

The International Marxist-Humanist

Journal of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization

Summary: Ukraine has experienced a popular uprising with serious contradictions, among them the presence of right-wing nationalism and a tilt toward neoliberal capitalism. Ukraine has since been threatened by Putin's Russia, which fears above all a similar uprising in Moscow - Editors

Ukraine: Popular Uprising in the Shadow of Putin's Russia

Kevin Anderson

April 16, 2014

The Ukrainian uprising and its aftermath constitute one of the most important events of the past year, both subjectively and objectively. At a subjective level, the uprising showed the creativity of masses in motion and the ultimate fragility of state power, even when surrounded by a repressive police apparatus and enjoying the support of a foreign imperialist ally. At an objective level, it has touched off a new stage of interimperialist rivalry that has, at the very least, signaled the end of the already fraying "New World Order" constructed by the US in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

THE MAIDAN UPRISING AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

In winter 2013-14, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians succeeded against great odds in toppling their authoritarian, pro-Russian government. Overall, as the Marxist-Humanist writer Richard Abernethy put it, Ukraine has experienced "a popular uprising with serious contradictions" (Comment on Richard Greeman, "Ukraine, Coup or Revolution?" *The International Marxist-Humanist*, 3-23-14

<http://www.internationalmarxisthumanist.org/articles/discussion-article-ukraine-coup-revolution-richard-greeman>).

The overthrow of the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich involved mass street protests of up to 800,000 people and the occupation of the Maidan, Kiev's central square, for weeks on end in the dead of winter. Despite efforts by Vladimir Putin's Russia to prop up Yanukovich with billions of dollars in loans, and police repression that resulted in over 100 deaths, in the end the regime collapsed. The police melted away, the army went over to the people, and Yanukovich fled for his life.

While the 2004-05 Orange Revolution, which espoused similar aims, was led by two neoliberal politicians, the 2013-14 uprising was to a great extent leaderless. In some ways this expressed the maturity of the 2013-14 democratic movement. It flowed out of wide popular disillusionment with the results of Orange Revolution, which neither curbed the rule of corrupt oligarchs over the economy nor improved living standards.

The Maidan uprising exhibited several contradictions, however. One revolved around the emergence inside the protests of far right groups. Though only a small minority within the movement, these groups were well organized and prepared for street fighting. While notions of the uprising as therefore fascist or reactionary were a figment of the imagination of Russian state propaganda, this does not mean that the emergence of the far right as a tendency with some followers is not a serious danger for Ukraine.

As second contradiction within the movement concerned a major part of its agenda, that of affiliating with the European Union and thereby receiving a multibillion dollar loan package. Unrealistic hopes were expressed to the effect that Ukrainians would soon be able to travel to the EU without visas. Little account has been taken of the kind of austerity measures the EU and other international lending agencies would demand in return for loans, above all cuts in salaries and pensions and hikes in prices of basic commodities. And this in a country already teetering on the edge of economic collapse after decades of crony capitalism, where the Yanukovich years alone (2010-14) saw an estimated

\$70 billion spirited away. The fact that the working class did not appear under its own banner, plus the weakness of the left, meant that the uprising lacked a much of a socio-economic, let alone an anti-capitalist dimension.

The Ukrainian leftist intellectual Volodymyr Ischchenko pointed to some of these kinds of limitations and dangers: "This does not mean the start of systematic democratic change, or that the new government is in any way going to challenge the root of pervasive corruption in Ukraine: poverty and inequality. Moreover, it is likely only to aggravate these problems, putting the burden of the economic crisis on the shoulders of Ukraine's poor, not on the rich Ukrainian oligarchs." (Ukraine has not experienced a genuine revolution, merely a change of elites," *Guardian*, 2-28-14

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/ukraine-genuine-revolution-tackle-corruption>)

A third contradiction involved the narrow form of Ukrainian nationalism that dominated much of the uprising. Thus, as Yanukovich was falling from power, parliament, which by now had gone over to the opposition, voted to repeal the language law which placed Russian on an equal footing with Ukrainian as a national language. Even though this measure never took effect due to a veto by the acting president, huge political damage was done, giving a powerful propaganda tool to Putin. Moreover, many eastern Ukrainians feared, with some justice, that the kind of neoliberal policies favored by those coming to power in Kiev would open the industrialized Donbass region to competition from cheaper foreign imports of manufactured goods, resulting in mass layoffs. Nothing at all was done to reassure them on this score.

