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Crimea Referendum: the Hidden Truth Behind the U.S.-Russia Rivalry

By Brian Becker

March 20, 2014

The people of Crimea have voted in overwhelming numbers and by an overwhelming margin to leave Ukraine and to federate with Russia.

The majority population in Crimea speaks Russian, identifies with Russia and was formally a part of Russia until the region was transferred to Ukraine as a largely administrative measure in 1954 when Ukraine and Russia were full republics united in one country: the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics.



The vote by Crimea to leave Ukraine has led to a chorus of condemnation and economic sanctions against Russia by the United States and all the NATO governments of Europe.

The same countries that dropped 23,000 bombs and missiles on Yugoslavia in 1999 demanding that Kosovo be separated from Serbia and Yugoslavia—and also invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and bombed Libya in 2011 — are crying about Russia’s flagrant “violation” of Ukraine’s sovereignty by virtue of encouraging and supporting the Crimean referendum.

The same militarists who criminally invaded and bombed sovereign Iraq or cheered while Iraq was divided and left bleeding from the assault, are now crying very big crocodile tears about respect for sovereignty in Ukraine. Working class and progressive people should treat their feigned loyalty to the cause of national sovereignty with complete contempt.

U.S. and EU overplayed their hand



An estimated 10,000 people rally against the Kiev coup government in Donetsk, Ukraine.

Provocateur neocon militarists like John McCain and his feckless counterpart who holds the position of Secretary of State have overplayed their hand by facilitating and congratulating a fascist-led anti-Russian coup d’etat against the corrupt but elected government of Ukraine.

They thought they were on the road of absorbing the second largest former Soviet Republic into NATO — lock, stock and barrel. They did not anticipate that the Crimea would hold a popular referendum and declare its independence.

The arrogance of imperial power drove the events. Five months ago Putin was prepared to engage in a peaceful economic competition to soften the hard edges of the U.S./EU campaign to absorb Ukraine into a western sphere of influence. Both sides knew, Putin assumed, that Ukraine is divided geographically and ethnically in a way that would make it impossible for the country to be entirely absorbed by western imperialism.

The ousted President Yanukovich favored integration into the EU but he promised Russia that Ukraine would never join the NATO military alliance against Russia. Yanukovich was a corrupt figure. Close to Ukraine’s oligarchs, he was perfectly willing in the past to do business with the fascist and semi-fascist forces who eventually toppled his government on Feb. 21.

The scrapping of the Feb. 21 agreement

Putin was busy hosting the Olympics and fending off a barrage of baiting by the western media while the street protests gathered steam in Kiev. Originally an eclectic mix of fascist, centrist and some leftist forces, the Maidan street protests came under the leadership of truly fascist forces controlled by the Right Sector and the Svoboda Party.

The foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland tricked Ukraine's hapless president, Victor Yanukovich and perhaps Russia, as well, to sign the Feb. 21 agreement with EuroMaidan protest leaders. Yanukovich agreed to withdraw the police, weaken the power of the presidency and call an early election to form a new government. The moment the police were withdrawn on Feb. 21, however, the fascist militias seized the presidential compound and other government buildings and Yanukovich fled for his life.

Until the violation of the Feb. 21 agreement, the Putin government was playing an oddly passive role even while the United States and the E.U. countries were destabilizing Russia's most important neighbor in an effort that, if successful, could only culminate in the integration of all Ukraine into EU and then into NATO. Crimea would be transformed into a NATO base. Russia would be ousted from its largest and most important naval base and NATO's relentless drive toward the east would be a dagger pointed directly at Russia.

The last straw

The scrapping of the Feb. 21 agreement and the seizure of power by the new fascist-dominated government in Kiev was the last straw for Putin. The Feb. 21 agreement was worked out with the EU powers but it was instantly scrapped by the fascists and the United States officials went public saluting the new regime and recognizing it as the legitimate government.

Did anyone who was thinking believe that Putin would accept this outcome in Ukraine, a country of 46 million people with deep cultural, economic, political and military ties to Russia?

McCain, of course, doesn't care because he spends his entire pampered life running around the world demanding new wars and new confrontations. He flies first class on the taxpayer's dime to Ukraine or Syria or wherever he can grab headlines for his "tough stance." McCain is a big windbag who has little real impact.

But John Kerry is responsible as Secretary of State for overseeing the foreign interests of the biggest U.S. banks and corporations and the status of the Empire globally. Kerry too is a pampered politician who has spent his entire adult life, like McCain, as a talking head in the U.S. Senate. As a Secretary of State he has proved to be a disaster for the Obama Administration. He almost succeeded in dragging Obama into a catastrophe by starting another war in Syria last August but his hand was checked by global opposition and Obama, at the last second, was given a helping hand by the Russians who arranged a diplomatic face saving gesture so the U.S. could back down without looking too "weak."

