

“Synthetic Left” Joins “Corporate Right” in Getting Ukraine War Wrong. Historical Analysis

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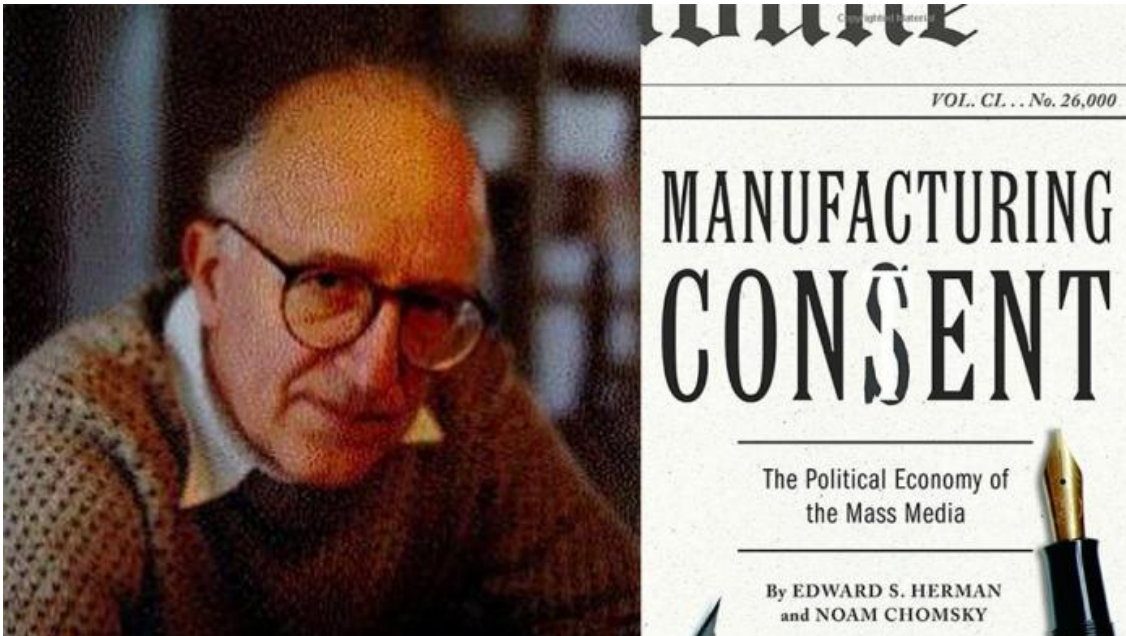
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Since the Russian military operation to de-Nazify and de-militarize Ukraine began in late February, there is a common misperception that the Western left is [“split”](#) over the conflict in its response.

Indeed, it is true there has been infighting within organizations such as the U.S.-based Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) between its “International Committee”—whose official [statement](#) rightly faulted NATO enlargement for “setting the stage” for Russia’s actions in Ukraine—and local branches of the group which released their own takes distancing themselves from the former.

Similar sectarian splinters have occurred among the U.S. Green Party over the issue with the [Howie Hawkins-led wing](#) on one side endorsing sending [lethal aid](#) to Ukraine and its [peace action committee](#) on the other.

However, all of them fell in line behind the corporate media in characterizing the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as an “invasion” by Moscow to be condemned. For what the late **Edward S. Herman** [called](#) the “cruise missile Left,” the 14,000 ethnic Russians killed in Donbass by the Ukrainian army since 2014 are “unworthy victims,” as Herman and Noam Chomsky defined the notion in *Manufacturing Consent*. With a few notable [exceptions](#), the vast majority of the so-called left wing in the United States and Western Europe have gotten Ukraine totally wrong.



Edward S. Herman, co-author of *Manufacturing Consent*. [Source: rollingstone.com]

International relations scholar John Mearsheimer [warned](#) for years that NATO expansion threatened Moscow's legitimate security interests and would likely lead to a hot war in Ukraine. Then again, Joe Biden himself [acknowledged](#) as much as a senator back in 1997.