Despite these contradictions, the Ukrainian uprising was on the whole a positive event, one that showed both the power and the creativity of a mass movement against authoritarian rule. It shook up not only Ukraine, but Russia as well, and also worried regimes as far away as Iran. There, conservative media attacked the reformist press for juxtaposing images of the liberation from prison former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko in Ukraine with articles referring to the imprisoned leaders of Iran's 2009 upheaval, Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi

Karroubi ("La révolution ukrainienne dérange les conservateurs en Iran," *Le Monde*, 2-28-14).

PUTIN'S RUSSIA: THE GREAT FEAR AND THE OLD IMPERIALISM

In Putin's Russia, the most basic reaction was fear of a Maidan in Moscow. As the British journalist James Meek wrote: "Putin's great fear is that the people of a future better Ukraine might inspire an entirely different unification with their East Slav brethren on his side of the border – a common cause of popular revolt against him and other leaders like him. The revolution on Maidan Nezalezhnosti – Independence Square in Ukrainian – is the closest yet to a script for his own downfall" (*London Review of Books*, 3-20-14 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n06/james-meek/putins-counter-revolution>).

At an objective level, the Ukrainian uprising has also touched off a European and possibly a global political/military crisis, involving Russia, the European Union, and the US. After Putin moved aggressively against the new Ukraine, fear of a new Cold War was even expressed in some quarters. Were that to happen, it would be a terrible setback for the global left, as it would strengthen the hand of the military-security apparatus everywhere, from the US to the EU to Putin's Russia itself, giving greater vent to the notion that internal critics and opponents are tools of the foreign enemy.

Putin moved immediately to annex Crimea, a territory that Russia has long claimed and which has one of its most important naval bases, and threatened to destabilize, if not annex outright, other parts of eastern and southern Ukraine where there are large numbers of Russian speakers. Crimea has a majority of Russian speakers, many of whom, unlike those in other parts of Ukraine, have long expressed loyalty to the Russian rather than the Ukrainian state. Putin prepared his takeover by ordering Russian forces to assume de facto power in Crimea, intimidating a large segment of the province's population, both Ukrainian speaking (24%) and Tatar (12%), who overwhelmingly opposed his scheme. Moving with lightning speed and operating covertly, Putin's armed

forces, intelligence services, and their local allies set up a referendum, intimidated the local population, and had it passed by a USSR-style majority of 97%. Within days, Russia formally annexed Crimea. He may be following a similar script in eastern Ukraine.

Inside Russia, the democratic opposition saved its own honor by mounting a 50,000 strong demonstration on the eve of the Crimea referendum, March 15. Slogans included "Hands off Ukraine" and "No to war." A much smaller counter-demonstration took place under the slogan, "There will be no Maidan in Moscow" (*Le Monde*, 3-16-14). That is probably true for now, but the specter of Maidan surely haunts Putin, even as his jingoism has temporarily jacked up his popularity ratings.

Russia has also hinted that it might try to lop off other parts of Eastern Ukraine, like the industrial city of Donetsk. These areas possess large numbers of Russian speakers, but also have very large Ukrainian speaking populations as well, much more so than in Crimea. As with Crimea, the US and the EU threatened sanctions if Russia were to do so, while offering no aid to Ukraine beyond economic loans.

