Ukraine: Anatomy of a Civil War

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This article examines the anatomy of the conﬂict in and surrounding Ukraine. Employing the dialectical method, the author presents the conﬂict as a multi-dimensional system of contradictions, with the accent on its socio-economic and class aspects. Also discussed are the prehistory and political and economic bases of the confrontation, as well as possible scenarios of future interrelations.

Keywords: civil war; Ukraine; Novorossiya; Russia and the West; political economy

Scholars and academic experts, politicians and “ordinary” citizens of our countries, we have been immersed for almost a year now in discussions of the situation in Ukraine. There is nothing aston- ishing about this; the situation both in and surrounding Ukraine is marked by painful, fundamental contradictions.

The crucial task is to analyze the situation, and in this way to resolve it. This is not for the sake of satisfying our intellectual curiosity, and not from political motives, but because it is impossible to be indifferent when on the territory of your homeland (and my homeland is the Soviet Union!) a civil war is raging.

But as a person very meaningful to me once said, such an analysis requires clean hands, a passionate heart and a cool head.

The author of these lines has no political commitment to any of the contending parties in Ukraine, Russia, or the West. My hands are clean. I have not been indifferent to the struggle occurring in my homeland’s west, and nor will I be in future, but as a scholar I hope to maintain a clear head. Now let me address the issue.

Analyzing the situation requires a strict methodology, and I plan to employ a method that has proven consistently effective in studies of social phenomena. That method is a historical-dialec- tical approach, making it possible to distinguish between the logical development of the process and random events, to emphasize the evolutionary and revolutionary (qualitative) changes that are occurring, and to isolate both the essential contradictions driving the process and their forms, including perverse ones.

The task I face is to use a dialectical systems approach. For a Marxist, this is perhaps so obvious as to be trite, but the fact is that this approach is rarely used. All the more important, then, is to apply it to analyzing so complex a topic as the conﬂict in Ukraine.

This material has been a long time in preparation, more than six months, and has grown into a text signiﬁcantly exceeding the usual length of a single article. It is divided into three relatively independent sections. The ﬁrst of these deals with the prehistory of the war.

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1. The Prehistory and Political and Economic Bases of the Conﬂict

It should be stressed that this situation is being analyzed within a deﬁnite social and historical conﬂict. I do not pose the question in terms of who is right and who is wrong, Russia or the West, Ukraine’s new government or someone else, and nor is it clear who this “someone” might be. The question is posed differently: “What are the social-spatial and historical contradic- tions that gave rise to the current situation in Ukraine?” Meanwhile, I do not resile from deﬁning my position and ultimately, answering the question of where I stand. The answer will become apparent, but as a result of the analysis.

Let us therefore examine the problem through the prism represented by the history of the social-spatial parameters in which Ukraine now ﬁnds itself—Ukraine with its complex of terri- tories, some of them traditionally Ukrainian, some traditionally Russian, and others which have changed hands repeatedly over the centuries.

In the course of its history, Ukraine has undergone a series of integrations and disintegrations. These have reﬂected its interactions with Poland and Russia, as well as a series of internal con- ﬂicts and wars that have been waged on its territory, beginning with the events that followed the rule of Bogdan Khmelnitsky and proceeding through Poltava and the civil war of 1917 – 22. The history of the latter period is particularly instructive. Some Ukrainian nationalists fought with Germany and Austria-Hungary, and others against them. The more pro-Russian elements of the population joined with either the Reds or Whites in struggling for a united Russia, while others resisted both Reds and Whites in ﬁghting for an independent Ukraine. The Second World War (for us, the Great Patriotic War) also swept across the territory of Ukraine, separating out two groups of people apart from those who were simply victims of that terrible conﬂict. The majority of Ukrainians, together with the Red Army, fought against fascism in all its manifes- tations, but a signiﬁcant minority joined the detachments of Bandera and various other nationalist formations that were used as punishment units by the German fascists. They were in fact accom- plices of the Nazis, sometimes even more ruthless than their masters. All this occurred beneath the ﬂag of Ukrainian national liberation (it is well known that fascism made wide use of nationalist movements, and the Ukrainian movement was not alone; the Vlasov forces were also a “Russian liberation army” and also employed nationalist slogans, though in both cases, of course, these were puppet formations and thoroughly reactionary).

This context is important because it is now, after more than half a century, once again shaping events. In Ukraine, 30 years ago it would have been completely impossible, including among sup- porters of Gorbachev’s perestroika, to discuss Bandera and the OUN (Organization of Ukranian Nationalists) in a positive sense. Now, Bandera and the OUN have become symbols of national liberation for important numbers of Ukrainians.