Now that the U.S. president has openly called for regime change in Moscow, one wonders what new excuses NATO apologists will invent to maintain that the eastward encroachment on Russia's borders is benevolent. Still, the source of the widespread misunderstanding today can be traced much further back in history—long before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany.

In the lead-up to the escalation of hostilities, many on the Left made reference to Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech formally recognizing the Novorussian republics. They pointed to Putin's blaming the Soviet policy on the Ukrainian national question for the current crisis as evidence that the Russian head of state is a reactionary and, therefore, Moscow's actions unjust.

A recent [article](#) in *Jacobin* magazine, the unofficial flagship publication of the Harringtonite reformist tendency in the U.S. [Michael Harrington was a social democrat who was anti-communist], continued this line of thought by distorting early Soviet history. In particular, the modestly self-professed "leading voice of the American left" sought to historically sever the ancestral relations between Russified communists in Donbass over a century ago from the latter-day militants in the Eastern Ukrainian republics.

Never mind that it was the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the largest political opposition to Putin, which first [proposed](#) to the State Duma back in January that the Kremlin should recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.



Russian Parliament in process of voting to approve recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk Republics—something first proposed by the Russian communists. [Source: [euronews.com](https://www.euronews.com)]

It is impossible to understand the struggle between the two countries and the Left's misapprehension without putting it in the context of the former Soviet Union and its demise. Leaving aside his own politics, Putin's assertion that the Bolsheviks carved up territory of the former Russian Empire to form a Ukrainian state is a historical fact.

That this controversial decision determined the course of the next century of events from the Second World War through Ukraine's independence to the current flare-up is also valid.

To its credit, one of the legacies of the USSR and its ethnic federalism was that it greatly reduced the frequently violent conflicts between the more than 120 different oppressed nationalities of the old Tsarist autocracy. With that being said, it would be a disservice to the socialist movement in failing to recognize that mistakes were made by the Soviet leadership over the national question. More importantly, what many self-described leftists would like us to forget is that there were other prominent Marxists at the time who were at odds with Lenin over Ukraine's right to statehood, chiefly among them Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg.

As the Slovene provocateur Slavoj Žižek once [noted](#), it is a "*historical irony*" that Ukrainian nationalists have been tearing down statues of Lenin, considering that not only did the USSR redraw Ukraine's borders and extend its territory several times—including the mostly Russian-speaking Crimea which was transferred by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 after nearly 200 years as Russian land—it was during the first decade of the Soviet era when Ukrainian culture, identity and language was revitalized and promoted by the state. Putin also called attention to this paradox when he mocked Kyiv's "decommunization" laws, pointing out that, if it were not for communism, there would be no modern Ukraine.

Despite the fact that the mother tongue of most Ukrainians was Russian, the local dialect only began to be taught in schools when the Soviet education system was introduced. Having said that, the choice to establish a Ukrainian state did not come without

considerable debate among the Marxist school beforehand.

Prior to the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty, there were many concerns among the Russian revolutionaries as to whether the calls for self-determination by the heterogenous demographics which composed the Tsarist Empire would make an eventual Soviet entity impossible to govern.

The Bolsheviks hoped to appease minority ethnic groups by formulating a policy which in principle offered autonomy and sovereignty but a form of national rights that did not take precedence over socialist internationalism—or as Lenin called it, a “voluntary union of nations.”

In *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, the Marxist revolutionary leader [explained](#) the policy of indigenization (korenizatsiya) or nativization which sought to integrate the many non-Russian nationalities into the Soviet system:

“The proletariat of the oppressing nations cannot confine itself to the general hackneyed phrases against annexations and for the equal rights of nations in general, that may be repeated by any pacifist bourgeois. The proletariat cannot evade the question that is particularly “unpleasant” for the imperialist bourgeoisie, namely, the question of the frontiers of a state that is based on national oppression. The proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that “its own” nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible.”



Soviet poster in Ukrainian on indigenization. [Source: svsx.livejournal.com]

Following the October Revolution, Luxemburg argued in her polemic that the right of oppressed peoples to self-determination should be on the condition that progressive

orientations would be in control of the newly formed nation-states.

