

EDITORIAL

Imperialism and War

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The production period of this issue of IMR has coincided with Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. If this editorial had been written at the beginning of the production process it would have been to speculate as to whether Putin was actually going to invade. Written halfway through the process it might have been assumed that the Russian forces would simply have marched into Kyiv in days. Now (on 8 March), just as we go to press, we are twelve days into the invasion and Kyiv and most of Ukraine still stands in defiance, and there is an anti-war movement in Russia that exceeds our most optimistic expectations. In such a situation it is impossible to know how things will stand by the time this editorial is in the hands of a reader – 10 days at the absolute minimum. For that reason I will leave attempting to analyse current events to other more suitable outlets and here simply offer some comments on the War in Ukraine in relation to the history and present configuration of imperialism.

Imperialism always involves the interaction of two sets of relations: on the one hand relations between the imperial, colonial, oppressor power and its victims, the colonised, oppressed people or nation; on the other hand relations between rival imperial powers or power blocs.

It is now widely recognised, even in the mainstream media and certainly in mainstream academia, that historically the first set of relations has been characterised by the utmost brutality. From the Transatlantic slave trade to the Belgian reign of terror in the Congo, from the extermination of Native Americans to the hideous oppression of Australian Aborigine peoples to the horrors of Vietnam it is an unending tale of appalling atrocities and barbarity which continues to this day in Yemen, Palestine, Iraq and elsewhere. The second set of relations, the inter-imperialist rivalry, which point to the systemic roots of imperialism in capitalist competition, are less widely recognised but are equally

important and have also produced a continual stream, over centuries, of wars of ever-increasing brutality.

For example, in the seventeenth century, when capitalism was in its early stages, the Dutch Republic won its freedom from the feudal Habsburg Empire and immediately started setting up an empire of its own in Batavia (the Dutch East Indies), South Africa, Pernambuco (Brazil) and North America (New Amsterdam/New York) and this immediately brought it into conflict with its rival England. The result was three Anglo-Dutch wars which included a battle with the Dutch fleet at Medway in the Thames estuary. In the eighteenth century the main rivalry was between Britain and France with Britain gaining control of much of India and North America by defeating France in the Seven Years War of 1756-63 (total casualties nearly three million). This rivalry continued through the wars with Napoleon and into the nineteenth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century the international capitalist system as a whole entered what Lenin and other Marxists called its imperialist stage and new inter-imperialist conflicts emerged with the central rivalry being between Britain and its allies (France, Russia etc.) and the new industrial power of Germany and its allies (Austria-Hungary etc). This rivalry in which Germany was demanding its 'fair share' of colonies and Britain was defending its empire 'on which the sun never set', culminated in the carnage of the First World War (total casualties up to 20 million) and the same basic rivalry underlay the most terrible war in history, the Second World War, with its more than 50 million dead. After that war a new phase of inter-imperialist rivalry developed between the US and the Soviet Union in the so-called Cold War with innumerable proxy conflicts, such as the Korean War with casualties of over three, and the ongoing threat of nuclear annihilation for the whole of humanity.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought a brief period in which the US dreamed of a 'new world order' in which it was the lone imperial superpower but that was an illusion, and the phenomenal rise of China has led to a new phase of inter-imperialist conflict with the US and its allies on one side and China and, increasingly Russia, on the other. Within this the EU is clearly in the US/NATO camp but also trying to develop its military capabilities and thus its ability to play a more independent, but no less imperialist role.

The War in Ukraine embodies both the sets of relations. It is at one and the same time an example of brutal imperialist invasion with the aim of returning Ukraine to the status of a Russian colony and an episode in the developing global rivalry between the major imperial blocs.

This has set socialists a number of related tasks: unequivocally condemning Putin's invasion and standing in solidarity with the resistance of the Ukrainian people; maintaining our ongoing

opposition to both imperial camps which includes opposing NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and the war mongering of Western politicians and media. In this, as socialists in the Western camp, we have a particular duty to combat our own rulers; by exposing their double-standards over cases such as the War in Yemen and the oppression and permanent war against the Palestinians, along with their hugely differential response to refugees from Ukraine compared to those from Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and so on; by opposing Western sanctions, arms deliveries, no fly-zones and other means of escalation towards all out war which would be an utter catastrophe for the people of Ukraine and all of Europe and beyond. It means stressing our solidarity with the anti-war protestors in Russia counterposing the international people's movement against war to the attempt to exploit the invasion of Ukraine for militarist and imperialist purposes. In Ireland it also means putting front and central the defence of Irish neutrality against all attempts by our government and its media allies to undermine it. [For a strong defence of Irish neutrality see Richard Boyd Barrett 'Defend Irish Neutrality' <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2022/03/06/defend-irish-neutrality>].

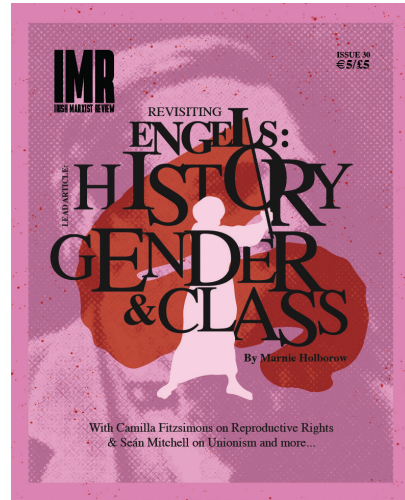
How socialists face up to these tasks in the face of an intense battery of propaganda from ruling class politicians and their friends in the media, an assault which is currently reaching into virtually every nook and cranny of civil society from sports and TV to theatre companies is of huge importance. It matters not only for today and tomorrow, but also for the future because the Ukraine crisis is a harbinger of many wars, crises and conflicts to come and imperialist rivalries intensify and the world becomes an ever more unstable and dangerous place.

Finally in this editorial I want to draw attention to the lead article in this issue which is of particular importance. This is Eddie Conlon's excellent study of 'The Irish Working Class Today' which demonstrates with a mass of evidence that although the composition of the Irish working class has changed significantly it remains the large majority of Irish society and a major power to be reckoned with, of central importance for socialist advance.

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