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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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13.09.2022

Russia's debacle in Kharkiv

By all indications, Russia has suffered a catastrophic military defeat near Kharkiv, the second-largest city in Ukraine, located in the country's northeast.



Ukrainian soldiers fire into Russian positions from anti-aircraft gun in Kharkiv region, Ukraine, early Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2022. [AP Photo/Andrii Marienko]

In the course of six days, the Ukrainian military, armed and financed by the United States and NATO, has taken dozens of miles of territory. The Institute for the Study of War reports: “Ukrainian forces have penetrated Russian lines to a depth of up to 70 kilometers in some places and captured over 3,000 square kilometers of territory in the past five days since September 6—more territory than Russian forces have captured in all their operations since April.”

Borrowing the methods of the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy, the Kremlin is responding to this catastrophe with lies and evasions. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that

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Russian forces are “regrouping,” a statement that is obviously false. It is impossible to deny that what is taking place is a rout and a massive military and political debacle.

The disaster in Kharkiv is the product of not only incompetent military leadership, but also, and more fundamentally, the bankrupt political strategy upon which Putin based his “Special Operation.”

Whatever the short term results of the defeats of the past week, the events continue the course of unending disasters produced by the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR and restoration of capitalism.

It will further intensify the crisis of the Russian regime, riven by factions that are arguing for a reckless escalation and those who are calling for concessions to be made to the US and NATO.

The Putin government’s decision to invade Ukraine was a desperate and reactionary response to the intensifying pressure of the US and NATO on Russia. Putin’s strategy, to the extent there was one, was to create the circumstances for a favorable negotiation of terms with the United States and its NATO allies.

Putin’s entire strategy in waging the war is bound up with the social outlook of the Russian oligarchic bourgeoisie, whose primary concern is to retain for itself control over the mineral and energy resources that the imperialists wish to plunder.

Putin sought to make an agreement with US imperialism that the Russian oligarchy could live with. Speaking for Russia’s capitalist oligarchy, Putin is far more concerned with domestic social opposition.

The US and NATO have shown, however, that they are uninterested in negotiation. They view the complete subjugation of Russia, including its carve-up into multiple statelets, as a critical strategic goal. Time and time again, the Kremlin has underestimated the determination of the US and its European imperialist allies.

The rapid breakthrough by Ukrainian forces is the result of the massive escalation of the conflict by the United States and NATO. American paramilitary forces are on the ground,

directly coordinating the offensive. Ukrainian missile strikes are directed by the US intelligence agencies, which designate targets.

Increasingly, the rifles borne by Ukrainian troops, the armor they wear and the vehicles that transport them are all NATO-standard weapons, paid for by the US and its European allies. Most importantly, Ukraine has been provided with the forces to strike dozens of miles behind Russian lines in the form of the HIMARS guided missile system and M777 long-range howitzer, as well as the HARM anti-radar missile and the Harpoon anti-ship missile. Ukrainian troops are backed by the NASAMS anti-aircraft system, the same system that guards the White House.

The American media no longer seeks to conceal the extent of direct US involvement in the war. In the words of *The Hill*, the US has become “brazen” in its intervention in the war. “Over time, the administration has recognized that they can provide larger, more capable, longer-distance, heavier weapons to the Ukrainians and the Russians have not reacted,” former US Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor told the newspaper.

The *New York Times*, ecstatic over the Ukrainian advance, wrote: “Senior Ukrainian officials stepped up intelligence sharing with their American counterparts over the summer as they began to plan the counteroffensive that allowed them to make dramatic gains in the northeast in recent days, a shift that allowed the United States to provide better and more relevant information about Russian weaknesses.”

The *Times* quoted Evelyn Farkas, a top Pentagon official for Ukraine and Russia in the Obama administration, as saying, “These guys have been trained for eight years by [US] Special Ops. They’ve been taught about irregular warfare. They’ve been taught by our intelligence operators about deception and psychological operations.”

To refer to the conflict as a “proxy war” is an understatement. The Ukrainian army has become a wholly-owned subsidiary of the US military, which has armed, funded and trained it to the standards of the US Armed Forces.

The US-led offensive has resulted in a catastrophic loss of life, both for Ukrainian forces and for Russia, with reports of more than a thousand people dying per day in recent fighting.

The capitalist governments of the United States and Europe are absolutely determined to carry out their goal of subjugating Russia. The consequences, in terms of the lives of Ukrainians and Russians, along with the disastrous economic and social impact on workers throughout the world, amount to nothing in comparison to the geopolitical imperatives of the ruling class.

It is not ruled out that the Kremlin will conclude from this military catastrophe that it is necessary to wage a massive military escalation, which would itself only lead to an escalation by NATO. Paradoxically, the desperate efforts by the Kremlin to reach an accommodation with imperialism do not preclude a series of actions that could trigger a thermonuclear war.

In a letter to a Russian socialist published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 2, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board chairperson David North wrote:

What is surprising is that Putin and his military command appear not to have fully grasped the extent to which NATO had armed and trained Ukraine's military. But this failure of their intelligence services is rooted in the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, which was based on wildly unrealistic, almost childishly naïve, conceptions of the imperialist system. While repudiating all association with Marxism, the Kremlin retained its faith in the possibility of "peaceful coexistence" with its Western Partners. Putin, shortly before ordering the invasion, complained pathetically that Russia had been "played" by the West.

North concluded:

The defense of the Russian masses against imperialism cannot be undertaken on the basis of bourgeois nation-state geopolitics. Rather, the struggle against imperialism requires the rebirth of the proletarian strategy of world socialist revolution. The Russian working class must repudiate the entire criminal enterprise of capitalist restoration, which has led to disaster, and re-establish its political, social and intellectual connection with its great revolutionary Leninist-Trotskyist heritage.

Putin opened the Russian offensive against Ukraine with a condemnation of Vladimir Lenin. But for all Putin's bluster, the world we inhabit today is the world Lenin described

in his 1916 work, *Imperialism*, which demonstrated that war and colonial domination express the essential characteristics of the capitalist system.

The Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union based on the false belief that imperialism was merely an invention of Lenin, and that a capitalist Russia could reach a *modus vivendi* with European and American imperialism. The ensuing three decades have shown, however, that this was a colossal delusion.

The central task is to mobilize the working class in opposition to imperialist war. This requires a break not only with all of the forces of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left that defend the US/NATO war drive, but those who claim that Russian nationalism offers a solution to the catastrophe created by the dissolution of the USSR.

It is necessary to make a warning: The debacle suffered by the Russian military over the past week only presages a further and even more bloody escalation of the war. The imperialist powers smell blood in the water, and they will redouble their efforts to conquer and subjugate Russia.

Russia's debacle will only further embolden the most reactionary forces within Ukrainian society, as well as the US war planners, to believe they can reproduce this success by triggering a war with China over Taiwan.

But this escalation will at the same time intensify the war on the populations of the United States and Europe, who will pay the cost of the war in the form of surging prices and falling living standards. Already, the war has triggered a collapse in workers' living standards amid a staggering escalation of military budgets, as prices for natural gas have surged ten-fold in Europe.

The 20th century witnessed the most destructive wars in human history. In the 21st century, capitalism now threatens disasters on an even greater scale.

The only social force capable of stopping the imperialist war drive is the international working class. It must combine its economic demands in opposition to the surging cost of living with the struggle against war and the fight to unite the workers of Europe, Asia and the Americas in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

World Socialist 12.09.2022