Lenin [disagreed](#) and upheld the position that the right to sovereignty should be unconditional, even if reactionary forces were to take power. Upon Moscow's exit from World War I, the Baltic states gained their first period of independence and the Finnish Civil War resulted in a Red defeat.



Vladimir Lenin, left, Rosa Luxemburg, right. [Source: links.org.au]

Meanwhile, Luxemburg's native Poland declared its autonomous status despite opposition from her own SDKPiL (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania) faction on the basis of a commitment to proletarian internationalism. Part of her pragmatic reasoning was that the ex-Tsarist colonies were instantly pulled into imperialist orbit once they seceded, culminating in the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War.

Her 1918 [essay](#) on *The Russian Revolution* is more well-known for its criticism of the one-party rule of the Bolsheviks, but its third chapter examines the nationalities question:

“The Bolsheviks are in part responsible for the fact that the military defeat was transformed into the collapse and breakdown of Russia. Moreover, the Bolsheviks themselves have, to a great extent, sharpened the objective difficulties of this situation by a slogan which they placed in the foreground of their policies: the so-called right of self-determination of peoples, or—something which was really implicit in this slogan—the disintegration of Russia... One is immediately struck with the obstinacy and rigid consistency with which Lenin and his comrades stuck to this slogan, a slogan which is in sharp contradiction to their otherwise outspoken centralism in politics as well as to the attitude they have assumed towards other democratic principles. While they showed a quite cool contempt for the Constituent Assembly, universal suffrage, freedom of press and assemblage, in short, for the whole apparatus of the basic democratic liberties of the people which, taken all together, constituted the “right of self-determination” inside Russia, they treated the right of self-determination of peoples as a jewel of democratic policy for the sake of which all practical considerations of real criticism had to be stilled.”

In retrospect, whether or not Lenin's stance was correct and Luxemburg's wrong is a matter of debate, though the consensus seems to be the former on the left, particularly when applied to the many anti-colonial and national liberation struggles in the global south. So too is the matter of whether Ukraine had the right to become a separate country from Russia, albeit both Eastern Slavic nations along with Belarus evolved from the medieval Kievan Rus state and they are essentially the same ethnic group. Nevertheless, what is more pertinent is that Luxemburg was ominously accurate in her assessment of the particularly dangerous character of Ukrainian nationalism. After all, Lenin died in 1924 and did not live to witness the Great Patriotic War and Ukrainian collaboration with the Axis powers.



Ukrainians greet German soldiers in western Ukraine in 1941. [Source: [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)]

Then again, the early warning signs were all there in the many pogroms against tens of thousands of Jews, Poles and Russians by Ukrainian ultra-rightists under the leadership of Symon Petliura who tried to create a racially homogenous state during the Soviet-Ukrainian War (1917-1921).

Historically, Ukraine's independence movement began as part of the broader extremist coalition which became European fascism and its defeat only further radicalized its exiled right-wing émigrés during the interwar period, eventually leading to the founding in Vienna of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in 1929. A decade earlier, Luxemburg had forewarned that placation of Ukrainian ultranationalism would serve as a counterrevolutionary call to arms and fragment Ukraine:

“Ukrainian nationalism in Russia was something quite different from, let us say, Czechish, Polish or Finnish nationalism in that the former was a mere whim, a folly of a few dozen petty-bourgeois intellectuals without the slightest roots in the economic, political or psychological relationships of the country; it was without any historical tradition, since the Ukraine never formed a nation or government, was without any national culture, except for the reactionary-romantic poems of Shevschenko. It is exactly as if, one fine day, the people living in the Wasserkante should want to found a new Low-German (Plattdeutsche) nation and government! And this ridiculous pose of a

few university professors and students was inflated into a political force by Lenin and his comrades through their doctrinaire agitation concerning the “right of self-determination including etc.”

Lenin remained unconvinced and proceeded with the policy. In hindsight, Luxemburg appears clairvoyant. Two decades later when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, many Ukrainians did not view the Wehrmacht as conquerors but liberators and more than a quarter of a million local quislings were recruited from ultranationalist organizations by the Third Reich to participate in the mass murder of Poles, Jews, Roma and other so-called undesirables.

