

Imperialism and the Ukraine War

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1. Introduction

When a major war breaks out, two distinct questions arise that are often not clearly distinguished. One question is who started the war by initiating military action across recognized national borders. In some cases the answer to that question is obvious, in others it is not so obvious. The second question is about the underlying factors that led to the outbreak of a war. The underlying factors always involve the actions of more than one party to the war. World War II, the “good war,” began in Europe when Germany fired first. The U.S. entered the war after Japan fired first at Pearl Harbor. Nevertheless, the underlying factors that led to World War II include the actions of the victorious powers toward Germany at the end of World War I that fostered the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, and for the U.S. entry into the war, the economic blockade of Japan prior to Pearl Harbor was relevant.

This paper aims to identify the underlying factors that led to the Ukraine War. There is no doubt that Russia fired first in this case, launching an invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, the underlying factors that led to the war include the policies and actions of the U.S. as well as those of Russia. This paper examines the policies and actions of those two parties including an analysis of the forces that were driving those policies and actions.

This paper argues that two main underlying factors played key roles in leading to the Ukraine War: 1) the full emergence of post-Soviet Russia as a powerful autocratic capitalist state with an oligarchic capitalist class; 2) the post-Cold War strategy adopted by the U.S. government aimed at preserving and expanding its economic and political domination of the suddenly enlarged global capitalist system. A subsidiary factor has been the rise of a nationalist ideology in post-Soviet Russia. The paper concludes that the Ukraine War can be interpreted as a war of inter-imperialist rivalry.

Section 2 of this paper reviews the Marxist theory of imperialism. Section 3 considers the

evolution of the economic and political system of post-Soviet Russia along with a transformation of the dominant ideology. Section 4 analyzes U.S. policy toward post-Soviet Russia and the region of which it is a part. Section 5 reviews post-Soviet Russia's relationship with Ukraine. Section 6 draws on the preceding sections to propose a view of the underlying causes, and also the effects, of the Ukraine War. Section 7 offers concluding comments.

2. Imperialism

This author presented a paper with Zhongjin Li of the University of Missouri at Kansas City that included an analysis of the theory of imperialism at a January 2021 URPE at ASSA session (Li and Kotz, 2021). To avoid recycling the same material in a second paper, here I will just briefly review the conclusions we reached about the theory of imperialism in that work.

Lenin's famous book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Lenin, [1917] 1939) has served as the starting point for Marxist analyses of imperialism over the succeeding decades since it was published in 1917. However, several different versions of a theory of imperialism claim descent from Lenin's work. In my view, Lenin proposed two theories of imperialism, one specific to the epoch in which he was writing in 1917, and the other a general theory of imperialism. The book focused on the former, with a mass of data and qualitative information about that period. However, in that book there was also a concept of imperialism that transcends that particular period.¹ That general concept of imperialism is the economic and political domination of one country or region by the ruling class of another, aimed at extracting special economic benefits for that ruling class.

A capitalist state has a drive to become an imperialist power. Not all capitalist states have the means to be successful in that drive, but large and developed ones inevitably seek imperialist domination. The imperialist drive derives from the pursuit of profit, which leads to a search for export markets wherever they can be found, investment of capital anywhere in the world where

profits can be made, and a search for raw materials and produced inputs wherever they can be gotten.

However, this is not just a tendency to engage in trade and investment. Capitalism is not just an economic system. It requires a state that backs up the ability of capitalists to extract profits. When capitalists engage in economic activities within their home country, they can count on the state to enforce their class interests. However, when they engage outside their home country, capitalists face a problem of facing a foreign state that will not necessarily safeguard their profit-making activities. Therefore, when capitalists engage in profit-making activities that stretch across national boundaries, they will bring with them the power that only their state can exercise to secure their cross-border profit-making. The historical fact that capitalism gave rise to nation-states, and that capitalism continues in a world of nation-states, means that, in addition to capitalist domination of their home state, they also have a drive to dominate other countries and the people who live in them. While some pre-capitalist modes of production (but not all) also gave rise to imperialism, the capitalist era has produced the biggest empires in history. Today imperialism is driven by the dynamics of capitalism, not by an inherent feature of nation-states per-se.²