While he certainly might invade eastern Ukraine outright, it is just as likely that Putin will simply let the country bleed by strangling it economically and keeping it off balance by maintaining a large military force on its border. Two dates to watch will be May 1, International Workers Day, and May 9, World War II Victory Day. Even before the recent tensions, these two holidays had been marked by clashes between Russian and Ukrainian speakers, who often see history differently. Above all, Russia does not want the scheduled May 25 Ukrainian nationwide elections to proceed peacefully, as all estimates suggest a rout for pro-Russian parties.

In terms of global imperialist politics, Putin is well aware that US imperialism has been drained by over a decade of disastrous wars and is in no position to make any kind of military response in a place like Ukraine, to which it never gave security guarantees in any case. In this sense, Ukraine is in a similar position to Latin America vis à vis US imperialism, with the important

difference that Russia, although stronger than in the 1990s, is at best only a regional power today.

In terms of the danger of a new Cold War, some argue that the close economic ties now existing between Russia and the West would preclude an actual Cold War. It is true, for example, that Russia supplies a third of the natural gas for the European Union, while also serving as a magnet for exports from the EU. But pre-World War I Europe also had deep economic ties among its rival powers, which many, including reformist socialists, erroneously thought would preclude a European war.

Be that as it may, what is clear is that the era of "new world order" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union is now over.

Even without a new Cold War, economic suffering is sure to deepen throughout Europe and beyond, amid the deepest and longest economic crisis since the Great Depression. The EU is already bracing for problems in natural gas deliveries from Russia, while Russia fears the effects of economic sanctions from the US and the EU. In addition, the mere threat of a disruption of Ukrainian agricultural production, an important link in the global supply chain, has caused the global price of wheat to go up by 25% since last fall (Laurence Girard, "La crise ukrainienne alimente la hausse de cours du blé et du maïs," *Le Monde*, 3-15-14 http://lemonde.fr/economie/article/2014/03/14/la-crise-ukrainienne-alimente-la-hausse-des-cours-du-ble-et-du-mais_4383124_3234.html).

MANIFESTATIONS OF INTERIMPERIALIST RIVALRY

It is often mentioned by Putin and his apologists, as well as international relations intellectuals of the "realist" school, that NATO has extended itself into most of Eastern Europe and the Baltics since 1991, in clear violation of assurances given to Russia's leaders as the Soviet Union was collapsing. To be sure, NATO was acting in true imperialist fashion, taking advantage of its

former rival's weakness, in a form of veiled aggression that sowed huge distrust from the Russian state.

But these critics of US and Western imperialism seldom mention that Putin has also violated the guarantees that Russia gave in 1994, when, along with the US and Britain, it signed onto the Budapest Memorandum. In that agreement, the three powers pledged to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity in return for Ukraine's agreement to give up its nuclear arsenal, then the third largest in the world. Ukraine did so by 1996, making it one of the only countries in the world to have given up their nuclear weapons.

Therefore, Russia's forcible annexation of Crimea in March and threats against eastern Ukraine are just as much an act of imperial expansion as was the NATO expansion of the 1990s. This is why the annexation of Crimea received overwhelming condemnation from the United Nations, where Russia found itself almost as isolated as Israel usually is.

PUTIN'S AMALGAMATION OF NEO-STALINISM AND PAN-SLAVISM

As Marxist-Humanists, we stand firmly alongside the Ukrainian people and the democratic forces within Russia. Putin's regime espouses a neo-Stalinist ideology that regards the collapse of the USSR as a tragedy. Reeking of Russian chauvinism, the worldview Putin projects also contains elements of older versions of Tsarist Pan-Slavism, especially the notion of "protecting" Russian minorities abroad. We have a recent example of where such irredentism can lead in the Milosevic regime of Serbia, which carried out "ethnic cleansing," mass rape and murder, and other genocidal policies, all in the name of "protecting" Serbian minorities in Bosnia and Croatia.