Those same far-right terrorist forces under Stepan Bandera’s command in the OUN continued a violent insurgency against the Soviets during the Cold War with the covert support of Western intelligence agencies in Project AERODYNAMIC. Central Intelligence Agency [documents](#) verify that the CIA sponsored Ukrainian Nazi collaborators like Bandera and [Mykola Lebed](#) in order to “*exploit nationalist cultural and other dissident tendencies in Ukraine*” and “*exploit the minority nationality question in the Soviet Union.*” A declassified CIA document from 1953 states:

“The purpose of Project AERODYNAMIC is to provide for the exploitation and expansion of the anti-Soviet Ukrainian resistance for cold war and hot war purposes. Such groups as the Ukrainian Supreme Council of Liberation (UHVR) and its Ukrainian Insurgent Army (**OUN**), the Foreign Representation of the Ukrainian Supreme Council of Liberation (ZPUHVR) in Western Europe and the United States, and other organizations such as the **OUN/B** will be utilized.”

The Banderovtsi were ultimately defeated in the late 1950s but Ukraine was never truly de-Nazified, as Khrushchev made yet another disastrous blunder in allowing many Ukrainians deported during the Stalin years to repatriate while releasing others from imprisonment.

Right-wing nationalism and anti-Russian sentiment remained underground for several decades until its reappearance when the USSR dissolved and would later become one of the biggest factors in the 2004 Orange Revolution and the Maidan ten years later. [CIA agitation was also of course a factor].

Modern Ukraine itself had grown out of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Habsburg Empire, and Imperial Russia to become a multinational state with a significant minority population of Russian speakers.

When Ukraine was incorporated into the USSR, the nationality question was kept under control by the fact that Soviet citizenship was not restricted by ethnic identity and all Ukrainians were citizens of the Soviet Union.

Immediately after Kyiv declared its independence in 1991, ethno-nationalism resurfaced just as it did in nearly every ex-communist country in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia to more than three decades of frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Once the Warsaw Pact disbanded, the West began to absorb all of its former signatories into NATO, renegeing on the agreement made between Mikhail Gorbachev and then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker who promised that it would not move “one-inch to the east.”

Once Eastern European countries started to pursue integration into NATO and the European Union, Boris Yeltsin signaled that the Russian Federation's long-term aspiration was to eventually join the alliance and superstate as well. Even in the first term of Putin's incumbency, Moscow naively continued to hope that it could one day be accepted into the Atlanticist and European projects.

By 2004, NATO had acceded eleven additional countries since the end of the Cold War, but it was not until three years later, at the Munich Security Conference, when Putin finally challenged NATO's continuous extension eastward and from that point on became a pariah in the West.

Even though Ukraine's induction into the transatlantic alliance was opposed by France and Germany in 2008, the possibility of Kyiv's eventual membership in the NATO bloc took center stage in souring relations with its neighbor. Former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski summed up the rationale behind using Ukraine as a beachhead to attack Russia in his influential 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*:

“Ukraine is a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country (means) Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire.”

It all came to a head in 2014 when Ukrainian **President Viktor Yanukovych** was thrust in the middle of the two competing spheres of influence. Faced with a choice between an EU Association Agreement which offered bilateral support in return for draconian austerity measures or a more favorable bailout loan from Russia, Yanukovych eventually accepted Putin's offer.

Immediately, Western-backed mass protests in the so-called “Revolution of Dignity” began and within months he was removed in a parliamentary coup with Washington strategists handpicking his replacement. When it turned out that Brussels [EU] preferred the former professional boxer and current Mayor of Kyiv Vitali Klitschko to be his successor—instead of the U.S.'s choice—it was revealed in a controversial leaked phone call that Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, told U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, “*Fuck the EU.*”



Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt: “Fuck the EU.” [Source: eleventimezones.com]

This was not the only occasion when the former foreign policy adviser to Dick Cheney would divulge Washington’s dirty secrets. Speaking to the National Press Club inside the Beltway, Nuland bragged that the supposedly spontaneous pro-EU demonstrations in which she notoriously handed out cookies had actually been funded in part by the U.S. State Department. Or as then-President Obama [put it](#), “we brokered a deal to a transition in power in Ukraine.”



