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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Ukraine Conflict as a Case of the Political Contradictions of Contemporary Imperialism

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the role of politics and ideology in post-Cold War imperialism, focusing on the current conflict between Russia, Ukraine, the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the European Union. The article argues that primary causes are not economic but primarily political and ideological. While there are clear *raisons d'état* that explain all sides' decisions, the article claims that there is a contradiction between the *raisons d'état* and an objectively rational assessment of the stated goals and the actors' ability to attain them. The article concludes that while the Marxist understanding of imperialism includes a focus on both its political and economic dynamics, they can sometimes over-emphasize the economic and objective rationality of political decisions. The current conflict in Ukraine, the article will argue, is a paradigm example of *raisons d'état* becoming unhinged from objectively rational strategies and economically rational capitalist motives.

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In separate interventions, well-known Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek and Democratic Socialists of America member Ashley Smith broke from the consensus on the Western Left against the war in Ukraine and openly called for the victory of Ukrainian forces (Žižek 2022; Smith 2022).¹ In Žižek's case, his argument explicitly demanded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) support for Ukrainian forces, while Smith argued against NATO arms shipments but in favor of Ukrainian victory. Žižek and Smith both celebrate the heroism of Ukrainian resistance, with Žižek arguing that they have “risked the impossible, defying pragmatic calculations, and the least we owe them is full support, and to do this, we need a stronger NATO—but not as a prolongation of the US politics” (Žižek 2022). What exactly a NATO that is not a prolongation of US politics would be Žižek cannot say, since NATO without US support would simply not exist. His position is as fantastical as Smith's belief that Ukraine can win against Russia without NATO support (Smith 2022).

Both Smith and Žižek appear to understand the resistance to the Russian invasion on the model of post-World War Two national liberation struggles against colonialism. However, they ignore the key difference: those national liberation movements were led by parties seeking to defeat colonialism as a necessary condition for the creation of

socialism. The fate of those revolutions is not my concern here, but the proper response of leftists to the war in Ukraine is. I will argue that while the Russian invasion was both unjustified and illegal, leftists should not support one side against the other but call for negotiations and peace. This position has in fact predominated on the left, but I want to set my version of it in the context of a critical discussion of the Marxist understanding of imperialism. In particular, I want to highlight certain shortcomings in the Marxist understanding of the political dimension of imperialist rivalry.

I want to highlight the need for a better understanding of the relative autonomy of politics in international relations. However, I want to be clear at outset that I am not going to develop a systematic alternative to existing Marxist theories. I do not disagree that the standard Marxist claim that the politics of imperialism must be understood as governed, over the long term, by the accumulation of capital as the deep structural driver of capitalist international relations. However, I do agree with Kubalkova and Cruickshank that typically Marxists have rejected the “possibility of an analysis segregating ‘economic’ from ‘political’” because “it is never states but class formations . . . [that] are considered to be the main analytical units and class struggle . . . the motive force in world politics” (Kubalkova and Cruickshank 1985, 17). While I remain committed to the view that class struggle is the ultimate transformative power in domestic and international political affairs, I want to argue that Marxists must sometimes focus on states as political agents motivated by (contested) definitions of the national interest. I am motivated to make this argument by my concern with social peace as both condition and goal of socialism.² While the long-term structural tendencies of capitalist competition lead to repeated international conflicts, not every political crisis needs to be resolved by war. In order to intervene politically in an effective way on the side of peaceful resolution of inter-state conflicts, I believe that Marxists sometimes need to shift focus from long-term structural tendencies of capitalist political economy and analyze the immediate, day to day terms of diplomacy and political interaction. There we will find, I believe, roads not taken that, had they been followed, would have avoided war and the massive costs to the working class on both sides of the conflict that military violence causes.

In order to make my case I will draw on some general insights of realist and neo-classical realist international relations theory. Again, I am not attempting to effect a novel, systematic synthesis of Marxism and realism or neo-classical realism. My goal is only to supplement the Marxist critique of the political economy of imperialism with specifically political insights that can help us understand the concrete rationality and—as I will argue—irrationality of political conflict in international affairs. Methodologically, my argument begins from the position that historical materialism is not based on abstract principles of analysis or a priori assumptions about causal forces but on the concrete analysis of concrete situations. Marx himself stressed the importance of concrete analysis as the key to understanding historical materialism when he explained to Russian supporters that historical materialism was not an abstract philosophy of history (Marx 1979, 321–322). Theoretical generalization develops from concrete analysis of specific events and is always open to revision in light of changed circumstances. Thus, where the concrete situation warrants, Marxists must not be afraid to examine the political minutiae of the actual development of events so that they can most effectively intervene on the aide of social peace.

This paper will examine an example of the role of politics and ideology in post-Cold War imperialism. I will argue that the political decisions that led to the current conflict between Russia, Ukraine, US, NATO, and the European Union (EU) were not driven by any underlying capitalist economic rationality. These decisions have been motivated by clear *raisons d'état*, but these reasons appear irrational from the perspective of an objectively rational assessment of the actors' goals and ability to attain them.³ I will use the term *raisons d'état* broadly to refer to the form and content of the plans, strategies, tactics, and justifications that countries use in the complex game of international relations. I will argue that Marxists can sometimes over-emphasize the economic and objective rationality of these reasons because they are sometimes too quick to seek out structural economic causes beneath *raisons d'état*.

If it is true, as I will argue, that Marxists have to pay more attention to the day-to-day political debates and decisions that drive some international political conflicts, then Marxists need to intervene in the short-term on the side of diplomacy, negotiations, and social peace. The long-term objective of building a socialist alternative to capitalism goes without saying. However, anti-Western imperialism is not enough, while support for Ukraine, as Žižek and Smith urge, cannot, objectively speaking, be distinguished from support for NATO and US imperialist aims. Consequently, Marxists must take an active pro-peace stance that exposes the political contradictions which caused the belligerents to miss opportunities for negotiations, diplomacy, and peace.

My argument will be articulated in three sections. In the first, I will examine the efforts of Marxists to develop a systematic understanding of the political dimensions of imperialism. I will begin by defending the continued salience of the language of imperialism against liberal-cosmopolitan beliefs that we have entered a new era of international law and human rights. North-South relations continue to display all the hallmarks of imperialist domination. While the economic understanding of new forms of imperialist relationship is highly developed, the corresponding Marxist understanding of the politics of international relationships is less fully formed. David Harvey and Alex Callinicos have both insisted on the need to develop a properly Marxist understanding of the political dimension of international relations, but when it comes to the problem of explaining actual international conflicts, both tend to favour explanations that seek out the underlying economic drivers of conflict. They thus fail to appreciate the possibility and political significance of what I will argue are objectively irrational political decisions.

