The Historical Background to Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

written by Rohini Hensman | March 2, 2022

If someone suggested that we could understand the Black Lives Matter struggle without some knowledge of the historical background of slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow and so on, we would find it unconvincing, to put it mildly. But many on the left seem to think that they can comment on the crisis in Ukraine while being totally ignorant of that country's history. I wish to argue, on the contrary, that it is impossible to understand what is happening in Ukraine today without some knowledge of its past, and to fill in some essential features of that past.[1]

The Ukrainian nation

While human habitation in Ukraine dates back tens of thousands of years, the first stable state was Kievan Rus, established by the Scandinavian Varangians who settled in Kiev in the late ninth century AD. The height of its prosperity occurred under Volodymyr the Great (980–1015 AD), who converted to Byzantine Christianity, and his son Iaroslav the Wise; but Kievan Rus was destroyed by the invasion of Genghis Khan's Golden Hordes in the thirteenth century, and was subsequently fought over, divided and dominated by Lithuania, Poland, Austria, and Russia, until most of it was colonized by Russia (then called Muscovy) in 1654. Nonetheless there was a revival of Ukrainian culture in the nineteenth century, in the latter part of which both nationalist and socialist parties grew as Ukraine was integrated more closely into the Tsarist empire as a provider of wheat and raw materials such as coal and iron, and as a market for Russian manufactured goods.[2]

This was a typical colonial relationship; as Lenin observed in 1914 at a talk in Zurich:

> What Ireland was for England, Ukraine has become for Russia: exploited in the extreme, and getting nothing in return. Thus the interests of the world proletariat in general and the Russian proletariat in particular require that the Ukraine regains its state independence, since only this will permit the development of the cultural level that the proletariat needs.[3]

Crimean Tatars were the most numerous indigenous ethnic group in Crimea when it was annexed by the Russian empire in 1783 during the reign of Catherine the Great, who proceeded to settle it with Russian colonizers and, according to Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term "genocide," to drown 10,000 Crimean Tatars.[4]

Thus, Ukraine's origins as a state predate the founding of the Grand Principality of Moscow (predecessor of the Tsarist Empire) in 1263. It is therefore entirely understandable that it would have a national liberation movement, which succeeded briefly in establishing Ukraine as an independent Soviet Socialist republic from 1920 to 1922. The Crimean Tatars were also granted special status under Lenin.

All that changed when Ukraine was recolonized by Stalin in a process described as "the classic example of Soviet genocide" by Lemkin, who outlined the process in chilling detail. First the intelligentsia was destroyed by deporting, jailing or killing teachers, writers, artists, thinkers and political leaders; at the same time, the Ukrainian churches were destroyed with hundreds of priests and lay-people killed and thousands sent off to forced labor camps, deliberately separating families and sending children to Russian homes to be "educated." Finally, in 1932–1933, as Stalin escalated his repression in Russia itself, around 5,000,000 Ukrainian peasants – men, women and children – were starved to death. Lemkin shows that this was *not* the result of forced collectivization, which had left ample crops to feed the people and livestock, but the outcome of a deliberate policy to engineer a famine. The dead and deported Ukrainians were replaced by non-Ukrainians, altering the ethnic composition of the country and comprising the fourth step in the systematic destruction of the Ukrainian nation. In 1944 the Crimean Tatars, who were also described by Lemkin as being subjected to genocide, were deported en masse by Stalin, a crime against humanity in which almost half of the population perished.[5]

Russia was not the only country to occupy Ukraine in the 20th century; the Nazis, with their own genocidal agenda, also did so. Timothy Snyder argues that Nazi policies, which referred to Ukrainians as *Afrikaner* or as *Neger* – including the Hunger Plan to starve millions of people in the winter of 1941, the *Generalplan Ost* to forcibly transport or kill millions more thereafter, and the "final solution" to exterminate the Jews – were centered on Ukraine; consequently some 3.5 million civilian inhabitants of Ukraine – of which an estimated 1.5 million were Jews – were killed by the Nazis, in addition to roughly another 3 million inhabitants of Ukraine who died as soldiers fighting against the Nazis or indirectly as a consequence of the war. Russian historians have calculated that more inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine died in WWII than inhabitants of Soviet Russia; more Ukrainians died fighting against the Nazis than French, British and Americans *put together*.[6] At the end of the war, Ukrainians were subjected once more to Stalin's rule.