A further important component of the historical process is the well-known transfer of Crimea to Ukraine. So long as the Soviet Union existed, the fact that Crimea was part of the Ukrainian Republic was largely of symbolic signiﬁcance. But after the Belavezha Accords at the end of 1991, the Ukrainian status of Crimea came to pose a considerable problem.

Since 1991, the “Russian question” in general has become highly relevant in Ukraine, where a marked division exists not only in terms of socio-economic and political characteristics, but also of national and ethno-cultural orientation. The issue of language too has proven to be both impor- tant, and (so to speak) diffuse. The areas of Ukraine that are Russian-speaking have at the same time been Ukrainianized; the people there use a speciﬁc variety of Russian, in some cases (as in Odessa) their own dialect, or else a southern Russian dialect which is inﬂuenced by Ukrainian, and which spread long ago into Russian territory.

Something similar applies to Western Ukraine, in parts of which the population now feel more afﬁnity with Central and Eastern European culture than with the Ukrainian cultural heritage. The

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latter has come to be perceived as a sign of provincialism, from which people are anxious to escape (though this is not so easy . . .). There is a diffusion in the “center” as well, since Gogol, Shevchenko and many other great cultural ﬁgures belong both to Ukraine and to Russia; Ukrainian nationalists and people in the more Russian-oriented areas of Ukraine are sim- ultaneously proud of them. This unity is especially characteristic of the culture of the Soviet Ukraine; every Ukrainian and every Russian considers as his or her own the ﬁlm director Dovz- henko, the singer Hnatiuk, the creators of the great Antey aircraft, astronauts and other heroes, including heroes of the Great Patriotic War.

This context is important. The contradiction between east and west in Ukraine is not so much a matter of two poles separated from each other by a national barrier, along with traditions of con- frontation, as of diffuse spaces in which there are powerful traditions of unity. The history of antagonism is not especially profound, except when Ukrainian nationalists with fascist roots, or else Russian chauvinists, enter into heated conﬂicts.

Another historically important factor has been the wave of “shock therapy” (or rather, of “shock without therapy”) which rolled across both Ukraine and Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. One of the results of these “reforms” was so-called “appro- priation-privatization,” that is, the concentrating in a short period of time huge quantities of the countries’ wealth in the hands of a few oligarchs. This was especially marked in the case of natural resources and of large raw materials processing facilities, including metallurgical plants. The process unfolded almost identically in Russia and Ukraine, and in eastern and western regions of the latter. The result was that a bureaucratic-oligarchic capitalism, resembling the Russian version in all its key parameters, took shape in Ukraine in the course of the 1990s, via the same stages of evolution and involution as in Russia. The difference was that in Ukraine there was no Putin; appearing instead were various parodic clones of Gorbachev. The central govern- ment thus ﬁnished up relatively weak and indecisive. The oligarchic clans pursued their struggles furiously, exploiting the contradictions in the socio-cultural ﬁeld and in nationalism of every variety. The result was the signiﬁcant socio-economic “embeddedness” of conﬂicts which at ﬁrst sight appear purely ethnic or cultural.

The result of the economic “reforms” in Ukraine, endlessly drawn out and never brought to their conclusion, was the creation of a semi-peripheral mutation of late capitalism very similar to the Russian model. Within this model, economic power belongs mainly to clan-oligarchic groups that have become fused with the political authorities. A speciﬁc feature of Ukraine, however, is that unlike the case in Russia there has been no consolidation of this power into a single pyramid headed by a sole leader. Instead, two broad, amorphous oligarchic groupings arose, one of them gravitating in geo-economic terms (and hence also geopolitically) toward Russia, and the other toward the Europe Union (EU).

Amid the still-shadowy confrontation of oligarcho-bureaucratic groups that did not differ sub- stantially in their socio-economic platforms, but which battled furiously to redistribute economic power in their favor, “western” and “eastern” political and social forces began to ﬂirt with nation- alists and with various geopolitical allies. For some it proved beneﬁcial to court Russia as a geo- political ally and to position themselves on the territory of Ukraine through promoting the use of the Russian language, through exploiting the proﬁts to be made from cheap gas, and through other advantages of integration with Russia. Others found it beneﬁcial to promote the ideas of Ukrai- nian national independence, of the use of the Ukrainian language, and of orienting the country toward Europe instead of “Asiatic” Russia.

Concealed behind all this, I repeat, were very serious conﬂicts in the social and economic ﬁelds between actors who were *identical in their economic and political nature*. These conﬂicts were linked to the enduring economic interests (as opposed to the short-term political ones) of the opposing oligarchic clan groups. Manipulating the population, the political authorities in these

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circumstances positioned themselves as the sole means of ensuring balance and compromise between the warring forces.