The second part will examine the current crisis in Ukraine. I will argue that a proper Marxist response needs to be rooted in an understanding of the political contradictions between the actual decisions made by the key actors and alternative possibilities closed off by the actors' interpretation of *raisons d'état*. The point of the second part is to lend substance to Marxist demands for peace. These must be rooted in objective political possibilities and not just a platitudinous revulsion against war. Hence, the importance of exposing the specifically political contradictions of international relations is to lend material support to Marxist demands for negotiations and peace. The analysis uncovers possibilities for peaceful resolution of the conflict that went unrealized demonstrating that were refused because of the parties political and ideological commitments.

In the final part I will make clear how my position differs from the realist position that international conflict and war is a permanent condition of human political life. The value of the Marxist critique of imperialist social and economic relationships makes itself felt

here. Peace between people is possible once the material structural dependencies and inequalities definitive of imperialism are overcome. All Marxist interventions into the day-to-day political tensions of contemporary reality are focused on building movements that can progressively overcome these dependencies and inequalities. In the short term, Marxists must actively condemn the war by exposing the irrational decisions all sides have made and take an openly pro-peace position. It ultimately does not matter to the people who lose their lives for the grand strategic vision they have fallen victim to. In every case, Marxists must condemn the sacrifice of human life and support the short-term political conditions which protect it.

1. The Dialectic of Economic Forces and Political Interests in International Relations

The end of the Cold War led many liberal commentators to believe that the age of imperialism was over. Cosmopolitan philosophers argued that a new international legal order was emerging. Henceforth national sovereignty would be conditional upon respect for human rights. Economically, the exploitation of the Global South was being replaced by real steps towards achieving substantive equality between and within nations. David Held, one of the most astute defenders of cosmopolitanism, writing with Thomas Hale and Kevin Young argued that imperial relationships between North and South have been overcome.

A plethora of institutions has developed to “govern” the global economy in the postwar period. These institutions have evolved as the global economy has grown larger and more interdependent. . . . Despite the many shortcomings of this system . . . its ability to execute global policy initiatives is a considerable achievement, especially when viewed historically. The emergence of a complex system of institutions, international covenants, processes, and other legal mechanisms has prevented a return to the beggar thy neighbor chaos of the interwar period, or to the nineteenth century style of imperial domination. (Hale, Held, and Young 2013, 147)

Hale, Held, and Young believe that since there is no longer a *colonial* relationship between North and South there is no longer an *imperial* relationship.

Realist international relations theory exposes the naiveté of this liberal account of post-Cold War international politics. Removing one cause of conflict does not eliminate all the causes of conflict because the international arena is anarchic and international law does not constrain great powers when they decide that they must act to protect their interests. Morgenthau’s second principle of realism states,

The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. This concept provides the link between reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood. It sets politics as an autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres, such as economics (understood in terms of interest defined as wealth), ethics, aesthetics, or religion. (Morgenthau 1978).

All states have defined political interests and relative power to enforce them. Those with superior power tend to expand their sphere of influence and their control over the territories and resources of other societies. International law is but a weak constraint on

great powers. If they can use it to their advantage they will; if they cannot, they will ignore it. The maximization of state advantage is a trans-historical constant. From the realist perspective, there is thus little difference between the Roman Empire of antiquity and the British Empire.

For Marxists, there is an essential difference between pre-capitalist and capitalist imperialism. While ancient empires also appropriated the resources of the lands they conquered, even the highly developed Roman economy was not driven by an inner expansionary dynamic. Capitalist imperialism, by contrast, is driven by the need to expand accumulation on a global scale. Lenin argued that the key to understanding specifically capitalist imperialism was the need for the developed capitalist countries to export capital, i.e., to find undeveloped economic spaces where surplus capital could be put to work (Lenin 1970, 76). “The interests pursued in exporting capital also give an impetus to the conquest of colonies, for in the colonial market it is easier to employ monopolist methods” (Lenin 1970, 100). However, it was Rosa Luxemburg who pioneered the contemporary Marxist understanding of the relationship between imperialism and the conquest of pre- and non-capitalist spaces. Luxemburg argued in her path-breaking work that the expanded reproduction of capital depended upon finding non-capitalist sources of labour, raw materials, and markets (Luxemburg 1951, 351–353). While today Africa and Asia have successfully liberated themselves from colonial domination, capitalist imperialism has changed forms rather than disappeared. The need to accumulate capital on a global level remains the system driver, but political maneuvering is not explicable solely as a response to the needs of capital accumulation. Luxemburg recognized that Marxist explanations still had to deploy concepts like spheres of influence and examine the explicit motivations of the political wing of the ruling class.

Today, the structure of imperialism has changed. The most innovative work in the Marxist theory of imperialism agrees with realism that the liberal belief in the constraining power of international law is naive, but rejects the realist view that international relations must remain a war of all against all.⁴ International relations are a war of all against all only to the extent that the structures of international domination and exploitation remain intact. Contemporary Marxists agree that formal colonial relationships have been overthrown, but bring to light the economic structures of exploitation which perpetuate the imperial power of the United States and the Global North over the Global South.

Jason Hickel explains why the age of imperialism did not end with the decolonization of the Global South or the rivalries of the Cold War. Imperialism changed form but continued its deadly assault on living standards in the Global South. Capitalism exploits labour, but the rate of exploitation is not equal across societies. The classical age of imperialism depended upon the direct political and economic domination of colonized countries. The new imperialism has done away with direct political rule in favour of effective control over the labour and public policy of formerly colonized societies. Capital is a global system and global accumulation depends upon the global circulation of capital. However, profits largely flow from the Global South to the Global North. The super-exploitation of the labour of the Global South is thus the key condition for the profitability of corporations based largely in the Global North. The contemporary form this super-exploitation takes was shaped in response to the economic crisis of the 1970’s.