Victoria Nuland with Pyatt behind her handing out cookies to Maidan Square demonstrators. [Source: csmonitor.com]

Yanukovych’s NATO-installed substitutes—former investment banker **Arseniy Yatsenyuk** and oligarchic chocolatier **Petro Poroshenko**—both advocated a nationalist agenda which included enacting legislation making Ukrainian the country’s sole official language and pressuring the Ukrainian Orthodox Church into severing ties with the Patriarch of Moscow. Current Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has only deepened the stratification with the signing of indigenous people’s laws recognizing Crimean Tatars and other minorities at the exclusion of ethnic Russians.

These steps, along with the emboldening of neo-Nazism, divided the country on ethnic lines and set off the bloody conflict in Donbass which is native to a significant Russian ethnolinguistic community. Threatened by the Banderite regime’s discriminatory policies and genocidal neo-fascist militias, the people of Novorussia sought protection from the Motherland. Since then, Kyiv and the separatists both agreed to a ceasefire in the 2015 Minsk Agreements to which the post-Maidan regime has consistently failed to adhere.

With the peace process undermined by the far right—including the Azov battalion—and Western military aid, the likelihood of a resolution to the conflict dwindled. If there was ever to be an end to the ongoing ethnic cleansing and [war crimes](#) in the Donbass region, a Russian intervention became almost inevitable.

For eight years, the people of Donetsk and Luhansk lived through a perpetual state of war as the NATO powers refused to provide Moscow with any security guarantee that Ukraine would not re-nuclearize or become a member state.

In the meantime, the Western yellow press has portrayed a war driven by complex historical developments as a Manichean dichotomy of a Russian bear picking on its little brother. Without much distinction, many on the so-called Left has drawn a false equivalence between the two sides.

While Putin is certainly a conservative, there is a magnitude of difference between Moscow and Kyiv where in the former the Communist Party is the second-largest political organization which [urged](#) the Kremlin to recognize the pro-Russian breakaway oblasts, and the latter in which the Communist Party is banned and fascists openly serve in parliament.

It should be acknowledged that there are many parts of Putin's historical analysis which are incorrect, starting with his sweeping statements concerning the formation of Ukraine and incognizance of the connection between revived ultranationalism and the reinstatement of free enterprise. However, rebuke of those errors means nothing coming from the Western Left which only lends tacit support to NATO when it turns reality on its head to portray the alliance's confrontation with Moscow as an "inter-imperial rivalry."

In order to understand why this is false, we should turn to Lenin who in 1920 reformulated the pre-industrial, traditional definition of imperialism into categories of "oppressor" and "oppressed" nations:

"That is why the focal point in the Social-Democratic programme must be that division of nations into oppressor and oppressed which forms the essence of imperialism, and is deceitfully evaded by the social-chauvinists and Kautsky. This division is not significant from the angle of bourgeois pacifism or the philistine Utopia of peaceful competition among independent nations under capitalism, but it is most significant from the angle of the revolutionary struggle against imperialism."

In the context of U.S. global hegemony, the Russian Federation would definitely fall into the oppressed nation distinction and still occupies the geopolitical space once filled by the former Eastern Bloc when it supported the movements of Third World national liberation. Although post-Soviet Russia has undeniably returned to the international stage, it remains a relatively weak capitalist country since the neoliberal "shock therapy" of the 1990s.

Those suffering from Putin derangement syndrome selectively omit that the Russian statesman acknowledges that the fall of the Soviet Union was a tragedy and that Ukraine has only become the poorest country in Europe since the restoration of capitalism, during which, on the advice and encouragement of U.S. advisors, Russia's most valuable assets and natural resources (which belonged to the Russian people) were privatized, plundered, and "sold" for virtually nothing to Yeltsin's cronies, who became today's oligarchs.