Almost miraculously, the Ukrainian sense of national identity survived this horrendous history, and in the referendum of 1991, 84% of the population participated and more than 92% voted for independence from the Soviet Union. When the votes are disaggregated by region, it is notable that every region had a majority in favor; the lowest majority (54%) was in Crimea, but *in each of the majority-Russian-speaking Oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, over 83% voted in favor*.[7] This was partly because citizenship was defined not ethnically but inclusively, and although the constitution adopted in 1996 proclaimed that the state language would be Ukrainian, it also promised that "the free development, use and protection of Russian, and other languages of national minorities of Ukraine, is guaranteed"; again, that "The State promotes the consolidation and development of the Ukrainian nation, its historical consciousness, traditions and culture, and also the development of the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of all indigenous peoples and national minorities of Ukraine."[8] The positive outcome of the referendum cannot be attributed to interference by the United States, because Pres. George H.W. Bush was strongly opposed to independence for Ukraine (see below).

This history puts Soviet-controlled Ukraine firmly in the category of colonies, and in fact one which has suffered more than many others. Most of us refer to colonies and former colonies of Western imperial powers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the "Third World" or "Global South," sharply distinguished from the imperial powers that exploited and oppressed them, yet we are guilty of lumping together the imperial power with its colonies and former colonies in the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the disintegration of the Soviet Union can be seen as an ongoing process of decolonization, and Ukraine's struggle for independence as being necessary, as Lenin said, to permit the development of the cultural level that the proletariat needs.

The Russian Empire

The Grand Principality of Moscow gradually absorbed other principalities, including the Kievan one, until in 1503 Ivan III took on the title of tsar and declared himself "Ruler of all Rus." The Tsarist Empire was an absolute monarchy, which was overthrown in 1917 by the Russian Revolution. Among the enormous challenges facing the revolution was the question of what to do with the colonies of Tsarist Russia. There was a debate on this issue between V.I. Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, with Lenin upholding the right of all colonial peoples to self-determination but conceding Luxemburg's point that this should not result in handing over power to regressive, authoritarian regimes. Lenin did not come to this position alone, but by listening to comrades from the colonies. During 1920 and 1921, Ukraine, Georgia, Byelorussia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were treated as independent republics.

In one of the articles that came to be called "Lenin's Last Testament," Lenin expressed anguish that one of Stalin's close associates had hit a Georgian Communist who disagreed with his plans to terminate Georgia's independent status, and continued,

> It is quite natural that in such circumstances the "freedom to secede from the union' by which we justify ourselves [against Western imperialist powers] will be a mere scrap of paper, unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that really Russian man, the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant.
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> […] I think that Stalin's haste and his infatuation with pure administration, together with his spite against the notorious "nationalist-socialism," played a fatal role here. In politics spite generally plays the basest of roles…
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> Here we have an important question of principle: how is internationalism to be understood?
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> In my writings on the national question I have already said that an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all. A distinction must necessarily be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a big nation and that of a small nation. In respect of the second kind of nationalism we, nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence; furthermore, we commit violence and insult an infinite number of times without noticing it. [He goes on to quote the racist epithets by which Ukrainians, Georgians and non-Russians in general are insulted.] …
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> I think that in the present instance, as far as the Georgian nation is concerned, we have a typical case in which a genuinely proletarian attitude makes profound caution, thoughtfulness and a readiness to compromise a matter of necessity for us. The Georgian [Stalin] who is neglectful of this aspect of the question, or who carelessly flings about accusations of "nationalist-socialism" (whereas he himself is a real and true "nationalist-socialist," and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully), violates, in substance, the interests of proletarian class solidarity, for nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice… [9]