Putin's odd combination of neo-Stalinism and Pan-Slavism is seen in how he reveres the reactionary Slavophile Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, even as he expresses nostalgia for the Stalinist regime that imprisoned him. (Of course, Putin is not a total supporter of the USSR system, as he has continued to allow ownership of part of the means of production by private capitalist oligarchs, albeit under the

firm control of the ex-KGB clique that surrounds him and which takes a lucrative cut for itself.)

As US journalist David Remnick noted, Solzhenitsyn, in an essay published in 1990 as the Soviet Union was collapsing, vehemently opposed independence or even self-determination for Ukraine: "'We do not have the energy to run an Empire!' [Solzhenitsyn] wrote. 'Let us shrug it off. It is crushing us, it is draining us, and it is accelerating our demise.' Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, along with the Caucasian republics, were to make their own way. But on the question of Ukraine he had a different view. Russia must be at the center of a 'Russian union,' he declared, and Ukraine was integral to it." That "union" was to involve Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine ("Putin's Pique," *The New Yorker*, 3-17-14 http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2014/03/17/140317taco_talk_remnick).

For his part, as Remnick also reported, Putin told U.S. President George W. Bush a decade later: "You have to understand, George. Ukraine is not even a country" ("Putin's Pique"). Putin confirmed that view on March 12 of this year when he telephoned Mustafa Dzhomelev, a venerated leader of the Crimean Tatar minority in Crimea. Putin was ostensibly trying to reassure the Tatars that they would not be persecuted under Russian rule, as they had in the Soviet Union. But a stunned Dzhomelev reported, Putin also suggested that Ukraine's 1991 independence from Russia lacked validity:

"I told Putin that the most important issue is the territorial integrity of our country, because its violation is violation of the agreement, which is signed by the guarantor countries - the US, Britain and Russia in 1994 in exchange for our renunciation from nuclear weapons. I told him about possible consequences if it is violated, including the fact that anyone will not trust such arrangement, and there will be an intention of each country that has financial capacity to acquire its own nuclear weapons, and Ukraine will not be an exception. Speaking about this topic – territorial integrity of Ukraine – Putin noted the issue that self-proclamation of independent Ukraine did not quite correspond to the Soviet norms that stipulated withdrawal procedure from the USSR structure" ("Ukraine

withdrew from USSR not quite legitimately," QHA-Crimean News Agency, 3-13-14 <http://qha.com.ua/ukraine-withdrew-from-ussr-not-quite-legitimately-putin-to-jemilev-130833en.html> ; see also Sylvie Kaufmann, "Après la Crimée, un autre monde," *Le Monde*, 3-17-14 http://lemonde.fr/europe/article/2014/03/16/apres-la-crimee-un-autre-monde_4383965_3214.html)

UKRAINE IN THE MIRROR OF HISTORY

During the 1917 revolution, Lenin castigated all such notions, supporting Ukraine's right to independence: "If Finland, Poland or Ukraine secede from Russia, there is nothing bad in that. What is wrong with it? Anyone who says that is a chauvinist. One must be mad to continue Tsar Nicholas's policy. Didn't Norway secede from Sweden? Alexander I and Napoleon once bartered nations, the tsars once traded Poland. Are we to continue this policy of the tsars? This is a repudiation of the tactics of internationalism, this is chauvinism at its worst. What is wrong with Finland seceding?The proletariat cannot use force, because it must not prevent the peoples from obtaining their freedom. Only when the socialist revolution has become a reality, and not a method, will the slogan 'Down with frontiers' be a correct slogan. Then we shall say: Comrades, come to us...." (Speech on the National Question, Seventh All-Russia Conference of the Russian Social Democratic Party-Bolshevik, April 29 (May 12), 1917 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/7thconf/29d.htm>). Here, Lenin surely meant the global socialist revolution, in keeping with the thinking of virtually all revolutionary Marxists at the time. "Socialism in one country" was a lie with monstrous consequences invented by Stalin.

