# The Ukraine War Will End, But How?

written by Peter Solenberger | May 25, 2022

The Russian invasion of Ukraine caught most observers by surprise. I, for one, didn't think that the Russian government would be so foolish as to invade. If Ukraine resisted, the Russian military could destroy it with nuclear weapons but couldn't conquer it with the conventional forces they had deployed to its borders. The Russian ruling class needed a deal, not a war. Ukraine in the European Union and out of NATO, like Finland or Sweden, would have suited it very well. The Russian people certainly didn't want war.

The Russian government must have thought that Ukrainian resistance would collapse as soon as the tanks rolled in and the the bombs began falling. Instead, the Ukrainian military held Kyiv and the other major cities outside the south and launched mobile attacks on stalled Russian columns. The Ukrainian government kept its head, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy emerged as an effective media spokesperson. The Ukrainian people rallied around the government in the north and west. The US and NATO flooded Ukraine with arms and munitions.

The Russian military and government took several weeks to conclude that their blitz had failed and to move on to their plan B, seizing as much as they could of the territory that the Soviet Union had transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1922, the arc from Kharkiv in the north to Odesa in the south. As of May 15, Russian forces control all of Kherson Oblast, most of Zaporizhzhia and Luhansk Oblasts, two-thirds of Donetsk  Oblast, and part of Kharkiv Oblast. They are making slow progress in a pincer movement to force the Ukrainian troops out of western Donetsk.

Neither the Ukrainian government nor the Russian government is ready to accept a ceasefire yet, since they still hope to make gains on the battlefield. But as the military situation becomes clearer, so do the lines along which Ukraine is likely to be partitioned after the fighting ends. Revolutionary socialists, however much we might wish another outcome, should consider the one coming into being.

If the Russian forces drive the Ukrainian army out of western Donetsk, as seems likely, the war will have reached a decision point. Having seized a corridor from Donbas to Crimea, the Russian government could either propose a ceasefire or continue fighting to take Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa, and the rest of the historically Russian parts of Ukraine. Having lost the corridor, the Ukrainian government could either propose a ceasefire or continue fighting to retake it.

Revolutionary socialists will have no say in the matter, of course, but we will have opinions. Mine is that a ceasefire would be better for Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the world than prolonging the war. A ceasefire would not be just. Apart from Crimea and eastern Donbas, the populations of the contested areas would not have been consulted as to their wishes. The partition would have been militarily imposed on Ukraine. But prolonging the war would increase the destruction without

breaking the impasse.

**Hubris, heroism and the course of the war**

The first days of the war were marked by hubris on the Russian side and heroism on the Ukrainian side. By the numbers, Russia was far more powerful. The Russian government made the mistake of thinking it could simply have its way. A common mistake among imperial powers. Since World War II the US military has lost wars it arrogantly expected to win in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Ukrainian military and government did well, but most of the credit goes to the Ukrainian people. Popular enthusiasm bolstered the morale of the troops. The government, having limited military and logistical capacity, distributed weapons and invited popular initiative. Workers took up arms and organized rescues, repairs, distribution of food and medicine, and more. The image of the Ukrainian people defending their country has been inspiring.

The image is not the whole story, however. Capitalist restoration left Ukraine impoverished, dominated by oligarchs, vastly unequal, and riddled with corruption. Ukrainian and Russian nationalists provoked conflicts between the Ukrainian majority, concentrated in the north and west, and the Russian minority, concentrated in the south and east. The conflict escalated into civil war in 2014, with fighting all across the arc now being contested.

The war in the north went badly for the invaders. They had come with too few troops to take Ukrainian cities in street-by-street fighting or to hold the countryside against guerrilla warfare. Russian artillery, bombs and missiles did great damage, but in the end the Russian military had to withdraw from the north and regroup for its plan B, the partition of Ukraine.

The war in the the south went better for the Russian forces. They moved north from Crimea, supported by their control of the Black Sea and air superiority. The population was more friendly. They took the cities of Kherson, Melitopol and Mariupol, but were stopped at Mykolaiv, on the way to Odesa. The battle of Mariupol was particularly bitter. The far-right Azov Battalion, in charge of the city’s defense, decided to fight to the death, rather than retreat when the military situation became hopeless.

The main fighting shifted to Donbas in the east, where separatists, supported by Russian troops, already held about a third of Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts from the 2014 war. Since the invasion Russian forces have taken nearly all of Luhansk and all but a third of Donetsk. They are slowly closing a pincer from the north and south to envelop the Ukrainian troops in western Donetsk and force them to withdraw.

The battle of western Donetsk will likely conclude soon. Either side could collapse, but more likely they will fight to a standstill somewhere between the current front line and Donetsk’s western border. At that point, the Ukrainian and Russian governments would have a choice: propose a ceasefire, or escalate the war to try to break the impasse. Escalation is not a foregone conclusion, since Ukraine and Russia both have good reason to seek a ceasefire.