Oddly enough, modern Ukraine itself would never have been established if not for Lenin's rethinking of imperialism and the Russian Empire as a "prison house of nationalities" which colonized and subjugated oppressed nations.

Motivated by colonial guilt over actions taken by the Tsars, the Bolsheviks partitioned new boundaries within the communist state so that marginalized groups could exercise self-rule.

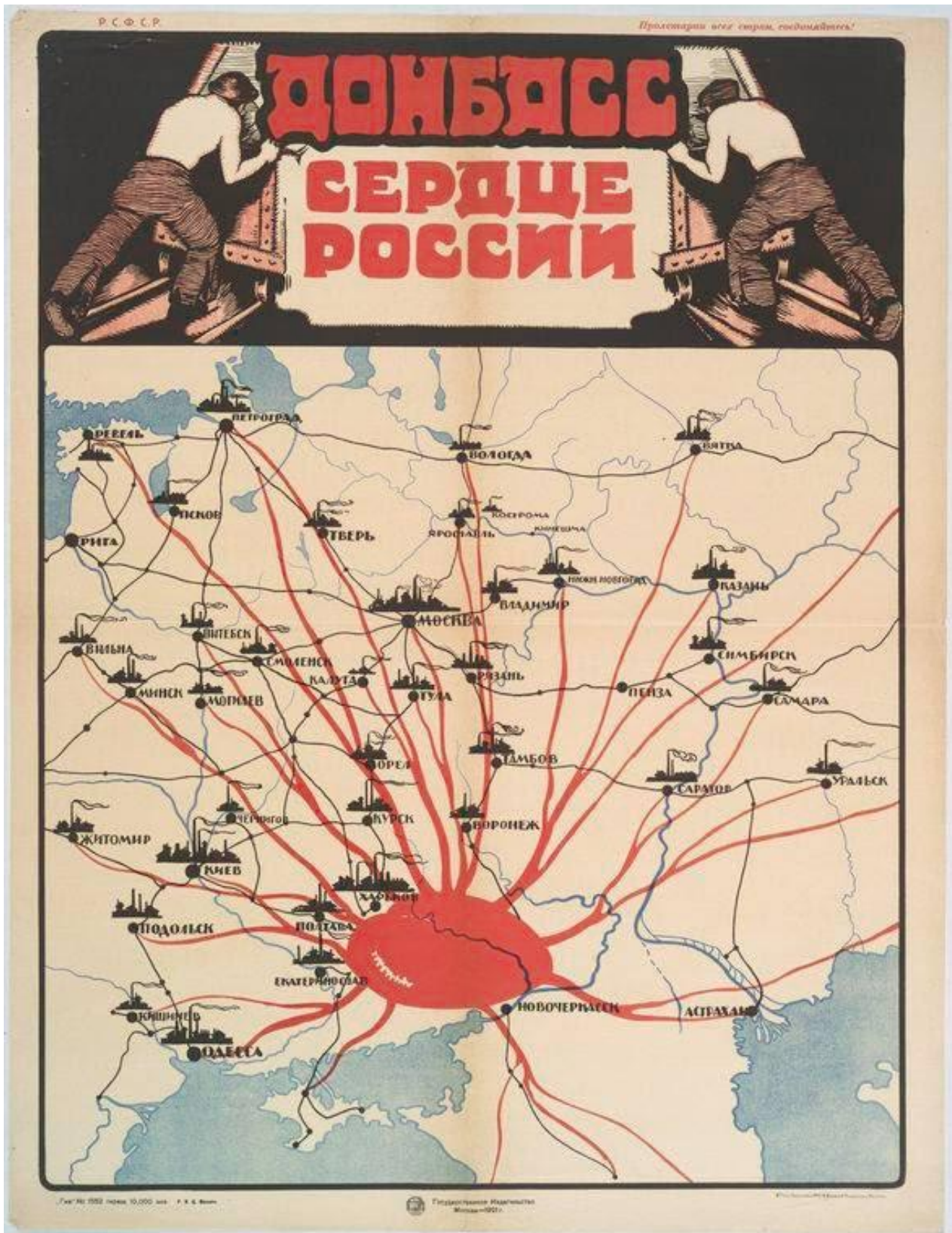
Putin takes issue with the Soviets because, when these lines were created, they permitted a large geographical distribution of Russian speakers who found themselves suddenly stateless as soon as the USSR crumbled. Yet the faux-Left which misrepresents his words fails to mention this part of the address and instead zeroes in on the Russian President's criticism of Lenin and his claim that modern Ukraine was founded by the Bolsheviks arbitrarily without the permission of its inhabitants.