In 1922, on his deathbed, Lenin tried to dislodge the Russian chauvinist Stalin, in a failed attempt to change the direction of the new USSR. The tragedy of Russia 1917, a revolution that transformed into its opposite, totalitarian state-capitalism, continues to haunt both Russia and Ukraine today.

Under Stalin, Ukraine suffered an even worse fate than most other areas of the Soviet Union. As Raya Dunayevskaya notes, during the forced collectivization drive of 1929-32, "The peasants, in their resistance to collectivization, carried out such mass slaughter of animals that Russia has not recovered to this day.... There was such havoc in the countryside that the grain harvest declined from 83.5 million tons in 1930 to 70 million in 1931. The Planners never admitted the terrible famine of 1932-33." Comparing the breakneck speed of Stalin's accumulation of capital in this period under state capitalism to Marx's account of the expropriation of the peasantry at the dawn of English capitalism, she remarked that "Stalin was more ruthless because we live in the age of state capitalism" (*Marxism and Freedom*, pp. 216, 217). Ukraine, which was the center of Stalin's famine, saw some 4 million deaths in that period, in what Ukrainians today call the Holodomor (Extermination by Hunger), now widely considered an act of genocide.

A decade later, Ukraine suffered under a particularly harsh Nazi occupation, during which the Holocaust swept up a huge percentage of the Jewish population, killing nearly a million. Several million non-Jewish Ukrainians also lost their lives. While some non-Jewish Ukrainians joined the anti-Nazi resistance, others collaborated outright with the Nazis, and still others joined nationalist groups that at times collaborated as well. To this day, Russian chauvinists claim that the Russian people did not produce its own share of collaborators, which is a blatant lie.

After the war, and in keeping with the Stalinist notion that entire peoples could be either revolutionary or reactionary, the Soviet Union enacted collective punishments on entire ethnic groups deemed to have furnished collaborators to the Nazis. Such was the fate of the Crimean Tatars, a Turkic and Muslim people who had lived in the area since the fifteenth century, and who formed the majority of its population. In May 1944, all 200,000 of the Crimean Tatars were rounded up and deported thousands of miles away to Central Asia. During the course of the deportation, half of them perished. The Tatars were allowed to return to Crimea only as the Soviet Union began to collapse and an independent Ukraine was being established. This is why the Tatar community sides

overwhelmingly with an independent Ukraine today, and deeply fears the Russian irredentists.

WHERE TO NOW?

The terrible legacy of Stalinist famine and deportation, and of Nazi occupation and Holocaust, weighs down upon Ukraine and the region today, both as memory and as foreboding for the future. Confronting this legacy and working out a truly revolutionary stance for today, one independent of both Putin's Russia and the US/EU, will have to involve a critique, on Marxist and humanist ground, not only of capitalism, but also of all forms of statist communism, Lenin's included.

The more recent legacy of the Ukrainian people over the past two decades, despite the contradictions mentioned above, nonetheless offers much to build upon for the future. In staging not one but two mass democratic uprisings over the past decade, the Ukrainian people have shown a yearning for self-determination in the broadest sense, and for grassroots democracy. Over the past two decades, Ukrainians have also lived largely in peace, in an atmosphere of relative tolerance for ethnic and religious minorities. Moreover, Ukraine's divesting itself of nuclear weapons in the 1990s shows another positive side to its recent history.

At the same time, Ukraine faces a deep crisis today, economically, politically, and culturally. Some fragile democratic and humanist beginnings are unfolding amid a collapsing economy and the threat of further Russian intervention. As Marxist-Humanists, we need to learn from and support the Ukrainian people in their struggle for democracy and national liberation, while at the same time pointing honestly to the contradictions and obstacles facing them, some of them self-generated.

Kevin Anderson is the author of *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (1995) and *Marx at the Margins: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Non-Western Societies* (2010).