Lenin made mistakes in theory and practice that we can debate, but his anti-racism, anti-imperialism, and identification of Great-Russian chauvinism as the Russian version of White supremacism set an example for all socialist internationalists to follow. However, he died soon after making these remarks, and Stalin went ahead with reducing the Tsarist ex-colonies back to the status of colonies. In Russia itself, his counter-revolution erased all the gains of the revolution except for the transition to state capitalism. Stalin exterminated communists as ruthlessly as Hitler, and converted the Communist International into an arm of the Russian state capitalist empire. His

totalitarian state ruling Russia and its colonies was distinguished not only by its extreme brutality but also by a systematic war on the truth, analogous to the Nazi use of the big lie repeated over and over again. His propaganda machine was responsible for literally rewriting history to propagate falsehoods, and for cropping and airbrushing photographs to eliminate his victims from them as they themselves were liquidated. These fabricated stories and images were then internationalized by means of the vast propaganda apparatus of the Comintern. Vicious censorship made it impossible to find alternative accounts or challenge the falsification without risking death. Stalin's collaboration with Hitler from August 23, 1939, to June 22, 1941 (the archetypal red-brown alliance) was possible only because the politics of the two men were so similar.[10]

When Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, a movement of disgust against the prevailing culture of corruption, lies, and assaults on the dignity of the individual was already underway, and he plugged into this:

> "A new moral atmosphere is taking shape in the country," Gorbachev told the Central Committee at the January 1987 meeting where he declared glasnost – openness – and democratization to be the foundation of his perestroika, or restructuring, of Soviet society. … Later, recalling his feeling that "we couldn't go on like that any longer, and we had to change life radically, break away from the past malpractices," he called it his "*moral* position." …
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> Democratization, Gorbachev declared, was "not a slogan but the essence of perestroika." … That reforms gave rise to a revolution by 1989 [the fall of the Berlin wall] was due largely to another 'idealistic" cause: Gorbachev's deep and personal aversion to violence and, hence, his stubborn refusal to resort to mass coercion when the scale and depth of change began to outstrip his original intent. To deploy Stalinist repression even to "preserve the system" would have been a betrayal of his deepest convictions.[11]

Gorbachev's plans for a new treaty that would create a truly voluntary federation – a vision close to what Lenin was working towards – were thwarted by a coup against him by Stalinist hardliners in August 1991; the coup was met with public outrage and defeated, but Gorbachev was sidelined and Ukraine, among other Soviet Republics, voted for independence, leading to the disintegration of the USSR. While the economic plunder and corruption which followed were disastrous, it should not be forgotten that in his own way, Gorbachev initiated a democratic anti-imperialist revolution.

This is what Vladimir Putin, from the time he first came to power in 2000, has been trying to reverse ever since. His agenda has two main goals: (1) to crush all expressions of democracy in Russia and inaugurate or support authoritarian regimes in the rest of the world; and (2) to rebuild the Russian empire. Investigators of the Moscow apartment bombings of September 1999 (which unleashed an Islamophobic "war on terror" against Chechnya and swept Putin to power), journalists, human rights defenders and whistle-blowers against corruption were murdered. In 2011-2013, huge protests against the rigged elections that had brought Putin and his United Russia party to power, and demanding free and fair elections and freedom for political prisoners, were met not only with arrests and police violence but also with mobilization of far-right counter-protests. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny (who more recently narrowly survived being poisoned and was subsequently imprisoned) was jailed. Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was shot dead yards from the Kremlin after writing an op-ed about the Russian incursion into Ukraine, published in September 2014 in Russian and Ukrainian, in which he said, among other things,

> This is not our war, this is not your war, this is not the war of 20-year-old paratroopers sent out there. This is Vladimir Putin's war… Through his bloody actions, though he is fomenting a fratricidal war, one can see his main goal – preservation of personal power and money at any cost.…

> Despite censorship, little by little the society started to understand that those in power are greedy and amoral people whose main goal is personal enrichment.
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> Ukraine became an example of an anti-criminal revolution, which overthrew a thieving president. Oh, so you dared to get out onto the street and throw off a president? Ukraine needs to be punished for it to make sure that no Russian would get these thoughts.
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> Moreover, Ukraine chose the European way, which implies the rule of law, democracy and change of power. Ukraine's success on this way is a direct threat to Putin's power because he chose the opposite course – a lifetime in power, filled with arbitrariness and corruption.[12]

Historian and opposition politician Vladimir Ryzhkov outlines the anti-Muslim racism that accompanied Russian annexation of Crimea, an issue that has been widely ignored:

> The Crimean Tatars are the ancient, native inhabitants of Crimea… In 1944, Stalin ordered that all 191,000 of them, all 47,000 families, be exiled to Central Asia. In 1954, Khrushchev transferred Crimea from the Russian to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, but in March of this year Putin returned Crimea to Russia…
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> Along with Crimea came the Tatars, who were surprised to find that they were part of Russia (once more). They had begun to return to their homeland in droves under Gorbachev in the late 1980s, and by 2001 the Ukrainian census recorded 245,000 Crimean Tatars living on the peninsula. They now number some 300,000 and make up around 13% of Crimea's population…
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> The hostility of most Crimean Tatars towards the idea of union with Russia caused a serious conflict with the pro-Moscow authorities. The Tatars' leaders, Mustafa Dzhemilev and Refat Chubarov, current head of the Mejlis, have been barred from entering their homeland for five years and are now living in Kiev against their will… On 18 May, the 70th anniversary of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, a day when many thousands of people usually assemble in the centre of Simferopol to remember and mourn, the Crimean authorities banned the gathering…. The ban was an insult to the Tatar people, for whom the deportation remains the most terrible tragedy in their history.
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> Mosques, schools (madrasas), community centres, firms and private homes belonging to Tatars have been searched and raided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs ("anti-extremism" special branch), prosecutors and the Special Purpose Police, as well as so-called "self-defence forces." The Crimean Tatars' only independent television station, ATR, has come under heavy pressure and many activists, journalists and bloggers have been forced to leave Crimea.
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> All these violations are set out in a report written by Nils Muižnieks, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, who himself visited Crimea. He pays particular attention to the killing, abduction and disappearance of people in Crimea.[13]

The important point being made by Nemtsov and Ryzhkov is that the 2014 annexation of Crimea and war on Eastern Ukraine was *an assault on democracy*. And Putin has extended this assault well beyond Russia by sponsoring extreme right-wing authoritarian groups and parties around the world, and in turn being admired by them. Such parties from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Serbia, and Spain have a symbiotic relationship with his regime, and neo-Nazis from Germany, Greece, Britain, and Norway have praised him. White supremacists from the US have close ties with their counterparts in Russia, and former KKK Grand Wizard David Duke has travelled to Russia several times to promote his antisemitic book, *Jewish Supremacism*.[14] The Russian paramilitary Wagner Group, whose brutal neo-Nazi Rusich unit was active in Donbas, has fought for

Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Khalifa Hiftar in Libya, both guilty of crimes against humanity, and has been associated with mass murder and military coups in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso.[15]

With this assault on democracy has come an assault on the truth, magnified since Stalin's time by new technology and social media. This was on full display in Putin's speech on February 21, 2022, in which he claimed that the Ukrainian state had been created by Lenin and the Bolsheviks "by separating, severing, what is historically Russian land." He fully supported Stalin's counter-revolution, deploring only his failure to delete the reference to "self-determination" from the constitution. According to him, there was a coup by radical nationalists supported by Washington in 2014; there was a policy to root out the Russian language and culture; Donbas communities daily come under military attack as Ukraine continues "its transition towards the Neanderthal and aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism which have been elevated in Ukraine to the rank of national policy"; the eastward expansion of NATO is a threat to Russia's security; and NATO should undertake not to induct any more countries in the east and in fact roll back its borders to where they were in 1997, failing which Russia would act to ensure its security.[16]

It is true that Ukraine has a history of antisemitism and collaboration with the Nazis, as have most countries in Europe, including Russia. It is also true that during the Euromaidan movement the neo-Nazi Azov brigade played a disproportionately large role in responding to the violent crackdown by the Yanukovych regime. Undoubtedly these facts are a cause for concern. But they have to be considered along with other facts: that far-right parties in Ukraine have consistently polled pathetically small numbers of votes, that Volodymyr Zelensky, a Russian-speaking Jew, won the last presidential elections with a landslide majority, and that the neo-Nazi and antisemitic forces on the Russian and separatist side, which engage in antisemitic smears against Zelensky, are incomparably stronger.[17] Zelensky himself, in an address to Russian citizens, tried to combat the disinformation, asking

> how can a people support Nazis [when they] gave more than 8 million lives for the victory over Nazism? How can I be a Nazi? Tell my grandpa, who went through the whole war in the infantry of the Soviet Army…. You've been told I'm going to bomb Donbass. Bomb what? The Donetsk stadium where the locals and I cheered for our team at Euro 2012? The bar where we drank when they lost? Luhansk, where my best friend's mom lives?[18]