To deal with the crisis of the 1970s, capital needed a way to restore the imperial arrangement... The final blow was delivered by the World Bank and IMF, which during the 1980s and 1990s imposed neo-liberal structural adjustment programs across the region. This move shifted control over economic policy from the national parliaments of the South to the technocrats in Washington and bankers in New York and London. (Hickel 2021)

The effective control over the life-conditions of people in the Global South remained the same as in the old imperialism, but the mechanism of rule switched from colonial domination to financial coercion.

Looking more deeply into the new economic mechanisms of imperial domination, Suwandi, Jonna, and Foster highlight global supply chains as a crucial factor. Capitalist profits depend largely on the cost of variable capital—labour. As the price of labour increased in the Global North, production was shifted to the Global South. This move both decreased absolute labour costs and generated tremendous pressure on working class organizations in the Global North. Today, production is elaborated along complex supply chains which keep costs low by relying largely upon super-exploited labour.⁵ Super-exploitation exists wherever “the difference in wages is greater than the difference in productivity between the Global North and the Global South” (Suwandi, Jonna, and Foster 2019, 5). The major institutions of the contemporary capitalist economy mistake super-exploitation for economic “growth” in the Global South. Cosmopolitan theorists can thus conclude that imperialism is over because its nineteenth century political forms have been discarded. However, the underlying economic mechanisms of domination and exploitation remain. “This enormous gulf between North and South arises” they argue, “from a system that allows for the free international mobility of capital, while tightly restraining the international mobility of labour” (5–6). Of course, Northern states can still intervene politically where recalcitrant regimes break a little too free of the structure of control, encouraging coups, as in Venezuela. However, the primary mechanism of coercion is exercised through the very institutions that cosmopolitans look to as alternatives to the old imperialism.

The connection between capitalist accumulation and imperialism is not accidental. As U. Padnaik and P. Padnaik have argued, imperialism remains essential to the global circulation and accumulation of capital. They reject the view that neo-liberalism has undermined state power. There has been a “change in the nature of the state itself” rather than a complete sidelining of state power (Padnaik and Padnaik 2021, 267).

Contemporary globalization implies... that within each country, not just in metropolitan countries but in others as well, there is a corporate-financial oligarchy, which is globalized, in the sense of going all over the world in quest of gain instead of seeking an exclusive economic territory of its own. (267–268)

The general fault lines of economic conflict (for example, between China and the United States), are explicable as a result of competition for markets and resources on a global scale.

The main economic driver of globalization according to Padnaik and Padnaik is the capitalist need to suppress supply costs. Raw materials and labour are the key factors determining supply costs, and they are largely suppressed by the subordination of the lives and life-interests of workers in the Global South to the interests of capital based

in the Global North. Imperialism is the systematic subordination of the lives and life-interests of people in the periphery and the politics, laws, and policies that structure their lives to the interests of the ruling class in the metropolitan countries. Imperialism is a structure of control that can be exercised in different ways. Hence capitalism remains imperialist even though its older political form has been shed.

Imperialism . . . ensures that the phenomenon of increasing supply prices does not actually manifest itself. In fact . . . it is not just one possible device, but the device typically used by capitalism for this purpose. Whence it follows that imperialism is immanent in the money form itself. (Padnaik and Padnaik 2015, 71)

The world has not exited the age of imperialism, as the cosmopolitans believe, but entered a new phase in which the primary fault line is between the Global North and the Global South.

However, other regions are also drawn into the imperialist orbit of Northern capital. The major prize for winning the Cold War was vast reserves of relatively cheap labour in Eastern Europe. The incorporation of Eastern Europe into the Western (Northern) capitalist camp posed a different set of ideological and political challenges. These ideological and political challenges raise the question of how Marxists should understand the relationship between the global economic drivers of imperialist exploitation and the interstate political relationships that dominate international relations. This problem was the subject of important work by David Harvey and Alex Callinicos, both of whom argued that in order to understand the politics of imperialism, certain assumptions from the realist school of international relations had to be brought on board.

Both Harvey and Callinicos argue that capital accumulation remains the structural driver of the “new imperialism.” However, they are equally insistent that political factors play an irreducible role in the interactions between states in the global capitalist system. I agree with both that international relations are shaped by a dialectic between economic forces and political interests. However, in some cases (the current conflict in Ukraine being one) political factors take on a life of their own and drive policy, at least in the short term. While I believe that a complete Marxist theory of international relations requires the integration of concepts appropriate to the politics as a distinct level, my aim here is not to produce a complete theory but only to justify the need through my analysis of the Ukraine conflict. Before turning to that analysis, I must explain what I take the shortcomings of Harvey’s and Callinicos’s arguments to be.

Harvey argues that capital is always in flow, but the way it is channeled depends upon political factors as much as endogenous laws of accumulation. Factories occupy land, minerals must be dug from the earth, ports must be built to dock the ships that transport raw materials and finished goods from their source to their destination. These logistical conditions presuppose control over space. Since one use of space precludes other uses, and there are multiple potential users of space with different interests, struggles over space are a key cause of political conflict, both nationally and internationally. Where there are large indigenous populations, for example, intense conflicts continually break out between national states serving the interests of domestic and foreign capital and indigenous peoples defending their traditional lands.⁶ The throughline connecting eighteenth and nineteenth century imperialism to its twenty-first century form is the practice that David Harvey has aptly named “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey

2005, 67). During what Marx called the “primitive accumulation of capital” peasants were driven from the land and traditional commons enclosed (Marx 1986a, 667–724). While indigenous peoples still face violent expropriation, dispossession typically proceeds by other means today. Harvey concurs with Hickle, Suwandi, Jonna and Foster, and Padnaik and Padnaik that financial coercion has become the primary mechanism of dispossession today. The creation of artificial financial dependencies, the commodification of formerly public goods, the privatization of public institutions, and the extraction of rents through patents and intellectual property rights all combine to separate direct producers from the material conditions of their lives (Harvey 2005, 137–182).