Viktor Yanukovych was one of the symbols of this search for compromise, and playing the nationalist card was an important device for him. As far as I can judge, based on the views of well-informed colleagues,[1](#_bookmark0) the previous government of Ukraine ﬂirted with nationalists and pro-fascist elements in order to suggest who might come to power if the existing leaders were not elected again. A sort of “semi-pro-Russian” orientation, inconsistent and ﬂuctuating, came into being. The government several times reversed decisions concerning the EU and Russia, each time settling on compromises that were partly pro-European and partly pro-Russian, while constantly invoking the bogey-man of the nationalist threat. The upshot was that the Yanu- kovych group themselves strengthened the nationalists, creating the preconditions for their trans- formation into a real political force.

Unlike the tactic of ﬂirting with the nationalists, the suppression of the left was consistent no matter who was at the helm. The left was not admitted to power, and persistent efforts were made to crush it. On the one hand, this policy took the form of attempts to destroy the Socialist Party of Ukraine from the inside, using a wide variety of political techniques. The Socialist Party tried to portray itself as a pro-European social-democratic alternative which at the same time had a pro- Russian cultural orientation (in the socio-economic and political ﬁelds they were inclined to the West, while in the area of culture they did not reject bilingualism or closeness to Russia). Mean- while, the Communist Party of Ukraine was effectively driven into the “ghetto” of a Russophile orientation. The Communists became known less for their alternative socio-economic programs than for their unequivocal support of Vladimir Putin as a great leader and an alternative to the current authorities and politics in Ukraine.

This latter stance created a rather unpleasant atmosphere. In earlier times, I repeatedly encoun- tered Ukrainian Marxists, Communists and members of left movements, especially in the eastern part of Ukraine, who viewed Putin as their hope of salvation. When I tried to explain the economic and political consequences for eastern Ukraine of this “salvation,” the reply was that it did not matter; the main thing was that they would be allowed to speak Russian.

This inversion of the socio-economic and political struggle was not accidental, and it rep- resented a very signiﬁcant development. It occurred despite the fact that the socio-economic pol- icies enacted by Putin were more right-wing (more neoliberal in their economic respects, and politically more authoritarian) than those pursued during the previous decade by Yanukovych and his predecessors. It is one of the paradoxes of the Ukrainian situation that in the economic ﬁeld the Ukrainian policies were somewhat less harsh and more socially oriented than in Russia. Another important aspect of the situation was that on the eve of the crisis the policies and programs of the leading pro-Western and pro-Eastern political forces were almost identical in socio-economic terms. Behind all of them lay the power of oligarchs and state ofﬁcials striving for political dominance, of the security forces and of ideological forces and institutions all of which were seeking to promote *their* capital and to extract maximum proﬁts from the exploitation of the country’s workers and natural resources. It is highly symbolic that until recent times the pro-Russian groups in Ukraine were supported by particular oligarchic clans associated, typically, with Russian capital; meanwhile, the current government in Ukraine is supported by the other clans, those for which closer integration with Western Europe is more advantageous, and

which seek to redistribute the resources of eastern Ukraine in their own favor.

1I am not a specialist on Ukraine, but I am acquainted with many knowledgeable colleagues and have repeat- edly taken part in discussions on these questions in Ukraine, Crimea and Moscow. I was also present at the ﬁrst Maidan.

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Also noteworthy in this context is the fact that the new government sought to appoint oli- garchs with their base in western Ukraine to administer the eastern provinces. It was believed that these oligarchs would be induced to invest their money to help people in the country’s eastern provinces. But the upshot was that the oligarchs, Kolomoyskyi among them, used their capital to destroy the people of this region.

Such was the socio-economic background to the conﬂict. As can be seen, what was involved was the redistribution of hundreds of billions of dollars in capital—vast amounts in the Ukrainian context—with the prospect of dependable proﬁts over the coming decades.

In this regard, the clash in Ukraine is a miniature, farcical copy of the tragic situation in Europe on the eve of the First World War, when economic systems of a uniform type were in con- ﬂict: in Russia, an authoritarian model of military-feudal imperialism, and in Germany, France and Britain, somewhat more “civilized” models of essentially the same system, only with a lesser legacy of feudalism and with the elements of capitalism more developed. The differences were not great, and *within* the entente they were deeper than between the entente and the Central European bloc (monarchist Russia fought alongside republican France against semi-authoritarian Germany and Austria, which from a political point of view occupied the middle ground between them). The source of the conﬂict between the two blocs was the *similarity* of their economic bases—imperialist capital, needing a “redistribution” of the economic space. To this can be added the geopolitical ambitions of vast bureaucratic state machines, which were and remain fused with capital.

Let me repeat: in Ukraine today, we ﬁnd something similar, but on a smaller scale and in the form of a farce.

This is the background to the events of the current period. In the following texts we shall examine the content of these events and the reasons why the conﬂict has assumed such brutal forms. Each of these texts will analyze the situation in light of the contradictions of one of the parties.

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