3. Post-Soviet Russia³

In the last few years of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin, a former high level Communist Party official, emerged as the leader of a coalition aiming to replace Soviet state socialism with capitalism. Yeltsin found support for that aim from several groups in Soviet society but most importantly among a large majority of the high level officials of the Soviet state and ruling party. Yeltsin was able to gain the new position of President of the Russian Republic within the USSR.⁴ However, Communist Party leader Mikhail Gorbachev controlled the union-wide institutions of the Soviet state, which blocked the pro-capitalist coalition from taking state power

within the Soviet Union as a whole. Yeltsin, from his position as head of the largest of the fifteen republics that made up the Soviet Union, outmaneuvered Gorbachev and was able to dismantle the Soviet state, leaving the fifteen republics as newly independent states. An immediate transition to capitalism began in Russia in January 1992.

The transition strategy followed by the newly independent Russian state was known as Shock Therapy. It called for lifting central planning of the economy, immediate freeing of prices, tight monetary policy, and rapid privatization of state-owned enterprises. Economic advisors from the IMF, World Bank, and US Treasury Department urged the shock therapy approach, but they did not have to exert any pressure since that approach was also favored by the top economic officials in the post-Soviet Russian government. The result of the shock therapy transition strategy was an 8 year long severe depression, the impoverishment of much of the population, the rise of a class of ruthless operators who seized the most valuable assets of the Soviet inheritance, an unprecedented rise in the death rate, and the domination of the economy and society by organized criminal groups. The only profitable economic activities were export of energy, raw materials, and metals to the global market.

Gorbachev's program of radical reform during the last years of the Soviet Union had led to the holding of free elections to new parliaments and local governments along with guarantees of individual rights of free expression and association. However, the newly emerging oligarchic capitalist system in post-Soviet Russia, whose new propertied class had no legitimacy among the disinherited and angry population, was not consistent with democracy. Democracy and individual rights were gradually restricted over the 8 years of Yeltsin's presidency of post-Soviet Russia. Yeltsin's chosen successor, Vladimir Putin, a former low level KGB officer, continued the trend toward the only state form that was compatible with the illegitimate oligarchic capitalism, namely an autocratic and repressive state. Putin was credited with bringing the very visible crime

and violence under control and presiding over a gradual economic expansion based on rising demand for raw materials and energy in the global market. Ironically, the U.S. government had cheered, and supported, a series of moves by Yeltsin that severely constricted democracy. When the candidate of the revived Communist Party was poised to win the 1996 election for the all-powerful office of President, the U.S. helped design and finance a series of measure to steal the election for Yeltsin, proclaiming the result as a great victory for democracy.

Thus, the autocratic Putin regime that emerged had, if not “made in the USA” stamped on it, then at least “fostered by the USA.” As a large and powerful state with a newly emerged capitalist system, post-Soviet Russia had the inevitable imperialist drive of such a state. It had an unusual combination of features: a super-rich new capitalist class, a powerful position in global politics based mainly on its military plus a residue of relationships with other countries from the Soviet era, and an economy based on exports of energy, raw materials, and metals. The new Russian capitalists were able to protect their ownership and control of the most valuable sectors of the economy. U.S. and west European capitalists succeeded in getting mainly the fast food sector, chicken imports, and luxury consumer goods imports. The Putin government basically represents the interests of the new Russian oligarchic capitalists.

At first President Yeltsin sought to occupy the position of chief assistant to U.S. imperialism.⁵ That is a common position for a powerful but secondary capitalist state, as the UK’s role in relation to the U.S. after World War II exemplifies. However, Yeltsin’s effort was rebuffed by the U.S., which regarded post-Soviet Russia as an uncertain ally. When Putin took office in 2000, he suggested that Russia join NATO, but this was not accepted. Thereafter Putin’s Russia moved toward establishing an independent imperialist position in the global capitalist system, sometimes intervening in conflicts on the other side from the U.S. (as in Libya) and other times in alliance with the U.S. (as in Afghanistan).

In the early 2000s Putin was presiding over an increasingly authoritarian state that was credited with restoring order and resuming economic growth after the chaos, crime, and long depression of the 1990s. As the new regime struggled to assert an independent role in the global capitalist system after repeated rejection of an alliance with the global hegemon the U.S., an ideology was needed to justify the new order in Russia. Marxist and Communist ideology had declined in influence in the later part of the Soviet period, as the conflict between Marxist ideas and the reality of Soviet state socialism became apparent.

