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By Denys Gorbach, Christian Mahieux
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Some elements about the war in Ukraine



Sources: Cérises, la coopérative

The war unleashed by the Russian army in Ukraine did not begin on February 24, 2022 but has lasted since 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea and then invaded the Donbass.

15,000 deaths that should not be ignored. The long low-intensity war that followed has greatly changed the opinion of the Ukrainian population.

The so-called "special operation" did not achieve its objectives. Putin and his generals hoped for a lightning victory and the establishment of a regime under their command. Seven months later, he has not succeeded. Cities and towns have been destroyed; the dead number in the tens of thousands on both sides; the Russian-speaking Ukrainian population, which the Russian army claims to "save", is the daily target of its cannons; but Ukraine is not under the control of the Russian regime.

The Popular Resistance has contributed greatly to this situation. At the front, participating in armed defense, there are many trade unionists, associative activists and politicians,

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covering the entire "Ukrainian left". Others participate in the unarmed Resistance, through financial and material support, aid to refugees, internationalist ties. Feminist groups are very active. For all these reasons, it is not a question of giving a blank cheque to the Zelensky government, which they opposed before the Russian invasion; All the more so since it has strengthened its anti-social policy.

The recent reactions to the partial mobilization in Russia remind us that part of the solution is also in that country, with those who reject the diktats of the regime. This makes it even more important to support all those who oppose it.

On the subject of NATO: if we take a long-term perspective and look at the last three decades, NATO enlargement is, of course, a structuring factor on the geopolitical scene of this region of the world. And many of those who today want to equate Russia and NATO in the responsibilities of this war hardly spoke out at that time for disarmament, for the cessation of arms sales, for the conversion of the war industries, etc. Without resuming actions to demand the dissolution of NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

If we focus on the dynamics of the last decade, it is marginal to understand the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, since what is happening today is not an inaugural scene but a new phase. NATO was, at least since 2008, a fringe issue and it was clear to everyone, including the Russian government, that Ukraine was not going to join this alliance. In fact, the Russian president quickly stopped talking about NATO and focused all his efforts on the "artificial" nature of the Ukrainian nation. It is clear that one of the effects of this war has been the strengthening of NATO. Finland and Sweden joined this alliance, but Putin is dismantling military posts near the Finnish border to send troops and equipment to Ukraine, whose prospect of NATO membership has just been rejected for the umpteenth time. Someone who feels threatened by NATO does not behave this way. Finally, it is not NATO that threatens to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine.

In speaking out against Western neocolonialism, Putin advocates classical colonialism, with the distribution of zones of influence between empires and brute force, rather than ideological wiles and economic cooptations, as the preferred tool of governance. A successful colonial war will spur other imperialist forces to do the same throughout the world.

Debate to build unity of action

It's been eight months since part of Europe has been at war... It was natural for Cerises la Coopérative to try to characterize as accurately as possible the nature of the war in Ukraine that began on February 24 with Russian aggression.

But it is also, for Cerises, to be part of the efforts to build a process aimed at ending the conflict. This implies listening to disagreements, working on them and thus building the basis of the necessary unity of action.

For this reason, the editorial team has taken the initiative to organize an exchange between exponents known both for their commitment and for the intellectual rigor that characterizes their work.

If there is a question to which the debate organized by Cerises will not give an answer, it is the following: how many men, women and children have already lost their lives in this war that has been going on for almost seven months? Always, in times of war, numbers are strategic...

Cerises opens the debate at a time when new elements of the conflict are emerging. Thus, from the sabotage that caused the leaks of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, Russia demanded and obtained a meeting of the UN Security Council, denouncing a "terrorist act" and pointing to the United States without naming it. That same day, the Russian government organized a rally of several thousand supporters, in which it welcomed the inhabitants of the annexed Ukrainian territories, saying that they had "returned to their historic homeland."

Can this war be summed up only to a Russian-Ukrainian conflict? Is it merely an expression of Russia's desire to recover its Soviet borders by partially dismantling the Ukrainian state born of the collapse of the USSR, or is it the work and sign of the imperialist character of the Russian state?

Is it a sign of an inter-imperialist conflict? Of an inter-imperialist conflict between all NATO forces – which, it should be remembered, are under the direction of the United States – and Russia?

Are these two visions true together? Or, does one of them overdetermine the other?

The harshness of these questions does not imply that we do not ask questions, in fact, it invites us to do so! – here and now: What position and policy should the French left adopt in the face of this war?