Harvey maintains that the relationship between structural economic forces and political interests is not mechanical. Capitalist imperialism is driven by a

contradictory fusion of the “politics of state and empire” (imperialism as a distinctively political project on the part of actors whose power is based in command of a territory) . . . and the molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time (imperialism as a diffuse political-economic process in space and time in which command over and use of capital takes primacy). (Harvey 2005, 26)

He turns to the work of Giovanni Arrighi to explain the contradiction between the economic and political:

What Arrighi refers to as the “territorial” and the “capitalist” logics of power are rather different from one another. To begin with, the motivations and the interests of agents differ. The capitalist holding money capital will wish to put it wherever profits can be had, and typically seeks to accumulate more capital. Politicians and statesmen typically seek outcomes that sustain or augment the power of their own state vis-à-vis other states. (Harvey 2005, 27)

Since these interests differ, there is always the possibility of conflict between the two logics. Harvey’s synthesis intends to give each side appropriate weight. What Harvey does not do is to expose the possibility of a distinctly political contradiction that can emerge between the *raisons d’etat* driving states agendas and objective assessments of their political and economic interests.

Harvey follows Luxembourg in recognizing the importance of political maneuvering, but he believes that political maneuvering is ultimately determined by the “molecular” processes of capital accumulation.

It is the state that is the political entity, the body politic, that is best able to orchestrate institutional arrangements and manipulate the molecular forces of capital accumulation to preserve the pattern of asymmetries that are the most advantageous to the dominant capitalist interests working within this frame. . . . Imperialism, in this domain, amounts to foisting institutional arrangements and conditions upon others, usually in the name of universal well-being. (Harvey 2005, 132–133)

Thus, despite his argument that there is a contradictory relationship between the logics of politics and the logics of capital accumulation, Harvey tends to explain geo-political events as driven, in the final analysis, by economic processes.

Take for example his discussion of the political and economic drivers of the Second Gulf War. He rightfully goes beyond simplistic economic reductionist arguments that the demonization of Saddam and the attempt to connect him to 9/11 was nothing but a ploy to seize Iraq’s oil. Instead, he sets the conflict in the context of the wider strategic

significance of the Middle East to US strategy overall (Harvey 2005, 19). What he does not do—and this point will become crucial in the next section—is to examine in detail, from the perspective of American officials and decision makers, what other options short of war they had to pursue those objectives. The same problem recurs in his initial discussion of the Ukraine crisis (Harvey 2022). He was criticized by Ukrainian leftists for focusing only on the anti-NATO dimension of Putin’s war and not on how Ukrainians understandably view Russia as an imperial power, given the history of Tsarist and Soviet domination (Hall 2022; Bilous 2022).⁷ Callinicos is aware of the need for this sort of analysis, but tends, like Harvey, to concentrate attention on the relationship between the economic and political and not the dynamics and tensions that develop within the political logic itself.

Callinicos explicitly warns Marxists against the danger of economic reductionism in international relations (Callinicos 2009, 70). He goes further than Harvey and claims that Marxists could benefit from incorporating a realist understanding of states as political agents engaged in competition for influence and territory (82). Like realists, he accepts that the political level has some autonomy from the economic and that there are contradictions specific to global politics (67). Nevertheless, for Marxists, according to Callinicos, the key problem is not the trans-historical features of political conflict but “the articulation of the economic and the (geo)-political . . . in the context of a larger understanding of the long-term trajectory of capitalist development” (67). The danger to which Callinicos’ argument ultimately falls victim is that this attempt to grasp the articulation of the economic and the political underestimates the causal force exerted on international relations by the political level.

Callinicos sees the state system as a function of the division of capital into many national capitals. Since capital is always divided into different national capitals (and those capitals are themselves divided into different industries and sectors) all of which are pushed by the drive to accumulate, instability is built into the capitalist system. Broadly speaking, the function of state is to manage the instabilities that capitalist growth dynamics generate. “On the strategy being defended here, the state system is treated as a *dimension of the capitalist mode of production*” (Callinicos 2009, 83; italics added). True, but it is also true, as realists like Morgenthau point out, that political conflict between states or other territorially unified political entities predates capitalism and yields insights into the strictly political dimension of interstate conflict. One cannot understand the political dimension without focusing on ideas like *raisons d’etat*, spheres of interest, and chauvinistic national or ethnic ideologies. Callinicos wants to give due weight to these political factors, but when it comes to his actual principles of analysis, he reduces politics to a function of the economic.

Economic competition among “many capitals” is constitutive of the capitalist mode of production. My claim is that any development of Marx’s theory . . . must introduce, at the appropriate stage in the analysis, a distinct form of competition with its own pattern and goals, as a property of the state system. (Callinicos 2009, 83)

As Davenport argues, Callinicos never in fact provides the concepts that would explain political competition (Davenport 2011, 30). Hence, he too ignores the salience of the irrationalities that emerge between *raisons d’etat* and objective evaluation of political interests and strategies.

Callinicos does not focus on the political level because he rejects as ideological the view that the state is an autonomous defender of the “national interest.” Callinicos considers this belief the main claim of the “constructivist” school of international relations (Callinicos 2009, 93). Wendt, whose version of this theory Callinicos examines, counterposes it to what he considers to be the overly economistic approach of Marxism. Callinicos explains how historical materialism does make room for the motivational force ideas can exert on both individual and collective agents (94).⁸ Nevertheless, he does not see ideas like the national interest playing an independent role in generating political conflict. Callinicos adopts

a broadly Gramscian approach to ideology that focuses on its role in constituting collective class actors and representing their interests as universal. This approach has become increasingly influential in Marxist . . . approaches to the international, where the focus has been on how ideological representations and international institutions and networks can facilitate the transnational hegemony of a specific capitalist class. (99)

He is not wrong to stress the ideological role of constructions like “the free world” or “the national interest.” However, he fails to do justice to the role that these ideas can sometimes play in justifying policies that lead to war when other choices that would have led to a peaceful resolution of the conflict were available.

This problem is not unique to Callinicos. Davenport demonstrates convincingly that Marxists have not properly understood or responded to the challenge that realism poses to its theories of international political conflict. Callinicos and other Marxists trying to develop a historical materialist theory of international relations assume what must be explained: the existence of distinct territorial units that compete not only for resources but also for spheres of influence and prestige, that are motivated not only by markets but also by distinct conceptions of the national interest (Davenport 2011, 42). Politics is the space in which different peoples construct a conception of the good life that conflicts with that of other people, and these ethical differences are, in the realist view, the trans-historical drivers of political conflict.