The disillusion with Marxist ideas affected not just ordinary people but much of Soviet high level officialdom. Old ideas of Russian nationalism began to gain a significant following in the Soviet Union in 1980s. In post-Soviet Russia this took the form of “Eurasianism.” This held that Russia was the center of a land mass between Europe and Asia, with Russia at the core but including all the non-Russian peoples of Russia, the Soviet Union, and parts of Asia.⁶ It stresses that Russia is neither a periphery of Europe nor an Asiatic state but something in between. It cites ties of religion, culture, and language across the “Eurasian” region, while also recognizing the presence of different religions and languages as part of the whole complex.

When Russia became a separate state with a capitalist system and an imperialist impulse deriving from it, Eurasianism provided a suitable ideology to define a place for Russia in the global system. That is, it called for Russian domination of its region, which is the area in which a lesser capitalist power such as Russia could imagine successful domination. Some western analysts have portrayed Eurasianism as a colonialist ideology of empire, but it appears that the dominant version of it among the post-Soviet Russian elite calls for a close association with adjacent peoples and significant Russian influence in nearby countries, rather than the seizing of adjacent territories. Unlike in the earlier age of empires, today an ideology that calls for a powerful state to incorporate adjacent peoples is difficult to defend. In 1992 Russia did recognize

the independent sovereignty of the other fourteen former Soviet republics, but increasingly Russian policy has aimed to achieve a position of strong influence over the new states in its region, a project aided and justified by Eurasian ideas. Part of this policy has been to prevent a hostile and powerful alliance from occupying those areas claimed as naturally allied with Russia.

4. U.S. Policy Toward Post-Soviet Russia

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, the U.S. was left as the sole superpower. A triumphalist mood took over the U.S. ruling elite. The Pentagon issued a defense plan in 1992 that stated that US policy would aim to prevent the emergence of any state, or group of states, with the potential to challenge the dominant position of the U.S. in the global system.⁷ This was a clear expression of the U.S. imperialist determination to maintain its unchallenged position as the global hegemon in the capitalist world, which had now expanded dramatically to include domination of practically the entire globe.

The economic interests of U.S. big business played a role. Every U.S. Administration since the first Bush Presidency has tried to gain a dominant position over the rich natural resources and the markets in the post-Soviet space for U.S. corporations. Soon after the breakup of the USSR, in oil-rich Azerbaijan a consortium of international oil companies got the contract to develop its oil. The consortium included ExxonMobil, Amoco, and UNOCAL, as well as BP of the UK and companies from other European countries. Russia's Lukoil soon dropped out of the consortium. In Kazakhstan a big joint venture to develop oil production was built that was 50% owned by ChevronTexaco and 25% by Exxon Mobil, with a Russian company holding 5%.

Why did the U.S. spurn Yeltsin's plea to attach Russia to U.S. imperialism and then Putin's suggestion of Russian membership in NATO? The pre-Revolutionary Russian Empire had been allied with the U.S. before it was overthrown by the Bolsheviks. However, despite the overthrow of the Communist-led regime, the U.S. elite regarded post-Soviet Russia uneasily.

Clearly Russia was regarded as a potential rival and threat to U.S. domination. Although Russia no longer had a rival socioeconomic system, and was no longer ruled by a Communist Party, it had a powerful nuclear armed military, was becoming a major energy and raw material supplier in the global market, and its capitalist class had kept U.S. and west European interests out of its most profitable sectors. It may be that there was also a fear that the Communist Party might return to power in Russia at some point.

There was a strong case for dismantling NATO in 1992. It had been formed to oppose the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies, and there was no Soviet Union and no Warsaw Pact any longer. Instead, the U.S. rulers decided to build up NATO by bringing in the former Warsaw Pact allies of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. The mission of NATO was transformed from an anti-Soviet alliance to an extension of the U.S. drive to dominate the world. NATO swiftly took on the character of an anti-Russian alliance, as the U.S. sought to bring as many of the former republics of the USSR into NATO as possible (except of course Russia), which would ring the Russian state's borders with NATO members and NATO weapons.

