

Russian imperialism and the invasion of Ukraine

Friday 5 May 2023, by [SLEE Chris](#) (Date first published: 28 April 2023).

Renfrey Clarke and Dave Holmes [1] argue that Russia is not imperialist because it lacks some of the features usually possessed by an imperialist country. They quote an article by Clarke and Roger Annis, which says:

Russia is not home to an advanced capitalism, or to a broad, prosperous middle class. Its monopolies tend to be puny alongside those of various countries that are clearly part of the semi-periphery [of world capitalism], let alone the corporate monsters of the imperialist centre. Russian industrial production has lost much of its past diversity, and its overall technical level is decidedly backward, while in a pattern reminiscent of the least developed areas of the periphery, the extractive sector accounts for a notably large share of output. Russia's foreign trade has a markedly dependent character, and the country exports mainly basic commodities for which prices are often depressed. Conducting little trade with poorer areas of the periphery, Russia does not benefit significantly from unequal trading exchange. There is no overall surplus of capital in Russia, and while the country nonetheless exports capital, this is for perverse reasons [essentially, capital flight] and despite a near-catastrophic lack of investment in infrastructure and productive plant. With its real foreign investment concentrated in countries of the [world capitalist] centre, Russia plays little direct part in the quintessential imperialist activity — the export of capital to the periphery and the extraction of profit from developing-country labour and resources. Russia's finance capital is small and weak, and the largely criminalised, chaotic nature of the Russian financial sector rules out any possibility that this sector might play a hegemonic role within the economy. No possible doubt can remain here: in the terms that Lenin defined, present-day Russia is not an imperialist power. [2]

It is worth noting that in some of these respects, Australia resembles Russia. In Australia, as in Russia, "industrial production has lost much of its past diversity". The closure of the car industry is an example. In Australia, too, "the extractive sector accounts for a notably large share of output". Australia, like Russia, also "exports mainly basic commodities" (iron ore, coal, gas, agricultural products).

In the neoliberal era, transnational corporations have shifted a large part of the manufacturing industry from imperialist countries, where unions won significant pay increases in the post-World War II era, to poorer countries where pay rates are lower. Meanwhile mining has become increasingly high-tech. Australia exports huge amounts of coal and iron ore with only a relatively small mining workforce. Hence the old idea that imperialist countries have a large manufacturing industry, while reliance on extractive industry indicates semi-colonial status, is out of date.

Marxists generally consider Australia as an imperialist power because Australian capital exploits people in semi-colonial countries, especially the people of the Pacific. Clarke and Annis claim

“Russia plays little direct part in the quintessential imperialist activity — the export of capital to the periphery and the extraction of profit from developing country labour and resources”. It is true that Russian foreign investment is small compared to the United States and European countries. But it is growing. Russian capital exploits the people of central Asian republics that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. Russian capital is also beginning to expand into Africa.

A key player in this is Wagner, a Russian private military company. Wagner is best known for its participation in the war in Ukraine. But it has also participated in wars in several African countries. Wagner’s motivation is to profit from gold mines in these countries. The actual mining is mainly done by small -scale “artisanal” miners, but various armies and militias impose taxes and control the sale of the gold. Wagner gets a share of the loot.

A recent article by Adam Tooze explains:

Unsurprisingly, mining on this scale draws in more or less organized groups of men with guns who seek to establish control, control commerce, tax and in some cases even organize production. Across the Western Sahel, gold figures in the background of the jihadist revolts.

Control over gold is also a key stake for the juntas who have recently seized control in Guinea, Burkina Faso and Mali. The gold has also attracted interest from the Russian mercenary forces that have been operating on an increasingly large scale, especially in Central African Republic....

According to official statistics, Sudan emerged quite suddenly in the 2010s as by far the largest of the Sahel producers....

Moscow started engaging with Sudan at the latest in 2017 when then President al-Bashir was hosted by Putin in Sochi....

Following the removal of al-Bashir Moscow backed both major military factions. Moscow cultivated Sudan’s regular military leadership in Khartoum with a view to establishing a permanent naval base on the Red Sea. At the same time, it worked with Hemeti and his militia in the gold fields. His Darfur base welcomed Russia’s own gold refining operations in Sudan and served as a convenient connecting point for their mercenary activities in both Central African Republic and Libya....

In October 2021 with Russian backing the military factions put an end to the civilian transitional administration. It has been rumored that the coup may have been motivated by the desire to end civilian administrative obstruction of collaboration between the Sudanese military and the Russians. In the months prior to the coup Russian operatives had become increasingly nervous about US oversight of their activities and had been looking to create Sudanese shadow companies to hide their tracks. This had been resisted by civilian Sudanese corruption watchdogs who bitterly resent the idea of a sellout of their country to Russia.

After the coup in October 2021 that civilian interference ceased. Russian warships docked in Sudanese ports and on February 24, 2022, the day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, ex-Janjaweed militia leader and gold tycoon Hemeti was in Moscow hobnobbing with Lavrov and Russian top brass. [3]

The beginnings of the imperialist exploitation of Africa by Russia is evident. It is still at a very early stage, but the direction is clear.

A “defensive” invasion?

Regarding the invasion of Ukraine, Clarke and Holmes claim “The reasons behind Russia’s ‘special military operation’ are profoundly defensive”. They refer to, among other things, the expansion of NATO; the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO in the future; the supply of NATO weapons to the Ukrainian armed forces; NATO military exercises on and around Ukrainian territory; the possibility that Western missile systems might be based on Ukrainian soil at some time in the future. All these things no doubt make Russian president Vladimir Putin nervous. But they do not justify the invasion.

Suppose Mexico were to form a military alliance with Russia and China. That would no doubt make the US leadership nervous. But it would not justify the US invading Mexico. Similarly, Putin is not justified in launching a pre-emptive war.