Are the forces of the European left looking the other way, relying on government initiatives for military aid to Ukraine, without making an effort to clarify the situation, not even in the debate about its complexity? Or do the forces of the left have to stop being

useful to the dominant discourse? Should they construct their own interpretation, even if it is plural, and thus set in motion so that the catastrophe recedes?

Finally, asking who started this war, what is its nature, implies thinking about its outcome. Is pacifism an old fad? When the war starts, should we wait a little to think about what will happen? Or, on the contrary, by establishing in the obviously contradictory debate the minimum conditions for stopping the killing, are we not working to bring the peacetable closer?

Ukraine / Irreconcilable analysis?

For you, what is the nature of the war in Ukraine and of Russian aggression? Can it be reduced to an inter-imperialist conflict? What are the links or consequences of this war in the crisis of globalized capitalism?

Alain Bihl *

Yannis Thanassekos and I have defended three theses [1] that are articulated.

The first is that this war is, above all, the responsibility of Russia and the Russian regime, which is sometimes reduced to its leader Putin, but which cannot, in our opinion, be understood solely as a conflict between the Russian imperialist power - since there is, in effect, a Russian imperialism, which seeks to reconstitute the space of the former USSR and even the space of the former tsarist Empire - and, on the other hand, the young Ukrainian nation-state, born of the disintegration of the USSR.

This is one dimension of the conflict, but it tends to obscure another. There is, including in this conflict, another conflict of another magnitude, an inter-imperialist conflict, which opposes the whole Western bloc, hegemonized by the United States, through NATO and Russia, and this conflict has its origin in the continuous expansion of NATO during the last two decades in Central and Eastern Europe and the rise of power in Russia.

And the third thesis we hold is that, of these two conflicts, one overdetermines the other. Without the second conflict, the first would not have reached war. The continuation of the war, as we see again these days, is largely fueled by the inter-imperialist conflict, that is, the way in which the Western powers – led by the United States – support Ukraine against the Russian nation.

Bernard Dréano *

I do not share that balance of things at all.

This conflict is first and foremost a conflict of imperialist aggression by Russia against Ukraine, which did not begin on February 24, 2022, and which has as its main reason

internal causes of Russia, which totally violates the texts and treaties that Russia itself has signed. In every conflict there is intervention by the great powers and imperialisms. But it is not NATO that arms Ukraine, but the Americans, the French, the British, etc.

The main problem is that, if you reverse the order of the factors, you reverse the order of the solutions. Almost all wars have internal and local causes. This conflict is a regional conflict. To draw a comparison, and of course this historical comparison has its limits, but wars of aggression happen often. A typical example is Iraq's aggression against Iran, which is strictly a war of aggression. At the time, Iraq had the military support and weapons of the United States, France, and the Soviet Union, and it was a war of aggression that would have catastrophic consequences for Iraq and Iran. The great powers intervene, because there is a war, but they are not behind it.

What are we talking about when it comes to NATO expansion? Is it a request from the governments or peoples of Central Europe? Or is it a decision ever made by NATO or the Pentagon regarding a built and consolidated policy? To what extent can this overdetermine a response of aggression, with a stated goal: it is not only about pushing back NATO, but about destroying the Ukrainian state, and destroying Ukraine as a nation. This has consequences for the repercussions, since the war cannot stop - as in other wars of aggression, for example, that of Israel/Palestine - if the occupied territories remain occupied, and if the refugees continue to be expelled. A ceasefire can be achieved, but not peace.

Alain Bihl

Historically, NATO's expansion process into Central and Eastern Europe began in 1997 with an invitation to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to apply. However, NATO rules stipulate that it is a state that must submit the request, which is then examined by the member states, which can accept or reject it. Unanimity is required for acceptance.

At this point, dissenting voices are raised on the side of the United States, to warn all Western governments that this would necessarily initiate tensions and could only provoke nationalist reactions in Russia. These are aspects that the governments of the time overlooked and ignored, with the consequences we saw later.

Bernard Dréano observes that the extension of NATO ends in 2004, that is, ten years before the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine, and 18 years before the Russian intervention in Ukraine.

Patrick Le Tréhondat

Is Russia's aggression against Ukraine based solely on the question of NATO, or does Russia have a particular conception, which is in fact that of erasing Ukraine as such, the negation of its culture, of its language, a conception inherited from both Great Russian chauvinism and Stalinism?

The ideologues of the Kremlin maintain a discourse that, of course, warns about the question of NATO, but that above all raises the status of Ukraine as an independent nation. If we skip this stage, we immediately come to the inter-imperialist conflict, we evacuate the fact that the war that Russia is waging against Ukraine is first and foremost a colonial war. So the question of the games of the imperialists, including US imperialism, is added and intermingled in this confrontation. But the war being waged by the Ukrainian people is first and foremost a struggle for national liberation.