The quick accession to NATO membership of the former Baltic republics put NATO relatively close to St. Peterburg, but they are small states unlikely to directly pose a threat to Russia. However, Ukraine was the big prize for NATO. It had the second largest population of the Soviet Union's former republics and a significant industrial base and agricultural resources. Ukraine has a 1,426 mile long border with Russia that at its closest point is only 523 miles from Moscow. NATO forces in Ukraine would be similar to Russian or Chinese forces in Mexico or Canada. In a world of capitalist states with conflicting imperialist interests, Ukraine in NATO would guarantee Russian subordination to the U.S. on terms the U.S. ruling class could dictate.

Thus, the U.S. aim of incorporating Ukraine into NATO ran up against Russia's drive to assert an independent position in the global system as well as its determination to maintain a

position of strong influence in Ukraine. The Putin regime did not oppose trade and other economic relations between Ukraine and the West – Russia itself also built trade and investment links with the West. But the Putin regime was determined to keep Ukraine neutral and to preserve its influential position in Ukraine.

5. The Evolution of Post-Soviet Ukraine's Relation with Russia

Russians view Ukraine's capital Khiv/Kiev⁸ as the place where Russian culture and national identity originated.⁹ Ukraine had been part of Russia or the USSR since 1654. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Ukraine became one of the fifteen republics in the Soviet Union. Ukraine became a sovereign state for the first time when the USSR was taken apart at the end of 1991.

The Soviet State was highly centralized, with little authority vested in the republic level. The Soviet economy was also highly centralized, and the Ukrainian Republic's economy was tightly integrated with that of the Russian Republic in the Soviet Union. Ukraine's economy was centered around chemicals, metals, and other manufacturing industries that depended on raw materials from Russia and distributed the outputs throughout the Soviet Union under the economic plan. Ukraine was also a major source of agricultural products in the Soviet Union. When Yeltsin began pushing for a shift of sovereignty from the union state to the republics from his position as leader of the Russian republic in 1990-91, many Soviet citizens of Ukrainian ethnicity were puzzled at the previously inconceivable idea of separation of Ukraine from Russia.¹⁰

In 1992 Ukraine suddenly emerged as a separate state and immediately entered a depression even more severe and longer lasting than that of post-Soviet Russia. As in post-Soviet Russia, a small group of fast and well-place operators seized ownership of the previously state owned enterprises. A class of super-rich oligarch emerged that has dominated Ukraine's

economy and politics. The oligarchs were divided between those who favored retaining close ties with Russia and others who leaned toward the EU. The population was also divided about evenly, between those in the east who leaned toward Russia and were native Russian speakers and those in the west who identified with the EU and spoke Ukrainian.

From 1992 to 2013 Ukraine balanced between its two powerful neighbors, Russia and the EU. The presidency went back and forth between Russian-leaning and EU-leaning figures, but all of them ended up balancing between the two powers during those two decades. The Ukrainian government's official position had been one of neutrality between Russia and NATO since 1992. Then in 2008 the U.S. pushed through a measure in NATO calling for a path to membership for Ukraine. However, Ukraine's policy of neutrality remained in place until 2014.

In February 2014 an armed uprising overthrew the democratically elected president, Viktor Yanukovitch, and installed a new government that decisively shifted Ukraine's orientation. The U.S. State Department played a role in encouraging the uprising and even in selecting the members of the new administration installed by the uprising. On December 23, 2014, the parliament installed by that uprising voted to abandon the neutral "non-bloc" status and instead seek NATO membership (RFERL 2014). The Ukrainian Party of Regions, the leading Russian-leaning party which was one of the largest parties in Ukraine, was repressed, and the use of the Russian language in official business was banned.

The uprising and the following anti-Russian actions of the new regime in Khiv horrified the population of the eastern Russian-identified regions. In Crimea, which had been part of Russia rather than Ukraine for centuries before Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gifted it to the Ukrainian Republic in 1954, the largely Russian-speaking population panicked and demanded rejoining Russia. A wave of nationalism swept the Russian population, leading to Russian military intervention to seize Crimea. That act garnered almost unanimous support in Russia,

even winning an endorsement from former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, an internationalist who as Soviet leader had declined to use force to hold the Soviet Union together. Leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces in the Donbas region along the Russian border launched uprisings that declared independence as sovereign “peoples’ republics.” It was notable that the Putin government did not recognize their independence at that time. It was clear that Russia’s aim was to maintain influence over Ukraine, and separating the eastern provinces from Ukraine would make that much more difficult by removing a large part of the electorate that had leaned toward Russia.

