

Is this monstrous war of aggression really between two equal sides?

Tuesday 22 March 2022, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2022).

An open letter in response to the Manifesto Against War

Dear comrades,

I write in anger and sorrow about your [Manifesto Against War](#), to which I turned in the hope of learning from you about how we can situate the anti-war movement in the wider struggle against capital.

Enumerating the causes of military conflict, you refer, first, to “the growing rivalry between the greatest imperialist powers”. Third is “Islamic fundamentalism”. But before that, second, comes that “the US government has positioned its military alliance system, NATO, against the Russian Federation to prevent the integration of the defunct Soviet empire’s successor into an enlarged, stable and peaceful European order with mutual security guarantees”.

You don’t explain why you think that, in this age of the deep crisis of the capitalist system – which in your words “unleashes ever more violent struggles for geostrategic zones of influence” – such a “peaceful European order” could ever have been possible.

That hope, embraced by Mikhail Gorbachev and many social democrats in the 1990s, was surely dashed as the economic crises of neoliberalism (1997-98, 2008-09, etc) multiplied, as the Russian bourgeoisie emerged in its 21st-century form on one hand, and the alliance of western powers pursued their murderous wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere on the other.

[Download this letter as a pdf.](#)

You don’t explain why you name the US government and NATO, and Islamic fundamentalism, as causes of the current war ... but not the Russian elite, which actually started it.

You turn causes into effects, and effects into causes, in order to justify this focus on the US and NATO. So, immediately following your point about the US using NATO to prevent Russia’s integration into a stable European order, you continue: “The sabotage of Nord Stream 2 shows that economic pressure is just as important here as it is in the positioning against China.”

This just doesn’t fit with the facts. Nord Stream 2 was a major point of dispute between the German ruling class and its US counterpart. For years, the US sought to sanction the pipeline, and the German government resisted. In July 2021, the Biden administration struck a deal with chancellor Merkel under which the pipeline would be completed. The German desire to integrate Russia, at least as a trading partner, prevailed.

The pipeline was finally frozen by the new German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, on 22 February, the day after Russian president Putin recognised the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” – a clear

indication that the Minsk peace process was finished and that Russia was preparing for some sort of war. Russia acted; Germany reversed its long-standing policy.

The freezing of Nord Stream 2 put no discernible economic pressure on Russia, anyway. The point of the pipeline was to enable Russia to pipe gas to European destinations without taking it across Ukraine. It was designed to reduce Russian dependence on Ukraine for pipeline transit, that is, to produce a geopolitical benefit rather than any significant economic benefit. The western powers have imposed heavy economic sanctions on Russia – after it invaded Ukraine on 24 February.

The reason you mix up causes and effects is clear. Your narrative description of the post-Soviet period mentions the collapse of the Soviet empire, the loss of those (to my mind illusory) “quite favourable” chances of Russia “democratising” – and then the failure of that option due to NATO expansion. The arrogance inherent in that expansion “created the external conditions in Russia for the implementation of a strategy of imperialist revisionism” under Putin, you say.

I would dispute the prevalence of NATO expansion as an “external condition”. I think the broader crises of capital, and of its neoliberal management strategy, were far more important. But what about the internal conditions? You don’t mention those. What about the reconstruction of the Russian bourgeoisie in the post-Soviet period, and its relationship with the post-Soviet repressive apparatus represented by Putin? Where does that fit into your analysis?

Your focus on the “external condition” means that your account of Russian militarism is one-sided. The Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea were “warning signals” that were “disregarded” by NATO, which, according to you, built “infrastructure” in Ukraine. What “infrastructure”? (NATO was always divided about admitting Ukraine as a member, and until last month’s invasion kept its military relationship with Ukraine at a low level.)

Your account of Russian militarism starts in 2008. What about the murderous assault on Chechnya in 2000-02, which first cemented Putin’s position as president, and was supported by NATO? What about the Russian assault on eastern Ukraine in 2014, which you incorrectly describe as a “civil war with indirect Russian involvement”? What was “indirect” about a war in which Russian mothers lost their sons on the front line, fighting in Russian army uniforms? What is “indirect” about the massive logistical, financial and political support given by the Russian government to the Donetsk and Luhansk “republics”?

Most telling of all, you don’t mention Syria. The drowning of the Syrian uprising in blood in 2015-16, surely the greatest defeat of a revolutionary movement in this century, was accomplished by the Assad regime with powerful Russian military support.

The NATO powers stood back and allowed this to continue (while they themselves fought their own wars in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan) for the same reason that they acquiesced in Putin’s actions against Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine: because for all their disavowals of “spheres of influence”, they were content that Russia should act as a gendarme for international capital in certain geographical areas. As indeed they were content to see Russian troops intervene against the Belarussian uprising in 2020, and in Kazakhstan in 2022.

You write: “this catastrophic war of aggression was also preceded by imperialist acts of aggression on the part of the West, which provoked in Putin’s Russia a geostrategic logic common to all imperialist power elites”. Sure! The Russian empire, with its rich history of suppression of its colonies and its own people, needed to be provoked by the western powers, in order to make war on the oldest of those colonies. Just like the British ever needed provoking, before making war on Ireland. (I hope my sarcasm comes through OK in a written text.)

Your policy proposals reflect your skewed view that this is a war between two equal sides. You make serious points, and I hope they are discussed. But first we have to be clear. Is this monstrous war of aggression really between two equal sides? Only one side is shelling and terrorising civilians, and arresting and murdering those who defy its occupying forces. (Remember Putin's declaration on the first day? "We don't intend to occupy"? Tell them that in Mariupol.)

Do you really believe this is an inter-imperialist conflict, with no element of a people's war? Why else did you neglect to mention those thousands of Ukrainians fighting outside the state framework to defend their own communities, with arms in hand or in other ways? Because they didn't fit your preconceived interpretation?

I write with anger because I have had such great respect for some of the signatories of the manifesto, and the contribution they have made to the development of socialist thinking. In the 1990s - when studying both the Russian revolution and modern-day Russia showed me that Trotskyism, the framework I had accepted before then, was wanting - autonomism was one of the trends that I began to study and learn from. Including what some of you have written.

Your statement looks as though you decided the conclusion - that this is fundamentally an inter-imperialist conflict, and nothing more - and worked back from there to interpret the facts. Comrades, that's the wrong way round. The younger generation deserves better, from all of us.

In solidarity,

Simon Pirani. (21 March 2022.)

Simon Pirani

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

People and Nature

<https://peopleandnature.wordpress.com/2022/03/21/is-this-monstrous-war-of-aggression-really-between-two-equal-sides/>