The inside, the space of politics, maybe the arena in which the pursuit of the good life is made possible, but the character of its constitution is such that externally it always remains within the state of nature. . . . What Realism thus perceives with unequalled clarity is that the form of the political simultaneously creates internal unity and external division. (31)

As we saw above, Callinicos treats the internal political unity definitive of a state’s national interests as ideological, and thus does not take seriously the possibility that it can in some cases be a relatively independent causal factor in international relations. However, treating it as a relatively independent factor is exactly what taking the political level seriously would mean. Davenport attributes Callinicos’s failure to a general failure of Marxism to develop a Marxist understanding of the form of the political. I cannot satisfy Davenport’s challenge to develop such a theory here (41). However, I do want to contribute to that project by arguing that one element of such a Marxist theory of the politics of international relations must involve an understanding of contradictions specific to the political dimension of the national interest. I will develop the theoretical position by examining the ongoing conflict in the Ukraine as an example of the sort of political contradiction that Marxists need to be able to explain.

2. Politics and Ideology in the Ukraine-US-NATO-EU and Russia Conflict

The crucial difference between Marxism and realism, according to Davenport, is that Marxists over-estimate the structural rationality of international relations. That is, Marxists tend to see all conflicts as the inevitable product of economic competition and politicians as, in the final analysis, instruments of these deeper structural forces. Realists, on the other hand, try to explain how internally rational political processes can yield irrational external (international) outcomes. “The nature of the political,” he argues, “is such that the rationality and order of the delimited political space continually issue in the irrationality and disorder of the international” (Davenport 2011, 33). I agree with Davenport and realism that the international space can in some cases become irrational, but I want to explain this irrationality not as a function of trans-historical forces, as realists do, but as the consequence of political decisions undertaken under conditions of partial control over the conditions of life.

There is some connection between my position and that of neo-classical realists. They maintain that domestic factors can cause states to take decisions which undermine rather than enhance their relative power.

States do not always perceive systemic stimuli correctly. The international system may present states with relatively clear requirements, based on the relative distribution of capabilities and differential growth rates. . . . Such misperceptions can occur to any leader, particularly when faced with incomplete information about other states intentions, relative capabilities, and the likely consequences of one’s behavior. (Ripsman 2017)

My argument differs from the neo-classical realist school in that my analysis remains embedded in a Marxist understanding of the deep political-economic drivers of international conflict and because my aims are essentially political and normative, not analytic. That said, I do believe that the neo-classical realist understanding of domestic, ideological, and psychological factors helps explain what I mean by political irrationality: leaders can make decisions that undermine rather than enhance the relative power of their state. In the case of the Ukraine conflict, I believe that *all* the states involved are acting in ways that are irrational in this sense.

The current conflict must be considered in the context of the post-Cold War history of Europe. The behaviour of the member countries of both blocs during the Cold War was readily explicable in terms of political competition to add to or subtract from the space available for capital penetration. The defining interest of American imperialism was to keep as much of the world open for Western capital as possible. The ideology of protecting “freedom” and “democracy” made sense against the backdrop of geo-political competition against the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, and China.⁹ It was easy to decode the slogans. The “free world” meant the world that was freely exploitable by Western capital. “Democracy” meant pliant governments that did what the US wanted them to do. I will argue that the return of free world ideology in the post-Cold War era, an era in which Russia is not a peer-economic competitor with the West, and China, while an economic competitor, has shown no signs of wanting to engage the United States in a global geo-political and military struggle (despite the US’s effort to goad it into one), remain *causally efficacious* but unnecessary from the perspective of the structural interests of capital accumulation or a reflective and critical assessment of state interests.

It is true, on one level, as Wallerstein argued at the outset of this conflict in 2014, that American strategy is dictated by the goal of maintaining US hegemony in Europe (Wallerstein 2014). What that argument misses if it is extended to the current conflict is that the US could have maintained its hegemony without pushing Ukraine into a policy that meant war. Hence my belief that the Russia–Ukraine–US–NATO–EU conflict is a paradigm case of the political contradiction between the *raisons d'état* deployed to justify each side's decisions and alternatives that a critical and reflective analysis of those reasons could have uncovered had such critical reflection been brought to bear on the situation.

The politics of this conflict must be examined across three levels. First, it must be viewed in the context of the complex historical relationship between Ukraine and Russia. Second, it must be viewed in terms of post-Cold War US–Russia relations. Third, it must be examined in light of the on-going civil war in Donbass.

The Western mainstream media were quick to label Putin delusional after the outbreak of hostilities in February of 2022. While I will argue that Putin's decisions were irrational in the sense defined above, that does not mean that he is delusional or insane. Western experts lazily dismissed Putin as mad instead of considering the arguments that he has provided to explain his decisions. There is no better example of this refusal than the widespread derision which met Putin's essay on the historical co-development of Ukraine and Russia. I cannot analyze the details of the argument here, but there is nothing particularly outrageous in the central claims that he makes about the common origins of Russian and Ukrainian people or the long history of Russian speakers in Crimea and the Donbass. These claims were attacked in the West for purportedly denying the reality of Ukrainian nationhood (Dickenson 2021). Putin does not deny the right of Ukraine to exist as a nation, but points to the lands around Kiev as the historical homeland of both Ukrainians and Russians.

Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory—from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov—were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and—after the baptism of Rus—the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today. The throne of Kiev held a dominant position in Ancient Rus. This had been the custom since the late 9th century. The Tale of Bygone Years captured for posterity the words of Oleg the Prophet about Kiev, “Let it be the mother of all Russian cities.” Later, like other European states of that time, Ancient Rus faced a decline of central rule and fragmentation. At the same time, both the nobility and the common people perceived Rus as a common territory, as their homeland. (Putin 2021)

He goes on to argue that the current geography of Ukraine is a function of a complex history that involves decisions made under Tsarist and Soviet times (Putin 2021). He contests the arguments of Ukrainian nationalists that downplay the common origins of Ukrainians and Russians and that falsely claim that Crimea was always Ukrainian (Putin 2021). Putin can be criticized for arguing from a one-sided Russian nationalist perspective that downplays the long history of Ukrainian resistance to Tsarist imperialism, but his argument is supported with evidence which was never seriously considered by Western commentators.