Clarke and Holmes quote historian Geoffrey Roberts’ statement that the invasion had a “preventative” character. But they do not quote from the same article his statement that: “Pre-emptive action to preclude an even bloodier conflict in the future is a standard justification for aggressive war, one that is often accompanied by the illusion of quick victory. To say that Putin believed he had been backed into a corner by Ukraine and the West is not to endorse his perceptions and assessments of the situation”.

Donbas conflict

Clarke and Holmes describe the 2014 Maidan rebellion as a “coup”. On the other hand, they say that the Donbas revolt was “genuinely broad, spontaneous and popular”. In fact, both revolts were complex, with a mixture of progressive and reactionary participants. I have discussed this in a previous article [\[4\]](#), so will not repeat what I said there. But I will respond to some of the objections made by Clarke and Holmes.

They disagree with the statement by Ukrainian socialist Taras Bilous that “the regional elites ... tried to use the separatist movement to maintain their power”. They point out that oligarchs such as Rinat Akhmetov “threw in their lot with Kyiv after the revolt began”. When Bilous talks about “regional elites”, I assume that he is probably talking about people such as the officials of the deposed president Viktor Yanukovich’s Party of Regions, rather than the top oligarchs.

Clarke and Holmes deny that Russian nationalist groups played a major role in the early stages of the Donbas revolt. They were certainly present, and claimed to have played a major role. Igor Girkin (also known as Strelkov), a former officer of the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation), claimed to have triggered the war.

Clarke and Holmes admit that the leadership of the Donbas revolt underwent a “near-complete political degeneration, losing all democratic content and answering to Kremlin dictates”, but argue that Russian control of the Donbas is still preferable to Ukrainian control. In my view, an internationally supervised referendum would be the best way of resolving this issue (though I admit the practical difficulties are enormous).

United Nations vote

In March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly voted to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine by 141 votes to 5, with 35 abstentions. Clarke and Holmes downplay the significance of this vote, emphasising instead that very few “developing countries” joined the sanctions against Russia.

Clarke and Holmes admit that the UN vote was motivated by support for “the principle of non-intervention, one of their few protections against imperialist assault”. Yet they don’t seem to think that this vote on such a question of principle is very important.

Most semi-colonial countries refused to join the US-led sanctions against Russia for several reasons. One is the hypocrisy of the US, which has itself carried out numerous invasions, without being subject to sanctions. Another is their desire to continue trading with a diverse range of countries, including Russia.

Putin’s ideology

Clarke and Holmes say:

Putin is a social conservative with a repressive bent and a weakness for mystical philosophising on Slavic brotherhood. That is something deeply unpleasant, but it is not fascism; the Russian president and his administration are not, for example, conspicuous either for exclusivist racism or for the cult of violence. Strictly speaking, Putin’s ideology is not Great Russian chauvinist either; a careful reading of his speeches shows that while he laments the waywardness of the Ukrainians, he rejects attempts to forcibly bring them within the Russian national fold.

Actions speak louder than words. Putin invaded Ukraine and sent troops in the direction of Kyiv. This looks like an attempt to “forcibly bring them within the Russian national fold”. We don’t know exactly what Putin’s intentions were, but it seems probable that he wanted to overthrow the Volodymyr Zelensky government and install a puppet regime that would then have requested “unification” with Russia. Putin may have been misled by his own ideology of “Slavic brotherhood” into expecting that most Ukrainians would welcome this, and that there would be little resistance.

What should we demand?

Clarke and Holmes say:

In discussing the prospects for peace in Ukraine, Snee suggests the appetites both of imperialism and of its allies in the Ukrainian ruling class would be satisfied if the Russians were to retreat to the pre-2022 line of contact outside the city of Donetsk.

In reality, I did not say anything about anyone’s “appetites” being “satisfied”. In fact, neither side would be satisfied with such an outcome. I am proposing it only as a temporary measure, pending an internationally supervised referendum to determine the wishes of the inhabitants.

Kagalitsky’s views

Clarke and Holmes quote Boris Kagarlitsky’s statement that “the defeat of Putin is definitely a better outcome for Russian society and for the Russian people than his victory”.

They comment:

The loathing for Putin felt by many people in Russia’s big-city middle classes shines through this statement. But so too does the naivety concerning the West — and refusal to believe that Western governments could do anything malevolent — that is so characteristic of that layer of Russian society.

Kagarlitsky is not naive about Western governments. But Putin’s increasingly reactionary and

repressive regime is currently the main obstacle to any progressive development in Russia. A defeat for the Russian invasion of Ukraine would provoke a questioning of the regime that launched the invasion.

Before the invasion, social discontent was rising in Russia. The war provided a pretext for repression of public manifestations of this discontent. The end of the war would lead to a revival of public protest activity. This would create opportunities for the left.

Clarke and Holmes seem to think that the only alternative to Putin is a Western-imposed regime similar to that of Yeltsin. Kagarlitsky is more optimistic. He says: "There is a good Russian tradition that we start reforms and revolutions every time we lose a war". [5]

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P.S.

Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal's vision

<https://links.org.au/russian-imperialism-and-invasion-ukraine>

Footnotes

[1] Renfrey Clarke and Dave Holmes

<https://links.org.au/setting-record-straight-ukraine-russia-imperialism>

[2] Renfrey Clarke and Roger Annis

<https://links.org.au/myth-russian-imperialism-defence-lenins-analyses>

[3] Adam Tooze <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-209-the-sudan-crisis-and>

[4] Chris Slee <https://links.org.au/complex-history-eastern-ukraine>

[5] Boris Kagarlitsky

<https://links.org.au/putins-war-driven-domestic-politics-interview-boris-kagarlitsky>