A brutal civil war broke out between the government in Khiv and the breakaway provinces in the Donbas. A negotiation in Minsk, Belarus, involving Ukraine, Russia, the rebel heads of the breakaway Donbass provinces, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) gave rise to a series of agreements culminating in the Minsk II accord in February 2015. Germany and France also participated, and the U.S. promised to respect the resulting agreements, which called for a cease-fire in the Donbas region, withdrawal of all foreign military equipment, semi-autonomy for the Donbas provinces, and a guarantee of Ukrainian sovereignty and independence. While the U.S. was not a signatory, it promised to respect the accord. However, the new Ukrainian government in Kyiv launched a renewed assault to regain control of the Donbas. Instead of respecting the Minsk II Accord, the U.S. sent a growing volume of military aid and trainers to assist the Kvin regime in its offensive to regain control of Donbas. That war went on from 2014 to 2021, resulting in an estimated 14,000 deaths in the Donbas region (Benjamin and Davies, 2022).

During 2021 the U.S.-supported military action to reclaim control of the Donbas region continued to escalate. There were rumors of a coming big push by the Kyiv regime to win a decisive victory. Putin demanded that the U.S. negotiate with Russia about the intensifying

Ukraine crisis. In March-April 2021 a Russian troop build-up along the border with Ukraine began. On December 17, 2021, Russia sent two draft treaties, one with the U.S. and one with NATO, aimed at resolving the Ukraine crisis (Kramer and Erlanger, 2021). It called for withdrawing NATO's path to membership for Ukraine, a ban on NATO deployment of offensive weapons in states neighboring Russia, and a ban on major military exercises along both sides of Russia's western border. The Russian Foreign minister indicated the draft treaties were intended to be a basis for negotiation, not final demands. The U.S. and NATO rejected any consideration of the Russian proposals, refusing to meet to discuss them. Then on Feb. 24, 2022, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine.¹¹ Russia declared its aims to be the protection of the people of the Donbas region, the de-Nazification of Ukraine, and neutrality for Ukraine. The US, NATO, and the main U.S. allies in Europe responded with massive military support for the Ukrainian government.

What was the basis of Russia's claim that Nazis ran Ukraine? The February 2014 uprising that overthrew the Yanukovitch government was led by two heavily armed right-wing nationalist organizations with neo-Nazi roots, Svoboda and Right Sektor, which also promoted white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and extreme hostility to Russians. While the political representation of those groups in the post-coup administration and parliament declined rapidly after the uprising, they remained active in street protests, and anti-Russian nationalism became a powerful force in Ukraine thereafter. The neo-Nazi Azov Battalion played a leading role in the new regime's military offensive to regain control of the Donbas starting in 2014.

In 2019 Volodymyr Zelensky, a comedian and political outsider, was elected President of Ukraine with 73% of the vote by promising peace through negotiation with Russia. However, after taking office, Zelensky switched his position and intensified the war to retake the Donbas with U.S. support. Some analysts claim that Zelensky's switch was prompted by threats of

removal from office or even death from the powerful neo-Nazi organizations if he negotiated with Moscow (Benjamin and Davies, 2014).

6. Causes and Effects of the War

The most frequently cited interpretations of the Ukraine War from official U.S. spokespeople and the mainstream media are the following four: 1) It is a war between autocracy, represented by Putin's Russia, and democracy, represented by Ukraine. This interpretation is sometimes extended to the argument that failing to assure a victory for democracy in the Ukraine war would lead to another military confrontation between autocracy and democracy in the China-Taiwan conflict. 2) It is a war launched by a power-mad dictator seeking to restore the USSR or the Russian Empire, and perhaps to seize other states in Europe. Sometimes this argument is supplemented by the claim that Eurasian ideology is driving Russia's actions. 3) The war stems from a belief on the part of Putin that Ukraine has no right to independent statehood and must become part of the Russian state. This belief is also attributed to the hold of Eurasian ideas. 4) Putin is lashing out at the U.S. and NATO out of an unfounded belief that they threaten Russia's national security and are aiming to destroy Russia.