The account of Ukrainian-Russian history that Putin presents is one-sided, but it is not the work of the lunatic he is portrayed to be in the Western media. However, that one-sidedness has informed what I will argue is irrational decision-making. His understanding of the history of Ukrainian-Russian relations has led him to think that Ukrainians would be able to understand his decision to invade if they thought about their own history from his point of view. In view of the historical domination of Ukraine by Russian Tsars and Soviet Commissars, there was little hope that the nationalists who hold sway in Ukraine were going to be open to Putin's understanding of Ukrainian-Russian history. Foreign invasion always inflames patriotic sentiment and fuels resistance. One can understand Putin's arguments (and accept or reject them on the basis of evidence), and still maintain that the decision to invade will most likely enter the annals as one of the most colossal strategic blunders of the past century. Marxists are not concerned to help states avoid strategic blunders, but they should be concerned with preserving peace because it is in the short-term interest of workers as living beings threatened by war, and in the long term interest of building international solidarity in the struggle for socialism.

Those reasons become particularly salient when we turn to the second dimension of the conflict. The main cause of the current conflict is the relentless eastward expansion by NATO (Mearsheimer 2022). Despite assurances explicitly given in 1991 that it would not expand east of the German-Polish border, as well as explicit warnings by senior US diplomats that *all* Russian political forces, liberal as well as nationalists, would read that expansion as threatening, NATO has continued to expand towards Russia (RT News 2022; Congressional Record 1998; *italics added*). As their initial willingness to offer guarantees to not expand proves, there was no *military* reason to expand. There was also no *economic* reason to extend the NATO security blanket over the ex-Warsaw Pact nations. Post-Soviet Union Russia was hardly in a position to economically dominate its ex-satellites. The West was going to scoop up those prizes (new markets and cheap labour) whether those countries were admitted to NATO or not.

So, what drove the decision-making that led to expansion? *Raisons d'état*: Cold War triumphalism, American hubris, European inertia, and paranoid fears that post-Soviet Russia would revert to some sort of Tsarist *imperium*. Having defeated the Soviet Union, American policy makers decided that they needed to manufacture Russia as an adversary. The current conflict has now been painted explicitly by the Biden administration as a proxy war to fundamentally weaken Russia. The current playbook was mapped out in 2019 RAND Corporation paper that focused on ways that Russia could be undermined by sanctions and international isolation (Dobbins et al. 2019). Yet, there was no economic reason to want to crush post-Soviet Russia. Post-Soviet Russia was never and is not now a peer-competitor of the US-EU. Ukraine is an important supplier of agricultural products, but it was already on the road to being incorporated in the Western camp following the 2014 coup. Provoking Russia further by refusing to explicitly repudiate Ukraine's desires to join NATO can only be explained by the inertial force exerted by the politics and ideology of US triumphalism. Cold, hard economic rationality could have led the United States to see the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to both incorporate Eastern Europe peacefully into the global capitalist camp and unburden itself of the extra costs associated with maintaining a huge military footprint in Europe. Indeed, 1991 was awash with heady talk of a "peace dividend" (Markusen 2001).

However, the political machinations of the massive military-bureaucratic foreign policy apparatus of the United States soon mobilized to scupper any hopes of lasting peace and to ensure that monies continued to pour into the military-industrial complex.

Expansion (and the current conflict) have been a windfall for American arms-makers, but the logic of capital accumulation is not driven by any one sector. Military spending represents an opportunity cost for capital as a whole. Ending military spending would not end capitalism: capital sunk in military hardware would be re-directed (and more productively) to other sectors.¹⁰ Sanctions are causing serious problems in the Russian economy, but any thought that sanctions will undermine Putin are contradicted by reality. International isolation and punishing civilians through blanket sanctions have created a siege mentality and increased support for Putin.¹¹ At the same time they are rebounding negatively on European capital and will most likely also help create a global recession (Miller 2022). The economic strains have also created the condition for far-right and fascist political success. The recent electoral success of fascists in Sweden and Italy directly contradicts the “free world” ideology that Western leaders are employing to justify support for Ukraine. On the international economic front, the seizure of half of Russia’s foreign reserves will most likely accelerate moves away from the American dollar as the global reserve currency. In Africa the conflict threatens famine and the Western response has been judged hypocritical (Handanji 2022). Thus, an objective assessment of Western motives uncovers clear *raisons d’etat* which, when reflected upon critically in light of the likelihood of their leading to the stated goals, appear self-undermining and politically irrational. There were no objective military or economic reasons to expand, and rather than prevent conflict (their expressed goal) expansion has helped provoke one.

Just before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Putin and Lavrov reached out to their US and NATO counterparts with a written document outlining concrete security guarantees that they hoped to use as the basis of negotiations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation 2021). These were arrogantly ignored by the Biden administration. While there was no immediate danger of Ukraine joining NATO, the Russians could not accept being surrounded North (the Baltics, Canada, the United States), West (Poland), East (the United States), and South (Ukraine, if it were to have joined). Hence the decision to launch the war against Ukraine. While these political reasons are readily comprehensible from within a realist perspective (Russia defines Ukraine as falling within its sphere of influence and insists, like all regional powers, on the right to control the countries in its sphere of influence), the decision to invade is nevertheless politically irrational. Rather than halt the expansion of NATO, it will most likely lead to Sweden and Finland joining, intensifying Russian encirclement from the North. While one can understand the fear of encirclement, there was never any real military danger of NATO invading Russia. What would be the strategic point of such a move? Furthermore, rather than destroy the power of Ukrainian nationalists and draw Ukraine back into the Russian orbit, it has strengthened them and made another Russian-leaning Ukrainian government unthinkable. Rather than strengthen Russian security, it has exposed shocking weaknesses in Russia’s conventional forces and emboldened the West to enact punishing sanctions that in the short term appear set to cause a serious contraction of the Russian economy and could hamper its ability to develop for a generation. Russia is also a capitalist country and while the withdrawal of some Western brands has created openings for domestic

manufacturers and retailers, the embargo on high technology exports will seriously compromise the long-term prospects for the Russian economy.

