Our Slogan Is “War Against War”

written by Russian Socialist Movement | February 19, 2023

For a year now, Vladimir Putin’s regime has been killing Ukrainians, sending hundreds of thousands of Russians to their deaths, and threatening the world with nuclear weapons in the name of the insane goal of restoring its empire.

For us Russians who oppose Putin’s aggression and dictatorship, it has been a year of horror and shame over the war crimes committed daily in our name.

On the one-year anniversary of this war, we call all those who yearn for peace to turn out for demonstrations and rallies against Putin’s invasion.

Unfortunately, not all the “peace” rallies taking place next weekend will be actions of solidarity with Ukraine. A large part of the left in the West does not understand the nature of this war and advocates compromise with Putinism.

We have written this statement to help our comrades abroad understand the situation and take the right stand.

A counterrevolutionary war

Some Western writers attribute the war to causes like the collapse of the USSR, the “contradictory history of the Ukrainian nation’s creation,” and geopolitical confrontation between nuclear powers.

Without denying the importance of these factors, we are surprised that these lists overlook the most important and obvious reason for what is happening: the Putin regime’s desire to suppress democratic protest movements throughout the former Soviet Union and in Russia itself.

The 2014 seizure of Crimea and hostilities in the Donbas were a response by the Kremlin to the “revolution of dignity” in Ukraine, which overthrew the corrupt pro-Russian administration of Viktor Yanukovych, as well as to Russians’ mass demonstrations for fair elections in 2011–12 (known as the Bolotnaya Square protests).

Annexing the Crimean Peninsula was a domestic policy win for Putin. He successfully used revanchist, anti-Western, and traditionalist rhetoric (as well as political persecution) to expand his social base, isolate the opposition, and turn the Maidan into a bogeyman with which to frighten the population.

But the popularity boost that followed the annexation was short-lived. The late 2010s saw economic stagnation, an unpopular pension reform, and high-profile anti-corruption revelations by Alexei Navalny’s team that dragged Putin’s ratings back down, especially among young people. Protests swept the country, and the ruling United Russia party suffered a series of painful defeats in regional elections.

This context has driven the Kremlin to place all its bets on conserving the regime. The 2020 constitutional referendum (which required rigging unprecedented even by Russian standards) effectively made Putin a ruler for life. Under the pretext of containing the COVID-19 pandemic, protest gatherings were finally banned. An attempt was made to poison extra-parliamentary opposition leader Alexei Navalny, which he miraculously survived.

The popular uprising of summer 2020 in Belarus confirmed the Russian elite's belief that the "collective West" is waging a "hybrid war" against Russia, attacking it and its satellites with "color revolutions."

Of course, such claims are nothing more than a conspiracy theory. Social and political discontent in Russia has been growing due to record social inequality, poverty, corruption, rollbacks of civil liberties, and the obvious futility of the Russian model of capitalism, which is based on a parasitic fossil-fuel oligarchy appropriating natural resource rents.

If there's one thing we can blame the "collective West" for, it's its longstanding pandering to Putinism, including on the Ukrainian issue. For decades, European and American elites have sought to do "business as usual" with Putin's Russia, which has allowed a dictatorship to emerge, redistribute wealth upwards, and conduct foreign policy with complete impunity.

Conceding to Putin will not lead to peace

Invading Ukraine was an attempt by Putin to repeat his 2014 Crimean triumph—by securing a speedy victory, rallying Russian society around the flag with revanchist slogans, finally crushing the opposition, and establishing himself as hegemon in the post-Soviet space (which Putin's imperialism views as part of "historical Russia").

Ukrainians' heroic resistance thwarted these plans, turning the "short, victorious war" of the Kremlin's dreams into a protracted conflict that has worn down Russia's economy and busted the myth of its army's invincibility. Backed into a corner, Moscow is threatening the world with its nuclear weapons while simultaneously urging Ukraine and the West to negotiate.

Moscow's rhetoric is parroted by certain European and American leftists who oppose supplying arms to Ukraine (to "save lives" and prevent a nuclear apocalypse). But Russia is not willing to withdraw from the territories it has captured, a condition that Kyiv and 93% of Ukrainians consider non-negotiable. Must Ukraine instead sacrifice its sovereignty in order to appease the aggressor, a policy that has very dark precedents in European history?

Saving lives?

So is it true that Ukraine's defeat, an inevitability if Western aid is withdrawn, will help prevent more casualties? Even if we accept the non-obvious (from a socialist perspective) logic that saving lives is more important than fighting tyranny and aggression, we believe that this is not the case.

As we know, Vladimir Putin has laid claim to the entire territory of Ukraine, asserting that Ukrainians and Russians are "one nation" and that Ukrainian statehood is a historical mistake. In this context, a ceasefire would merely give the Kremlin time to rebuild its military capacity for a new assault, including by forcing yet more Russians (mostly poor and ethnic minority) into the army.

If Ukraine continues to resist the invasion even without arms supplies, it will lead to innumerable casualties among Ukrainian soldiers and civilians. And terror, the horrific remains of which we saw in Bucha and elsewhere, is what awaits any of the new territories seized by Russia.

Multipolar imperialism

When Putin speaks about getting rid of American hegemony in the world and even about "anti-colonialism" (!), he is not referring to the creation of a more egalitarian world order.

Putin's "multipolar world" is a world where democracy and human rights are no longer considered universal values, and so-called "great powers" have free rein in their respective geopolitical spheres of influence.

This essentially means restoring the system of international relations that existed in the run-up to World Wars I and II.

This "brave old world" would be a wonderful place for dictators, corrupt officials, and the far right. But it would be hell for workers, ethnic minorities, women, LGBT people, small nations, and all liberation movements.

A victory for Putin in Ukraine would not restore the pre-war status quo, it would set a deadly precedent giving "great powers" the right to wars of aggression and nuclear brinksmanship. It would be a prologue to new military and political catastrophes.

What would a victory in Ukraine for Putinism lead to?

A Putin victory would mean not only the subjugation of Ukraine, but also the bending of all post-Soviet countries to the Kremlin's will.

Within Russia, a victory for the regime would preserve a system defined by the security and fossil-fuel oligarchy's rule over other social classes (above all the working class) and the plundering of natural resources at the expense of technological and social development.

In contrast, the defeat of Putinism in Ukraine would likely lend momentum to movements for democratic change in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and other former Soviet countries, as well as in Russia itself.

It would be overly optimistic to claim that defeat in war automatically leads to revolution. But Russian history is replete with examples of military setbacks abroad that have led to major change at home—including the abolition of serfdom, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and Perestroika in the 1980s.

Russian socialists have no use for a "victory" for Putin and his oligarch cronies. We call on all those who truly desire peace and still believe in dialogue with the Russian government to demand that it withdraw its troops from Ukrainian territories. Any call for peace that does not include this demand is disingenuous.

- End the war! Stand in solidarity against Putin's invasion of Ukraine.
- End the draft! Russians are not cannon fodder.
- Free Russian political prisoners!
- Free Russia!