None of the above portrayals is persuasive. Russia is indeed an autocracy in this era, but Ukraine has a similar system. Before the current war elections in Ukraine were more often honest than in Putin's Russia. However, powerful oligarchs dominate Ukraine's politics, while armed extreme right wing organizations directly interfere in political decisions. After the war with Russia began, the Ukrainian government banned all significant opposition political parties and seized control of all the major mass media. There is a serious conflict raging today between autocracy and democracy, but it is within states, including the U.S., not between states.

Second, there is no evidence that Putin is an irrational actor or that he aims to restore the USSR or the old Russian empire. While he voices nostalgia for some features of the Soviet

period – as do a high proportion of the population in most of the former republics of the Soviet Union – Putin has severely criticized both the former Soviet system, the former ruling Communist Party, and Communist and Marxist ideas. The suggestion that Putin aims to seize countries to the West that were never associated with Russia in a state or empire is pure fiction, confusing the expansionism of Nazi Germany with the aims of Putin’s Russia.

Third, in some speeches Putin has complained about the separation of Ukraine from Russia when the Soviet Union broke up. Putin has raised Eurasianist themes in his speeches, sometimes questioning whether the current Ukrainian “Nazified” state is legitimate. However, Putin has never cited the absorption of Ukraine into the Russian state as an aim. The broad Russian elite not would have supported a war of conquest of Ukraine. If incorporating Ukraine into the Russian state were the underlying aim of the war, it would not have elicited the strong support from the Russian elite and the Russian people that followed Russia’s invasion.

On numerous occasions Putin has stated his support for Ukrainian statehood. The claim that Eurasian ideology dictates a drive to absorb neighboring states is misleading. Some fringe followers of Eurasian ideas have taken an extreme position calling for Russian sovereignty over Ukraine, but that vision is not held by a significant part of the Russian elite nor apparently by Putin. When the U.S. decisively rejected negotiation with Russia over the role the U.S. and NATO have been playing in Ukraine in December 2022, that threat the gave rise to broad support for the invasion among the Russian elite as well as the Russian population.

Fourth, Putin, along with the rest of Russia’s elite, does indeed believe that the U.S. and NATO are threatening Russia’s national security, but that is an entirely rational belief. The U.S. always claims that an extension of U.S. power into a region is beneficial for all parties, but few others see it that way. Why was the U.S. response to the Soviet Union’s placement of missiles in Cuba reasonable and justified, while Russia’s outrage at the prospect of NATO forces along

more than 1400 miles of its western border a case of paranoia? How can the U.S. claim with a straight face that every country has the right to join any alliance they wish to join, given the long U.S. history of challenging that very right, starting with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.

The primary underlying cause of the Ukraine War is the inter-imperialist rivalry between the U.S. and Russia. On one side, the dominant global hegemon U.S. is determined to maintain and extend its control of every location in the world and, specifically, to gain the leverage to prevent Russia from being able to act independently in the global system. On the other side is the newly capitalist and imperialist Russian state, much weaker than the U.S. together with its allies, but aiming to secure its border regions, particularly the part close to its major cities and government centers, to maintain and extend its influence over states along its border region, and to preserve its ability to act independently in the global arena.

Each side is reflecting the interests of its ruling capitalist class. The rise of a nationalist ideology in Russia, in the form of Eurasianism, is providing justification for Russia's imperialist aims. On the other side, the ideology of beneficent domination by the U.S. provides justification for the 750 US military bases spread around the world, the many U.S. overt and covert interventions, and the U.S. actions that played a central role in leading to the Ukraine War of 2022. The U.S. ideology claims that U.S. power exercised abroad always promotes democracy, freedom, and economic progress, despite the long history that belies such claims.

The interpretation of the Ukraine War presented here indicates that Russia's invasion was indeed provoked, contrary to the repeated claims to the contrary from Washington. However, that does not mean the invasion was justified. While Russia's invasion was provoked by the aggressive U.S. imperialist policy in that region, that does not justify a brutal invasion of a neighboring state. The huge amount of human suffering and economic loss highlighted daily in the U.S. media is real, although one wished the U.S. media had covered with equal sympathy the

equally huge human suffering and economic loss resulting from recent U.S. and U.S.-supported invasions outside of Europe such as in Iraq and Yemen. Also, it has become increasingly obvious that the consequences of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine will be almost uniformly negative for Russia.