**Just or not, war is hell**

The war has been a disaster for Ukraine. The true numbers won’t be known until after the fighting ends, but some 10,000 soldiers and a similar number of civilians have been killed. Seven million have been internally displaced. Six million have fled the country. Many, having gained entry to the EU, will not return. Ukraine’s gross domestic product is expected to be halved this year. The Russian blockade has cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea, and the fighting has destroyed its capacity to export.

Russian bombs and missiles have targeted Ukrainian airfields, train depots, warehouses, bridges and other infrastructure, but not on the scale that military experts had expected. If the war continues, Russia will presumably intensify its efforts to stop the movement of weapons and munitions across Ukraine. The Russian government may be tempted to escalate the destruction, as the US and Britain did during World War II with the bombing of Dresden and other German cities, and the US did with the fire-bombing Tokyo and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The war has been a disaster for Russia too. Its troop losses are similar to Ukraine's. It has used or lost vast quantities of arms, munitions and supplies. Replacing them will require diverting production from civilian purposes. Russia's GDP is expected to fall 10 percent this year, as a result of sanctions and the economic war the US government has initiated against it. The war has cut Russia off from the rest of Europe and motivated some of those abroad not to return.

The war has been a disaster for the rest of the world. In immediate terms, the cutoff of Ukrainian exports by the fighting and the reduction of Russian exports by sanctions has pushed up the prices of oil, gas, food, and other primary products. This has intensified general inflation, as the world economy, having not yet recovered from the Covid-19 pandemic, is about to plunge into the next recession. In the advanced capitalist countries, workers are suffering, and political tensions are rising. In poor countries millions face starvation.

US imperialism is using the Ukraine war to try to weaken Russia, threaten China, control its allies, and restore its global hegemony. Outsourcing fighting to Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Kurds, and now Ukraine is far cheaper than sending US forces. But the announcement by the Biden administration that it is sending troops back to Somalia shows that it feels emboldened to act directly, if it can't find adequate proxies.

The US government is increasing its military spending and pressuring Germany, Japan, and the other advanced capitalist countries to increase theirs. It is also pressuring them to stop buying oil and gas from Russia, which would require more extraction in the US, Saudi Arabia, and other big producers, as well as reviving nuclear power and coal. The military and energy industries love it, but it's the death knell for progress on poverty, inequality, or climate change.

**How should socialists respond?**

The Ukraine war is a convergence of three wars: 1) Ukraine defending itself against the Russian invasion, 2) the inter-imperialist cold war between the US-led bloc of the established powers and the Russia-China bloc challenging them, and 3) the civil war between the Ukrainian government and Russian separatists.

In the Ukraine war so far, the first aspect has dominated. Revolutionary socialists in all countries should support Ukraine against the Russian invasion, since Russia is an imperialist power attacking Ukraine, which is capitalist but not imperialist.

The best outcome would have been a Russian defeat leading to a ruling-class crisis and a working-class uprising. The scenario has occurred before in Russian history. Defeat in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War led to the 1905 Revolution. Defeat in World War I led to the 1917 Revolution.

A prolonged war could lead to political crisis in either Russia or Ukraine, especially on the losing side, and that could lead to demonstrations, strikes and other working-class action against the government that failed it. Revolutionary socialists would welcome such a development in either country, especially in Russia, where it would change the political dynamic worldwide. But we can't wish for a prolonged war, hoping that it would lead to revolution.

After the battle of Donbas is over, there might be an opening for a ceasefire. The governments would not be eager for one, since they would not have achieved their objectives. The Ukrainian government would not have retaken the territory it lost to Russia, and the Russian government would not have taken the territory it sought. But the mutual destruction, military impasse, and popular disillusionment with the war might force them to accept a ceasefire.

If the Russian government rejected a ceasefire, the character of the war would remain what it is now: predominantly a defensive war by an oppressed nation against an imperialist invader. The destruction would continue with little chance of Ukrainian success until the next impasse.

If the Russian government proposed a ceasefire and the Ukrainian government rejected it, the character of the war would change. It would become a war to retake territory to which Ukraine has an ambiguous claim. With the deepening dependence of Ukraine on the US and NATO, it would increasingly become a proxy war between the imperialist blocs. Peace would be better than the victory of either side.

There’s no reason to change position yet, but we should recognize that the longer the war continues, the more destructive and futile it becomes.

However the fighting in Ukraine turns out, the main task of revolutionary socialists in the US is to defeat the intrigues of our own rulers. US imperialism is exploiting the Ukraine war to escalate its cold war with Russia and, indirectly, China and reassert its imperial hegemony. We need to expose that and help workers understand the connection between imperialist war and domestic reaction.