Now that Putin was forced to act and did so by the exercise of a popular referendum that displayed beyond any doubt the genuine yearning of the majority in Crimea to affiliate with Russia, he has demonstrated an ability to push back against the schemes of U.S. imperialism. Even so Putin's actions are measured and clearly designed to find a new path for possible negotiations over the fate of Ukraine and Russia's acknowledged interests in the country and the region.

Russia's move has changed the equation and provided a conundrum for the United States and the EU. Russia and the EU countries have many shared economic interests and trade. A sudden collapse in relations will create widespread economic suffering on both sides. This was not anticipated by the main figures in the west.

John McCain and the war-mongers in Congress want to pretend that Russia is Iraq or North Korea or Syria and that economic sanctions will do the trick and greatly weaken and destabilize Russia as if Russia doesn't have counter measures available with which to hit back.

The crux of the U.S. rivalry with Russia

Russia today is far weaker in relationship to the United States and the other NATO powers than was the Soviet Union.

Russia's military is one fifth the size of the Soviet Armed Forces, Air Force and Navy.

More importantly than the size of its military, Russia's main European allies in the Soviet era have now been absorbed into the U.S./NATO sphere of influence. So too have many former non-Russian republics of the USSR.

The USSR was a union of 15 republics. The largest was Russia. Ukraine was the second largest powerhouse of the USSR. It had both heavy industry and a vast agricultural sector and was called the breadbasket of the Soviet Union.

Industry in Russia, Ukraine and the other republics was public property. It belonged to the state and its productive capability and products were government owned. There was not a class of billionaires, multi-millionaires, and oligarchs who controlled the economy. Nor did western multi-national corporations have a foothold in this economy.

The Soviet economy operated according to the principle of economic planning. The mainspring of this economic mechanism was completely different than that of the major capitalist powers where bankers lend and corporations produce and trade solely and exclusively to make profits for owners and investors.

The Soviet Union was sanctioned, largely cutoff from trade and investment with the United States following World War II and pushed into diverting a huge section of its national treasury to a nuclear arms race forced upon it by the Pentagon. Nonetheless, the Soviet Union, with Russia as its anchoring republic, became the second greatest economic and military power in the world.

How imperialism viewed the USSR

The USSR not only projected economic and military power for Russia, it did so on a different class basis. As the global struggle to decolonize Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East became the central feature of world politics after World War II, the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc nations became the economic and military ally of those fighting for independence.

Even though the Soviet political leadership was most anxious to have peaceful coexistence and a period of non-confrontation with the United States, the anti-colonial global struggle in the so-called Third World kept drawing the USSR into struggle.

Each of the former colonizing powers of Europe and the United States opposed the revolutionary movements in Vietnam, Korea, Cuba, Indonesia, Iraq, Palestine, Angola, South Africa, Mozambique and elsewhere while the USSR provided military and economic assistance.

The other hotspot for confrontation between the USSR and the United States was over the status of Eastern Europe following World War II. Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania had been dominated by the fascists

Eastern Europe was the staging ground and gateway for the German invasion into the USSR in 1941. The Soviet leadership wanted to guarantee that the post-war leadership of these countries not be controlled by anti-Soviet political forces who owed their political allegiance to the United States and Britain.

It was the Soviet Red Army that defeated Nazism in the area of Eastern and Central Europe in 1944 and 1945. The Red Army was able to mount a massive counter-offensive against the Nazi military machine and its quisling forces in the region—but at a nearly unimaginable cost. More than 27 million Soviet soldiers and civilians were killed in the war and most of the country was devastated. (The name of the Soviet Red Army was changed to the Soviet Armed Forces in 1946.)

It is critically important to understand this basic history, not only to grasp the essence of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation during the so-called Cold war but to ascertain the orientation of Putin and the Russian government today in the Ukraine crisis. Even though the socialist-led government of the Soviet Union was overthrown and the USSR was dissolved in 1991, even though the current Russian government is ideologically and programmatically pro-capitalist rather than communist, there is a constancy in the policies of the United States and the NATO powers that are deeply threatening to Russia.

Hitler and German imperialism

Germany's invasion of the USSR was motivated not only by Hitler's extreme anti-communism and hatred for communists, it was also designed to grab hold of the vast resources of the lands of Eastern Europe: Ukraine, the Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia), the Caucasus region (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and big parts of Russia as well.

German imperialism, under Hitler, invaded these lands because it wanted to create a German imperialist zone of economic domination, not only or even mainly for fascist ideological goals, but rather for the benefit of the Germany's capitalist-owned banks and industries.