In fact, Putin himself has made it very clear that NATO's eastward expansion and Russian security are simply red herrings to distract from his real goal. At a press conference,

> he quoted Soviet-era punk-rock lyrics about rape and necrophilia to demonstrate what Russia wants from Ukraine…. "Whether you like it or don't like it, bear with it, my beauty," Putin said. Russia experts noted that Putin appeared to be quoting from "Sleeping Beauty in a Coffin" by the Soviet-era punk rock group Red Mold. "Sleeping beauty in a coffin, I crept up and fucked her. Like it, or dislike it, sleep my beauty," the English translation of the Russian lyrics reads.[19]

By invading and heading straight for Kyiv, he has confirmed that raping a dead Ukraine is his objective.

Jason Stanley explains that Putin's grotesque claim to be "de-Nazifying" Ukraine by toppling a Jewish president whose family fought against the Nazis rests on the Holocaust-denying neo-fascist myth that the "real" victims of the Nazis were not the Jews but Russian Christians.[20] Putin is a living embodiment of the Stalin-Hitler Pact: the ex-KGB agent who has absorbed the fascist nostalgia for absolute power, imperial glory, and blood-and-soil nationalism. Lenin's words from a century ago

about the “vulgar Great-Russian bully” who “carelessly flings about accusations of ‘nationalist-socialism’ [today’s neo-Nazism] whereas he himself is a real and true ‘nationalist-socialist’” sound weirdly apposite today.

The culpability of Western imperialist powers

In general, Western imperialist attacks on democracy in the name of democracy have helped to spread skepticism about democratic values. Most recently, the 2001 war on Afghanistan and 2003 war on Iraq violated and undermined international law. Perhaps as damagingly, given that the Taliban had virtually nothing to do with 9/11 and Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction, they destroyed the credibility of Western media, creating an environment in which even well-researched and reliable reports could be dismissed as “fake.”

Coming to the more specific failures connected to this war, I mentioned earlier that George H.W. Bush had opposed Ukrainian independence in 1991.[21] One anxiety, among others, was that the new nation became the world’s third-largest nuclear power after the United States and Russia. Negotiations to persuade Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons, while also giving it security assurances that it would not suffer attacks if it did so, resulted in Ukraine signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear power while on 5 December 1994 the USA, the Russian Federation and the UK signed the *Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* aka the Budapest Memorandum. Among other things, the signatories undertook to “respect the Independence and Sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” and to “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine.” This agreement was torn up by Putin when he annexed Crimea and made incursions into the Donbas in 2014, but have the other signatories made real efforts to hold him to it?

Instead of holding Putin to the Budapest Memorandum, there were the two Minsk Agreements signed by Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany. Hastily drafted in order to establish a ceasefire while Russian forces were ranged against a much weaker Ukrainian military, the Minsk Agreements of September 2014 and February 2015, which sought to end Russia’s war in eastern Ukraine, rest on two irreconcilable interpretations of Ukraine’s sovereignty:

- Ukraine sees the agreements as instruments with which to re-establish its sovereignty in line with the following sequence: a ceasefire; a Russian withdrawal from eastern Ukraine; return of the Russia/Ukraine border to Ukrainian control; free and fair elections in the Donbas region; and a limited devolution of power to Russia’s proxy regimes, which would be reintegrated and resubordinated to the authorities in Kyiv. Ukraine would be able to make its own domestic and foreign policy choices.
- Russia sees the Minsk agreements as tools with which to break Ukraine’s sovereignty. Its interpretation reverses key elements in the sequence of actions: elections in occupied Donbas would take place before Ukraine had reclaimed control of the border; this would be followed by comprehensive autonomy for Russia’s proxy regimes, crippling the central authorities in Kyiv. Ukraine would be unable to govern itself effectively or orient itself towards the West.
- These contradictory provisions are testimony to a stunning failure of Russian foreign policy. In 2014 Russia launched a campaign of violent subversion to compel Ukraine to “federalize” its political system. Belying Russian expectations, Ukrainians fought back en masse, forcing Russia to resort to increasingly open military intervention. Russia inflicted crushing defeats on Ukrainian forces, yet was unwilling to pay the price that further high-intensity war would have exacted.[22]