Makan Rafadjou

I wonder if the two positions are really so opposed. Russia's responsibility for this aggression is, above all, total. No one is unaware that NATO, to a greater or lesser extent, intentionally provoked the situation. But what response can we give to this kind of provocation?

The colonial character of this war has its roots in the political reality of Russia, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in the fact that progressive forces have been totally annihilated. Today, the vast majority of Russian political forces, including the Communist Party, hold totally nationalist, pan-Russian and pan-Slavic positions, which even go beyond Stalin, are positions of Tsarist Russia.

We find ourselves in an internal reality in which inequalities are skyrocketing, we have a bloodless economy totally gangrenous by the mafia of oligarchs, and Russian power does not even want to answer these questions. The only mechanism they have is to excite Russian nationalism, to the detriment of other peoples, in this case the Ukrainians. They artificially light the fire, and this is the only binder left in Russia.

Conflict between two imperialisms, arms race, Makan Rafadjou observes that this opposition of the two blocs, in which Europe is totally aligned with the American position, also leads to a schism between the Western bloc and the rest of the world.

"The positions in the world are much more nuanced. We did not see, in the UN votes, a massive vote against Western positions. It wasn't necessarily a vote of no support for Ukraine, but it was mainly a vote not to give the West a blank check."

Alain Bihl

At least we agree on two points, which is no longer a small thing.

First, it is a conflict that combines two. There is undoubtedly a specific Russian-Ukrainian or Ukrainian-Russian conflict, which opposes an imperialist power in the double sense of pre-capitalist imperialism, Roman-type imperialism and imperialism in the capitalist sense, and the young Ukrainian nation-state born of the disintegration of the USSR. That this conflict goes back to history is obvious. It is currently reactivated for a number of reasons. And a different conflict that pits Russia against the Western bloc hegemonized by the United States. It is already an important point that we agree that we cannot reduce the conflict to one or the other of those two conflicts. What is at stake is the articulation of both conflicts.

This is our first point of agreement, and it deserves to be highlighted.

The second point (on which we agree) is that depending on whether the Russian-Ukrainian conflict or the Russian-NATO conflict is emphasized, we will have completely different readings.

Because the discourse we have to deal with on a large scale completely denies the duality of the current conflict and unilaterally emphasizes the Russian-Ukrainian character of it. The fact that the left has largely fallen into the trap of this discourse seems to us to have potentially very serious consequences for it...

Is the left up to the task?

To clarify your answers, can you indicate what position and policy the left should adopt in the face of this war?

Alain Lacombe

I think there is a lot to be said for the opportunity, for Western imperialism, to regain the initiative. Let's say that allows for a counteroffensive by US imperialism.

Patrick Le Tréhondat

During the war, the class struggle did not end! ... There are currently social clashes in Ukraine. This is an extremely important dimension because it raises the question of what Ukraine after the war.

Bernard Dreano

If we take the world scale, the majority position of the forces that declare themselves progressive is to criticize the United States.

The second position we see on the left, which is the majority in Europe, is to try to talk about something else, that is, to do nothing... This is the position of the Communist Party, of the Greens, of France Insoumise. The position that the left should take, apart from the

fact that in my opinion it should be to support the armed and unarmed resistance of the Ukrainian people, is to support the Ukrainian left.

But the absolute silence of the European left on what is happening in Ukraine, for example, in relation to anti-social laws, is quite impressive, and they even refuse to hear it. On the other hand, since they do not know what to say, they say "yes, NATO will have to be dissolved". Of course, NATO will have to dissolve! But that's not the immediate issue.

Alain Bihr

What the left must do is, first of all, not to join a dominant discourse, which emphasizes unilaterally – exclusively – the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, silencing, minimizing the conflict in its inter-imperialist dimension, ... This constitutes, in our opinion, a real political and ideological suicide that deprives the anti-capitalist left of all autonomy with respect to Western imperialist policy, and its conductor. Behind the conflict (...) is the risk of a direct confrontation between the West, NATO and Russia, which could lead to what everyone knows: a nuclear apocalypse.

There have been recent demonstrations in the Czech Republic, Germany, the UK, etc., and this popular discontent will continue to grow...

If we do not want the nationalist far right to capitalize on this popular discontent for its own benefit, it is time for the left to come out of silence and take initiatives that point in that direction.

Bernard Dreano

What does it mean: "the left must mobilize" to do what? To say "let's stop arming the Ukrainians like this, the Russians are going to win"?