The final dimension of the political contradictions of the current conflict is Ukraine's unwillingness to implement the Minsk agreements and bring an end to the civil war that has raged in the Donbass since 2014 and has killed 14,000 people (Horton 2022). Contrary to Ukrainian nationalist claims, Ukraine does not speak with one voice. The contradictions of self-determination loom large over the entire period, 2014 to the present. As with all other nation state based inter-ethnic conflicts, self-determination for one-side (the Ukrainian state) means domination for the other (Russian speakers in the east). The Russian speaking majority in the Donbass has historically supported Russian-leaning administrations. The government toppled by the Maidan coup was overwhelmingly supported in the Russian-speaking East and overwhelmingly rejected by the Ukrainian speaking rest of the country (Raimondo 2014). Zelensky, pushed by far-right nationalists, backtracked on his commitment to peace and refused to push the Minsk agreements forward. He calculated that Russia would not invade because the West would back him. The West has backed him, but not at all in the way he hoped. US and NATO policy clearly views Ukrainian lives as expendable (as they have viewed millions of other lives wasted in their proxy wars throughout the Cold War as expendable). Once again, Zelensky's political reasoning is clear, but politically irrational from the perspective of its likelihood of leading to his stated objectives. Indeed, in so far as he is now engaged in a prolonged war, it has brought about the very opposite of the conditions that he hoped to achieve. His country has been invaded, many of its cities have been destroyed, horrific costs have been imposed on the civilian population, and Russia has formally annexed four regions plus Crimea.¹²

From both political and economic angles, and for each of the parties to the conflict, there are clear contradictions between their *raisons d'état* and an objective assessment of their interests and goals. If the goal of all parties was to, at the very least, increase their security, all have brought about the opposite result. Russia is less secure politically and economically because of the sanctions imposed and the fierceness of the Ukrainian resistance. The US and the EU are likely going to face a recession. They are at the very least no more secure than they were before the war. There was never any danger of Russia invading EU countries with conventional forces. While a nuclear exchange is closer to reality (but still, I believe, unlikely), so long as Russia controls the world's largest nuclear arsenal, Europe can never be completely secure (and those countries that join NATO, like Sweden and Finland, will make themselves targets). Finally, Ukraine is suffering most from all of these politically irrational choices. Western aid will not rescue an economy that was already a shambles, fighting could continue in one form or another for years, the EU is not opening its doors to Ukrainian membership, nor is NATO, and its civilians are being killed by Russian troops but also cynically and murderously used by the US and NATO to prosecute a needless proxy war against Russia. The choices each have made are politically irrational not only because they undermine everyone's stated interests and goals, but because there was an alternative that everyone could see and none ultimately chose: open-ended, patient negotiations and diplomacy. Russia opened the door, the US refused to enter the room. Russia over-reacted, and the result is a brutal conflict in which, as in all wars, workers who had nothing to do with starting it suffer most. Hence the need,

as I will now argue, for Marxists to express their anti-imperialism as resolute and consistent pro-peace politics.

3. The Priority of Social Peace

Žižek's and Smith's open support for Ukraine make them outliers on the left. Most Western leftists have continued socialism's historical support for peace. This support is not platitudinous. The underlying normative goal of Marxism is the creation of global social relationships that satisfy the natural and social conditions of human life, life-development, and life-enjoyment. War is the antithesis of these conditions. The structure of armed conflict is baked into the competitive dynamics of capitalism and the scrambles for access to and control over resources, labour, and markets. Capitalism treats human life as a mere means to be consumed in the production of capital. As I have argued extensively in other contexts, Marxism starts from the principle that human life is intrinsically valuable and the struggle for socialism a struggle for the conditions in which each person can fully realize that intrinsic value (Noonan 2011). Marx states that principle clearly in "Grundrisse,"

if the narrow bourgeois form is peeled off, what is wealth if not the universality of the individual's needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive forces, etc., produced in universal exchange; what is it if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature. . . . What is wealth if not the absolute unfolding of man's creative abilities, without any precondition other than the preceding historical development. (Marx 1986b, 411)

Hence, Marxist's support for peace is rooted in their respect for the intrinsic value of human life that defines its deepest ethical commitments.

However, Marxism is a political movement and not an abstract ethical philosophy. To be effective, its support for peace must be able to demonstrate that contingent ideological and political factors can sometimes push politicians to choose war when there were available options for peaceful resolutions. As I argued in part two, the conflict in Ukraine is an example of the political contradictions of international relations: each side had options that they did not choose because of the inertial force exerted by history, the interests of bureaucratic factions, and chauvinistic ideologies. Marxism can learn from realism the need for concrete study of the political dimensions of international conflict, the way in which they generate their own momentum and close off alternatives objectively available to the actors.

At the same time as it can learn from realism, Marxism does not regard international anarchy as a permanent feature of the human condition. International hostility is ultimately a function of the private and exclusive control over universally required life-resources and their exploitation for profit. Social peace cannot be achieved unless this life-destructive structure of control is overcome. However, since the transformation of all nations into cooperating socialist democracies is not going to happen in the near future, Marxists must be able to intervene in arguments about how to solve international conflicts with something more than slogans about the necessity of socialism. While Marxist theory needs to link warfare to the underlying competitive dynamics of capitalism, it cannot afford to be fatalistic if it wants to be a relevant voice helping to shape short term political choices. Disclosing the political contradictions that close off *available*

avenues for non-violent resolution of conflicts lends substance to the ethical demand for social peace. A global transition to socialism is a long way off, but people are killed by imperialist wars here and now. Workers suffer the most in those wars. While Marxists have long underestimated the power of nationalism, it remains true, I would argue, that workers of the world ultimately have no country. Hence, politically motivated national chauvinism and the wars it helps fuel are the antithesis of the core values of socialism. Therefore, the short-term priority of the left must always be to insist on peaceful, negotiated resolution of international conflicts.

A critic might still insist that Marxists have nothing to gain from intervening in debates between capitalist powers about how to carve up and manage the globe. I would respond that Marxists should be concerned with these debates for the same reason that they support unionization drives and reforms to capitalism. Marxists support reform movements not only because they are schools of struggle that can help radicalize workers and the oppressed; they support them because they make people's lives better by satisfying unmet needs. Just as successful unionization drives depend upon precise knowledge of local conditions in a particular workplace, so too meaningful intervention on the side of peace demands precise knowledge of the political dynamics of a particular history of tension. Meaningful calls for negotiation must be grounded in an argument that shows them to be possible but consciously not chosen by the parties to the conflict, not because the economic logic of capital accumulation rules out negotiation, but because one or both sides refused to choose that road for reasons that made sense in light of a certain definition of the national interest but proved politically irrational in so far as they led to worse rather than better results for all parties.

