin keep" cool in dealing with "the collapse of the Ukrainian economy, the disintegration of this country" that finds it so hard to be unified.[12]

What a marvelous expression of solidarity of the "great French nation" with the "great Russian

nation" against the "little Ukrainian nation," tinged with contempt toward the Mexicans of the United States who are oppressed by another imperialism which uses them as cannon fodder. Isn't it high time for the international left to break definitively with such a geopolitical and chauvinistic view of the world, often tinged with racism, that praises any form of opposition to the interests of American imperialism by any tyrant who comes along? Shouldn't the struggles and aspirations of the exploited classes and oppressed peoples of the world for their own emancipation, in the East as in the West, in the South and in the North, be supported unconditionally?

Translation by Dan La Botz.

Footnotes

1. Political Capital Institute, "The Russian Connection. The Spread of Pro-Russian Policies on the European Far Right," Mar. 14, 2014.
2. Vladimir Lenin, "On the National Pride of the Great Russians."
3. Vladimir Lenin, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism."
4. Vladimir Lenin, "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomization' (Continuation of the Notes)."
5. On the trajectory of Russian imperialism, see Zbigniew Kowalewski, "Russian Imperialism."
6. Given the impossibility of finding common ground between the victorious powers, it would ultimately be the independence of the Kingdom of Libya that would triumph in December 1951 (Ronald B. St John, "The Soviet Penetration of Libya," The World Today (vol. 38, no. 4, April 1982), 131-38).
7. Der Spiegel Online, Politik, Mar. 19, 2015.
8. Quoted by Keith Gessen, "Remembering Boris Nemtsov," London Review of Books, Mar. 19, 2015.
9. "La rencontre de Sputnik and Pogrom: Borodai, Zhutchkovskiy, Tchalenko, Kholmogorov," Mar. 26, 2014.
10. Ernst & Young, Ukraine FDI Report 2011.
11. Ernst & Young.
12. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, "Poutine a-t-il tué le cacique eltsinien Boris Nemtsov?" Mar. 4, 2015.