The pretext given by Putin for the 2014 invasion of Ukraine was exactly the same as the pretext

given by Hitler for the annexation of Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia – protecting speakers of Russian and German respectively and uniting them with their homeland – and it is interesting that some of the same arguments, like the "right to self-determination" of these enclaves, were used in both cases. Instead of opposing this blatant aggression, British Premier Neville Chamberlain and French Premier Édouard Daladier negotiated with Hitler, and on September 30, 1938, signed the Munich Agreement — drafted by the Nazis and presented by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini — in the hope of avoiding war.[23] As we know, the outcome was World War II. Since then, the Munich Agreement has become a byword for the futility of appeasing expansionist totalitarian regimes. The Minsk Agreements were not quite so bad, because at least the victims of aggression were allowed to participate in the negotiations and there were weak sanctions against the aggressor, which probably prevented Putin from launching an all-out war until he thought he had sanction-proofed Russia; and then, even as the Western powers were talking about the Minsk Agreement, he tore it up by recognizing Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. But while Putin prepared for war, it was business as usual for the Western imperialist powers.

Just a few examples illustrate this criminal negligence. On September 30, 2015, Putin started bombing Syria in support of his genocidal protégé Bashar al-Assad, targeting hospitals, schools, markets, residential neighborhoods, and mosques, with massive civilian casualties including small children. Yet the Obama administration negotiated with Putin and on September 10, 2016, signed a ceasefire deal that was unanimously condemned by secular, democratic Syrian activists, treating the perpetrator of crimes against humanity as a partner in the "war on terror."[24] It is not surprising that the Syrian Civil Defence or White Helmets – who had experience of the Russians using helpless Syrian children, women, and men to test their fearsome new weapons – were among the earliest to offer solidarity with the beleaguered Ukrainians.[25] Then, it is almost beyond belief that instead of diversifying their sources of energy, the EU allowed construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to go ahead despite it being so clear that its purpose was to starve the Ukrainians into submission. Thirdly, investigations have established that Russia provided at least social media support and probably also money to the Brexit campaign in the belief that it would weaken the EU, demonstrating the cosy relationship between Putin and this section of UK politics.[26]

Had the measures now being belatedly implemented been discussed when Ukraine was first invaded in 2014, had they been implemented when Putin started bombing civilians in Syria in 2015, there is a good chance that this war could have been prevented.

What can be done now?

It is too late to prevent the war, but how can it be ended as soon as possible?

There is no harm in talks, but it should be understood that negotiations with Putin are about as useful as negotiations with Hitler turned out to be. They will not stop the war. The only people who can really end it are the people of Ukraine and Russia, and they should be given all the assistance they need. The Ukrainians need humanitarian and military aid to defend themselves as well as help to repel cyberattacks and convey what is happening to the rest of the world. The measures being taken now should certainly continue and in some cases be stepped up until Putin vacates the whole of Ukraine, including Crimea: appeasement has been shown not to work. Refugees need to be cared for, and solidarity demonstrations with Ukraine should continue.

Some way of communicating with the Russian public, bypassing the censorship, should also be found. Solidarity with the incredibly courageous anti-imperialist, anti-war activists risking arrest and jail to speak out and demonstrate against the Russian invasion in locations throughout Russia should be conveyed to them. There are probably many more opponents of the war who are too afraid to come out openly. It appears from some reports that the Russian soldiers invading Ukraine have been

told, as American soldiers were told when they invaded Iraq, that the locals would welcome them as liberators, and are shocked to find out the real situation. Ukrainians have two big advantages over the Iraqis: (1) a democratically elected government and (2) the ability to speak the same language as the invaders, and some of them have been appealing to Russian soldiers. But these young Russian soldiers and their parents, should know that they are being sent to kill and die for Putin's imperial delusions *before* they leave Russia; they should get accurate information about what is happening in Ukraine, and this is something that people outside Ukraine can help with – a kind of modern *samizdat*. As Nemtsov said before being murdered, this is not their war, this is Putin's war, and the more Russians who see that, the sooner the war will end