If that reasoning is sound, then Marxists must avoid the temptation, which Žižek and Smith did not, of supporting one side in an inter-imperialist conflict. In the current case, the Marxist Left should criticize Putin for choosing war rather than exercising patience, but it cannot support Ukraine, given that Ukraine is not making choices as an autonomous political entity but has clearly become a proxy for NATO and US imperialism. Marxists must also avoid the opposite mistake of supporting Putin's invasion. Putin is no friend of Russian workers. He has attacked working class organizations that have demanded peace. His armies are laying waste to Ukraine and killing Ukrainian workers. As I noted in part two, there are legitimate worries for the security of Russian speakers in the Donbass, but these must be addressed through negotiations and the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

The evidence from observed behaviour supports the conclusion that political and military leaders believe that their ideological constructions of national virtues and values are objectively true, and they act accordingly. If treating these ideological values as objective truths helps to explain the political irrationality that *raisons d'état* can sometimes generate, then Marxists must expose these political contradictions. However, Marxists must not only engage with them through ideology critique, i.e., not only by exposing the particular class interests behind the falsely universalized values, they must bring to light the ways in which unthinking adherence to *raisons d'état* can sometimes cause statespersons to miss objectively available opportunities for negotiation and peace. Particular wars are not caused by capitalism in the abstract, but all have a concrete historical-political genesis that must be understood as the result of dogmatic attachment to *raisons d'état*.

With that said, it is also true that criticism, like charity, begins at home. Western leftists should therefore expend most of their political energies exposing the complicity of their own governments, not because they think that Putin's war is legitimate, but because struggles have the most effect the closer they are to power. If the US and NATO are fueling the conflict, then leftists living in NATO countries have to concentrate their attention on forcing their governments to stop fueling the war. At the same time, they must not be led into the dead end of supporting Putin's aggression just because it is opposed to NATO expansion. NATO ought to have ended in 1991. It did not. If it ended in 2022 that would be a good thing, *if it resulted from a democratic peace movement that successfully channeled resources away from the military industrial complex*. The peace, security, fullness, and enjoyment of human life is the overriding goal of socialism. Every other goal is instrumental to that end.

Notes

1. In Smith's case this meant breaking from the consensus inside the Democratic Socialists of America, whose leadership took an early position against the war and in favour of negotiations (Democratic Socialists of America 2022).
2. I use "socialism" generally here to refer to a democratic society committed to collective ownership of basic life-resources, their use to satisfy the fundamental natural and social needs of each and all, and thus to the maximization of the life-value of its citizens. I will return to a discussion of this definition of socialism in Part Three, but for a systematic articulation and defense of the relevant principles, readers should turn to my earlier work (see Noonan 2006; Noonan 2011, 195–216; Noonan 2012, 123–140; Noonan 2014, 85–101).
3. The idea of *raisons d'état* traces its history to Machiavelli and is an important idea in realist international relations. In the popular interpretation of Machiavelli, *raisons d'état* are defined by their independence from the reach of ordinary moral judgement. States are entitled to do what individuals are forbidden from doing because of the distinctive nature of states' interests. Machiavellian scholars object that this position oversimplifies Machiavelli's thought, but I am not interested or qualified to enter into those debates here. For my purposes *raisons d'état* are not so much a special permit that allows states to act in ways which would be immoral if an individual were to act that way, but rather reasons which make sense from within the framework of what rulers define as the national interest, but might not be rational when critically assessed from opposed perspectives or tested in light of likely outcomes. See Johansson (1996, 295–330) for a discussion of the relevant theoretical and historical debates.
4. For a more complete discussion of the connections between Marxism and the Hobbesian background to realist theories of international relations, see Kubalkova and Cruickshank (1985, 31–36).
5. Hale, Held, and Young do not ignore the flow of wealth from Global South to the Global North, but they do not see the role of multinational corporations as imperialism in a different form, but a problem that can be solved by more equitable trade laws and tighter regulation (Hale, Held, and Young 2013, 131–134).
6. The struggles of indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada are paradigm examples. The major political flashpoint in Canada today is between the Wet'suwet'en people of Northern British Columbia and the Canadian state over an oil pipeline being built across their traditional lands. Updates can be found at: <https://unistoten.camp/no-pipelines/>. For a general discussion of the political and spiritual dimensions of indigenous struggles, see Coulthard (2014, 60–64).
7. Neither Hall nor Bilous deny that US and NATO policy played a primary role in stoking the conflict, but both insist that the conflict be viewed through the eyes of Ukrainians under

invasion. From their perspective Putin's decisions are themselves part of a history of Russian imperialism.

8. The problem of how historical materialists should understand the causal force that ideas exert in history would take us into philosophical waters in which we do not have time to swim. Callinicos himself provides an excellent, non-reductionist account of the material force of ideas in *Making History* (Callinicos 1989). I have argued elsewhere that to properly understand the force that ideas exert, Marxists need to understand the meaning of "material" in a non-physicalist, non-reductionist way that can include the symbolic dimensions of human social life (Noonan 2021, 1043–1059).
9. In the 1960s and 70s on the anti-Stalinist Left a debate arose over the question of whether the economic relationship between the Soviet Union and the Eastern European members of the Warsaw Pact was imperialist. Michael Barrett Brown argued that there was some evidence that the terms of trade established by the Soviet Union vis-à-vis its Eastern European clients resembled the sort of systematically exploitative relationships typical of Western imperialism (Brown 1974, 285–304). While that debate has only historical interest now, the after-effects of the Soviet Union remain essential to understanding the political fears that drive the politics of Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine today. Whatever the economic dynamics were, these countries equated, and continue to equate, the policies of the Soviet Union and today's Russia with the history of Tsarist imperialism. I will return to the importance of this relationship in section two.
10. Although the current American military budget is over 700 billion dollars, that only represents 3.5% of American GDP (Statista 2022). There are models that suggest redirecting capital away from military industries would lead to higher levels of economic growth (Garrett-Peltier 2017).
11. Despite a courageous anti-war movement, Putin's approval rating jumped from 69 to 82 per cent in early April, more than one month into the war (Levada Centre 2022).
12. I cannot provide a detailed assessment of the September referenda in the Donbass or Putin's speech justifying the annexation of these territories, save to say that the decision makes an eventual negotiated solution that much more difficult. While the case of Kosovo exposes Western hypocrisy, exposing Western hypocrisy, while necessary, does not solve the problem. For Putin's speech, see Putin (2022). The parallels with Kosovo are explored in Snider (2022).

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