While it is too early to be certain, the following appear to be likely consequences of Russia's invasion: 1) Much and perhaps most of the part of the Ukrainian population that had leaned toward Russia have been driven into a long-lasting hostility to Russia by the horrific effects of the invasion, greatly weakening the prospect of future Russian influence in Ukraine; 2) the anti-Russian alliance NATO, which had been struggling for relevance, has been energized, with previously neutral states such as Finland and Sweden asking to join; 3) European states that had pursued friendly relations with Russia, in particularly Germany, have decisively turned against Russia; 4) Russia's military, previously viewed as modernized and strong, has been exposed as weak and ineffective; 5) Support in Congress for even more military spending has become almost unanimous; 6) A serious danger of a nuclear confrontation between the U.S. and Russia has emerged. The sole likely advantage Russia may have gained from the invasion is that Ukraine's accession to NATO may have become less likely to happen in the future

7. Concluding Comments

A major war typically begins when one state uses military force to attack another state. However, the question of who fired first is not the same as the search for the underlying factors that led to a war. While the U.S. was involved politically and militarily in Ukraine prior to February 2022, Russia clearly fired first to launch the Ukraine War. However, the key underlying factors include imperialist drives on the part of both Russia and the U.S.

Rivalries between powerful capitalist states are an inevitable feature of a world divided into capitalist states. Such rivalries will sometimes give rise to devastating wars, with enormous

costs for ordinary people. As long as capitalism persists, avoiding such wars requires efforts to reach compromises between the conflicting imperial ambitions of large capitalist states. Big state influence over smaller states around its borders can be resisted with force of arms by other big states only at the cost of war and its attendant destruction.

If a future socialist world is similarly divided into nation-states, then without the capitalist drive to dominate across borders it may be possible to avoid wars without validating an unjustified big-state domination of smaller states. However, an evolution toward removing the instruments of war from nation-states in a future socialist world may be the only way to finally banish war from human society.

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Notes

1. Lenin wrote “[ancient] Rome ... achieved imperialism” (Lenin [1917] 1939, p. 82). Lenin did not think ancient Rome had a monopoly/finance capitalist system.
2. Some states have lacked an imperialist drive. The Japanese feudal state was inward-looking, avoiding interaction with the outside world, until powerful capitalist states intervened and forced it to open up.
3. Much of this section is based on Kotz and Weir, 2007.
4. The Soviet Union was made of fifteen republics. In this paper we will use simplified names for those republics in the Soviet era. For example, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic will be shortened to the Russian Republic. The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic will be referred to as the Ukrainian Republic.
5. Yeltsin made a trip to the U.S. during his rise to power, financed by an anti-Castro Cuban organization in Florida. It proved to be a wise investment. An early act of President Yeltsin after Russia became an independent state was to cut off aid to Cuba. Yelstin clearly focused on currying favor with the U.S.
6. “Eurasianism can be defined as an ideology which affirms that Russia and its ‘margins’ occupy a median position between Europe and Asia, that their specific features have to do with their culture being a "mix" born of the fusion of Slavic and Turko-Muslim peoples, and that Russia should specifically highlight its Asian features. Eurasianism rejects the view that Russia is on the periphery of Europe, and on the contrary interprets the country's geographic location as grounds for a kind of messianic "third way." From Klump (2022).
7. From the Pentagon’s Defense Planning Guidance of 1992: “Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia.” Source:
https://militarist-monitor.org/profile/1992_draft_defense_planning_guidance/.
8. Ukraine and Russia differ over the spelling of the capital city of Ukraine. In Ukraine is it Khiv while in Russia it is Kiev. We will use the Ukrainian version.
9. The Kievan Rus’ lasted from the late 9th to the mid-13th century.
10. In 1991 a mid-level Soviet official I met in Moscow whose ethnicity was predominantly Ukrainian said to me “It looks like Ukraine might become a separate country from Russia, isn’t that outrageous?” Many urban families had complex mixtures of ethnicity at that time.
11. Russia finally recognized the independence of the two breakaway Donbass provinces three days before the invasion.