Hitler's Germany and later the United States and the NATO powers viewed these countries largely as they viewed their former colonies in the Third World: as a potential source of super-profits based on exploiting their land, resources and labor.

What Stalin and the USSR wanted after World War II

Under the leadership of Stalin, the Soviet Union hoped for a respite from war following World War II. The Soviets would have preferred that the war-time alliance with the United States would continue. They would have been content with a neutral Eastern Europe along the lines of the agreement that was worked out with Austria's neutral status.

But the new leadership in Washington in 1945 was headed in a different direction altogether. The Soviet Red Army's sweep into Europe coupled with the rising tide of anti-colonial national liberation movements and the global popularity of the USSR for its defeat of Nazism created widespread fear, panic and a war fever in Washington D.C. The U.S. establishment envisioned that a third World War was probable but this time it would be with the Soviet Union and their allies.

The U.S. began massive covert and overt operations to bring right-wing and anti-Soviet forces back to political power in Eastern and Central Europe—the same lands that Hitler had used for a staging ground for the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. It was under this pressure that Stalin and the Soviet leadership decided to abandon the idea that Eastern Europe could be “neutral” and started bringing to power permanent governments that were lead by communist parties who were allies of the USSR. The exception was Yugoslavia where the indigenous communist forces led by Tito were strong enough to carry out their own socialist revolution following their long and bitter struggle to defeat the Nazi occupiers.

By “socializing” the governments in Eastern Europe, the Soviet leadership in the late 1940s also removed them as an arena for exploitation by European and United States capitalist corporations and banks.

Not just an ideological struggle

The Cold War is usually presented as an *ideological struggle* between pro-communist and pro-capitalist governments. That was one component to be sure. Imperialism, however, isn't fundamentally an ideological program or project. It is a *global economic system* that compels the banks and corporations to dominate every piece of potential real estate for the benefit of those same entities.

This *global economic system* was reorganized in a transformative way after World War II. Inter-imperialist competition and rivalry between the colonizing powers had been the dominant characteristic of this global system between 1900 and 1945. After World War II, the rivalry between imperialist countries that had generated so much chaos and two world wars within two brief decades was muted as a direct consequence of the dominant role achieved by the United States and a sophisticated global strategy employed by the U.S. government in its newly acquired position of global leader and anchor of the global economic system.

A world system reorganized under U.S. leadership

Instead of punishing, sanctioning and weakening its enemies in World War II, U.S. policy set about reviving the economic and political power of its defeated foes in Germany and Japan.

Under conditions of U.S. military occupation, German and Japanese ruling economic elites and most of their political operatives were quickly restored to power. Instead of smashing them economically, the strategy of U.S. imperialism was to allow German and Japanese business to receive access to global markets and resources.

Under the new alignment both Germany and Japan, along with Britain, France and the other major capitalist economies and governments were welded together as a united front against the USSR and socialism.

After more than four decades of global struggle against the USSR—a struggle that was unremitting and carried out on every front—it was an internal political implosion inside the summits of the Soviet Communist Party that finally collapsed Soviet political power and led to the dissolution of the second greatest power on earth.

Russia was weakened greatly. Its prime allies were picked away by NATO. Its economy went into a giant tailspin. The living conditions for a broad part of the population dropped dramatically. There had never been such a precipitous drop recorded in peace time. Big parts of the nationalized economy were looted by gangsters with connections to international financing. Russia was on its knees but 10 years later Russia started to come back. The United States wanted Russia to be a puppet or so weak that it could never be an obstacle again to imperialism's desires and designs including in the vast resource-rich and geo-strategically important territories within the former boundaries of the Soviet Union.

An inherently expansionist system

But Russia is too big to be a puppet. Its military is too large, its land mass and resources too vast, and its level of development too high for Russia to be a doormat for western imperialism.

So even though the Soviet Union is no more, there remains a continuing struggle between the club of imperialist countries, led since 1945 by the United States, and Russia.

The ideological struggle against communism is no longer a feature of the new rivalry. But the inherently expansionist nature of modern day imperialism puts it on a continual collision course with Russia, China or any national entity or mass movement that serves as a brake or an obstacle to its desire for unfettered domination over the planets' land and resources.

This historical pattern is observable because it is the dominant characteristic of modern imperialism. It is also the reason that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War did not bring about a peace dividend, disarmament and the diminution of militarism. On the contrary, the last 20 years have witnessed one imperialist war after another as the primary power center in the **global economic system** marches on in pursuit of its predatory agenda. In that sense, there is not a new Cold War but rather a continuation of an ongoing effort by the most powerful elites in the largest capitalist countries to maintain their stranglehold over the world.

