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Is Russia an imperialist state? A letter from a Russian socialist to David North

The World Socialist Web Site has received this letter from a Russian socialist, commenting on a letter written by David North, posted on the WSWS on April 2.

I have read your letter to the Russian comrade, and it does not contradict my position.

There is a leftist milieu in Russia that correctly acknowledges the provocative role of the United States and Europe in the current conflict, but speaks of a Russian imperialist act of invasion.

I immediately raise the question, what do they mean by an imperialist act? After all, if you think about it properly, an imperialist act is an action carried out by a capitalist power in order to expand its economic, financial and military power, seeking to redivide the world under new conditions of existence.

First, the Russian bourgeoisie has no material basis for the expansion of its “empire.” (Financial capital of Russia is incredibly weak in comparison with Western financial capital. In fact, the influence of Russian financial capital is fully manifested only in Russia itself, and partially in a number of “allied” countries—Belarus, Syria and others). Second, there is also missing in the psychological character of the Russian bourgeois state (which, of course, results from the material conditions)—it does not seek to defeat its rival imperialists, to take away its markets, to weaken its influence on the world stage. No, it

seeks to make a deal with imperialism so that the Russian bourgeoisie, accustomed to its solely privileged parasitic position in a country rich in raw materials, will not be touched.

We can see that Putin's invasion was not based on any motive to expand his markets (rather, it led to their reduction on a global scale), or a desire to redivide the world. Putin wants to keep the world as it has been for the last thirty years, when Russia was "independent" from Western partners. Over the past thirty years, this position has been constantly violated by NATO's eastward expansion, which is what the Russian bourgeoisie fears, not surprisingly.

And if one thinks of the fact that the Russian bourgeoisie seeks to expand its influence on the world stage in this way (that is, through war), that is also untrue. Putin does not need any expansion for the "Russian world," as the material conditions for this are totally unsuitable and will not allow him to do so. His main task is not to expand, but to protect a position that will allow the Russian bourgeoisie not to fear a military intervention by NATO. Putin is incapable of destroying NATO (except for nuclear war), so he will reckon with NATO, but by protecting his interests in the border areas of Russia, as he did in 2008, 2014 and this year.

If Putin's regime were imperialist, we would not see hesitant Russian bourgeois looking for a deal with imperialism, but real predators who would seize Ukraine and the Ukrainian population into bondage even before NATO did. Further, the Russian bourgeoisie would have reclaimed Belarus, northern Kazakhstan and many other "Russian" territories. But we don't see that because there is no real imperialist basis for that, i.e., there is no strong financial capital capable of expanding its interests into weaker countries in order to subjugate them to the center and exploit them for extraction of increased surplus value. In this way, Russia would indeed become imperialist, as pre-Soviet Russia once was.

Of course, the absence of a real basis for expansion does not exclude a layer in the Russian bourgeoisie that aspires to this, but this layer is in the absolute minority. In any event, for the realization of this aim, Russia would have to establish a national fascist dictatorship. In principle, the current isolation of Russia could give more influence to this pro-imperialist stratum, but as long as there is a Putin regime engaged in maneuvering, feverish and improvisational swings from side to side, we will not see any imperialist policy from Russia. I hope you agree with my position on this point.

One further point must be made: the establishment of fascism would require a tremendous militarization, hitherto unprecedented in Russia, to provide some real basis for its expansionary policy. But it is the duty of every revolutionary Marxist to prevent such consequences through socialist revolution. There is no other way to avoid negative consequences in this matter, and it would hardly exist within a class society where the revolutionary class is the proletariat.