Where have you seen, even for a second, that left-wing forces are supporting the left in the region? They are doing nothing.

Alain Lacombe

And precisely, should we not take initiatives to try to overcome these divisions?

Sylvie Larue

I can understand the saying that we must help the Ukrainian resistance and, in particular, that we can maintain this position of handing over weapons to the Ukrainians. At the same time it is contradictory, it is an opportunity for NATO forces to resume the arms race.

How do we handle this contradiction?

For me, there is no diplomatic solution if a relationship of forces is not created at the level of popular mobilization. And in what has to do with popular mobilization...

I agree with what Bernard says: the left is completely absent and does not work in favor of popular mobilizations, which establish the link between the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, inflation...

Catherine Destom-Bottin

Leftist forces don't even use the word peace. We have to discuss it with the population. We cannot imagine a youth that does not dream of peace.

We must, imperatively, include peace in the debate. I want to be a saboteur of the murderers, putting peace in the debate. We must say the word PEACE. We must widen the gap between the two imperialisms and the peoples who are victims. I want to live with the shame of being a pacifist. Calling for peace strikes at the two belligerents, the two imperialisms that are confronting each other and that is good for peace.

Patrick Le Tréhondat *

In relation to the question of the left? My first step is to listen to the Ukrainian left. There are the Ukrainian people and also the Ukrainian left and we must listen to what they say, and from there we can form our own opinion. What I see in Ukraine is a lot of experienced militants, anti-capitalists, libertarians, trade unionists, many of them are at the front.

They are fighting, for territorial integrity, but they are also in the perspective of the transformation of Ukrainian society at the end of this war.

Bernard Dreano

He pointed out to some German pacifist friends that there was a much bigger problem than in France. Germany is now the fourth or fifth largest arms seller in the world. In 2021, he sold three or four times more weapons to the petro-monarchies than he delivers to the Ukrainians. Today most of the French Caesar guns are not in the hands of the Ukrainians to defend themselves, but in the hands of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The second question is: how can we imagine peace in the Ukrainian region? ... Peace implies the evacuation of the occupied territories and the return of refugees, it is an absolute and inevitable condition and there will be no peace, there will be ceasefire no doubt, but there will be no peace without the evacuation of the occupied territories and the return of refugees. ... I fully agree that we must put peace on the agenda, but we must know in the precise context of this war what the means of peace are and then we must put our own house in order because the F-35s or the rafal planes are not given to the Ukrainians, but, On the contrary, we give them to true warmongers.

Patrick Le Tréhondat

For my part, I would add that there are 36 Caesar guns that have just been sold to Morocco and which, in my opinion, could even be used against Algeria.

Makan Rafadjou

It seems to me that this question of war was not absent for anything during the election campaign. Not in vain today we are in this position that is either reduced to American anti-imperialism or the left avoids it because broadly today, the coalition of the left, the NUPES [coalition between the France Insoumise de Mélenchon, Socialist Party and EELV, ecologists], hides international issues, and the position is basically that the NUPES was built on a position of rupture on other issues. By sweeping geopolitical issues, international issues, under the rug, the consequences of this war are going to fall on us, even if it does not end in a nuclear conflagration between the West and Russia.

* Christian Mahieux, member of the Union Syndicale Solidaires, the International Trade Union Network of Solidarity and Struggles, *Cahiers Les Utopiques* and the team of Cérises, the coopérative.

* Alain Bihr, professor emeritus of sociology. He is the author of about twenty essays and research, several of which were translated into other languages. He published, above all, *La préhistoire du capital* (Page 2, 2006), *La logique méconnue du "Capital"* (Page 2, 2010), *Les rapports sociaux de classes* (Page 2, 2012), *La novlangue néolibérale*, (Page 2 / Syllepse, 2017), as well as *Le premier âge du capitalisme, 1415-1763* (3 volumes), (Page

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* Patrick Le Tréhondat, Makan Rafadjou, Sylvie Larue, Alain Lacombe, Catherine Destom-Bottin, members of the editorial team of Cérises, la coopérative.

Notes

1) La guerre en Ukraine, le récit dominant et la gauche anti-impérialiste et La guerre en Ukraine et la gauche anti-impérialiste. Unite anti-criticism.

2) Syllepse, 2020 [See the interview with Alain Bihr "Globalization allowed capitalism to be born" in <https://correspondenciadeprensa.com/?p=5837> and Guillaume Fondue's article, "The role of the state in the genesis of capitalism in Europe. <https://correspondenciadeprensa.com/?p=7868>)

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