What about NATO and security guarantees for Russia? Shortly before the invasion, Putin recognized the regime of Lukashenka, who couldn't even win a rigged election in Belarus, and sent in troops to crush a popular uprising against the fiercely repressive regime in Kazakhstan. These are the kind of neighbors he wants – dictators whom he can dominate – and in his mind, NATO is the main obstacle to realizing this dream. The dreadful irony of the present situation is that NATO membership is probably the only thing that stands between, say, the Baltic states and a similar invasion, and it is very likely that if Ukraine had been a NATO member, it would not have been suffering in this way. Look at the countries that have been chopped up by Putin: Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova – all non-NATO countries. There is also evidence that he is helping genocidal Bosnian Serb nationalists, so generously given almost half the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Dayton Accords after the genocide of Bosnian Muslims (another betrayal by the Western imperialist powers), to split up their non-NATO country.[27] So, winding up NATO is a worthy goal, but it will have to wait until Putin stops acting as its recruiting agent. In the meantime, progress towards global nuclear disarmament and moving weapons delivery systems back from both sides of Russia's borders with its neighbors will help to guarantee Russia's security as well as theirs. The UN too needs to be reformed to be able to achieve its goal of eliminating the scourge of war, and the first requirement is removing the veto powers of the permanent members of its Security Council. Socialist internationalism in this crisis means supporting the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination as a multi-ethnic democracy.

Notes

[1] I have drawn on parts of my book *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2018, temporarily selling at a highly subsidized price), in order to write this article more quickly, given that the current situation is so dire. The book has much more on Russia, Ukraine, Syria and Bosnia as well as Iran and Iraq, and I think the events of February 2022 fully confirm the arguments I put forward in it.

[2] Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) pp. 25, 32–41, 75–77, 134–35, 227–35, 268–69.

[3] Subtelny, p.269; Zbigniew Kowaleski, "For the independence of Soviet Ukraine," *International Marxist Review*, Autumn 1989; reproduced by Louis Proyect, 2014.

[4] Raphael Lemkin, "Soviet genocide in the Ukraine," 1953.

[5] Raphael Lemkin, "Soviet genocide in the Ukraine," 1953.

[6] Timothy Snyder, "Germans must remember the truth about Ukraine – for their own sake," *Eurozine*, July 7, 2017.

[7] See Wikipedia.

[8] Constitution of Ukraine.

[9] V.I. Lenin, "The question of nationalities or 'autonomisation,'" 1922,

[10] See Hensman, *Indefensible*, p.63

[11] Leon Aron, "Everything you think you know about the collapse of the Soviet Union is wrong," *Foreign Policy*, June 20, 2011.

[12] Boris Nemtsov, "Boris Nemtsov: This is Vladimir Putin's war," *Kyiv Post*, Feb. 27, 2016.

[13] Vladimir Ryzhkov, "Russia's treatment of Crimean Tatars echoes mistakes made by Soviets," *The Guardian*, Nov. 25, 2014.

[14] Natasha Bertrand, "'A model for civilization': Putin's Russia has emerged as 'a beacon for nationalists' and the American alt-right," *Business Insider*, Dec. 10, 2016.

[15] Candace Rondeau, Jonathan Deer and Ben Dalton, "Neo-Nazi Russian attack unit hints it's going back into Ukraine undercover," *The Daily Beast*, Jan. 26, 2022; Al-Monitor Staff, "Intel: EU sanctions suspected head of Russia's Wagner paramilitary group," *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 15, 2020; Philip Obaji Jr., "Survivors say Russian mercenaries slaughtered 70 civilians in gold mine massacre," *The Daily Beast*, Jan. 31, 2022; Philip Obaji Jr., "African president was ousted just weeks after refusing to pay Russian paramilitaries," *The Daily Beast*, Jan. 25, 2022.

[16] Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Feb. 21, 2022

[17] Cathy Young, "Smear and Loathing: A close look at accusations of Ukrainian anti-semitism," *Cato Institute*, Feb. 18, 2022.

[18] "Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky's 'heartbreaking' appeal for peace goes viral," *News18*, Feb. 24, 2022.

[19] Bill Bostock, "Putin quoted song lyrics about rape and necrophilia to explain Russia's demands from Ukraine," *Business Insider*, Feb. 8, 2022. (Commentators keep saying they can't look inside Putin's mind, but this is a Freudian slip that reveals how deeply misogynist it is.)

[20] Jason Stanley, "The antisemitism animating Putin's claim to 'denazify' Ukraine," *The Guardian*, Feb. 26, 2022.

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