Admittedly, Putin does leave out many historical details in which multiple quasi-governments were declared during the Ukrainian War of Independence. These included the nationalist Ukrainian People's Republic set up in Kyiv after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, its follow-up the Second Hetmanate or "Ukrainian State," and the Kharkiv-based Ukrainian Soviet Republic government in the east which appealed to Moscow for military support against its rivals.

However, the Ukrainian Soviet Republic was not the only communist state-like formation at the time—there was also an Odessa Soviet Republic pseudo-state as well as a Donetsk Soviet Republic. This oversight makes Putin's conclusion that the mostly Russian-populated Donetsk Basin was dictatorially added to Soviet Ukraine incomplete. In fact, historical records show that Lenin was at one point in favor of the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic remaining independent from the Ukrainian SSR and respected its territorial integrity.

The option to incorporate the Donbass was only taken because the province did not wish to remain secluded and vulnerable after its previous occupation by Ukrainian nationalists in collaboration with the Central Powers.

The region was also an industrial hub and, without it, Soviet Ukraine would have been an agrarian-based society, so it was an economic as well as a political decision, not simply an autocratic decree by Lenin. As it happens, the present-day self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic considers itself the descendant to the short-lived proto-state of 1918.



1921 Soviet poster: "Donbass Is the Heart of Russia." [Source: istorya.ru]

While there was no referendum to include Donbass in Ukraine, the Bolsheviks introduced the most democratic structures the one-time Tsarist territory had ever experienced in its history. Where Putin's point would be more applicable as an instance when the Soviets did actually transfer Russophone territory without the consent of its people was when Khrushchev gifted the Crimean peninsula to his native Ukraine. Even so, it was not the abolition of the Crimean Autonomous Republic in 1954 that led to the current schism but the

fall of the USSR which Putin fails to identify as the real cause of ethnic tensions between Galicia, or western Ukraine, and Donbass.

Above all, it was the removal of the Soviet policy of the “Friendship of Peoples” and the Soviet of Nationalities chamber which eliminated the guarantee of equal representation of minorities.

The reinstatement of the free market did not just make Ukraine impoverished as Putin concedes but was also what opened up political space for the Ukrainian ultranationalism of the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan which had been kept in check under communism. After all, few remember that, in March 1991, more than 70% of the Ukrainian population voted to preserve the Soviet confederation and to remain in one country with Russia before capitalism was forced upon them, an inconvenient truth to the narratives of both the West and Putin alike.

Putin’s nationalism often overlaps in interests with his communist political opponents in terms of geopolitics but just as frequently diverges. For example, he regards the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk as a national humiliation. While the peace agreement between the Bolsheviks and Central Powers did cede a large amount of Russian imperial land, the negotiations were supported by the majority of Russians as the communists rose to power on the slogan of “peace, bread and land” and had to deliver on their promise to the Russian people which the provisional government betrayed after the February Revolution. Moreover, much of the area that was surrendered was later regained following World War II, including the Baltic states which rejoined the USSR despite having previously been colonized by Tsardom.



Borders drawn up in 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. [Source: [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Brest-Litovsk)]

And what is the tragedy of the execution of the Romanov family compared to the millions of Russian peasants who Nicholas II sent to their deaths in World War I? Putin seems to forget that the needless imperial bloodbath was what propelled the success of the Russian Revolution to begin with. The reigning Russian leader is also just as seemingly unaware that Lenin did not reject Russian nationalism outright as the mainstream Left critics of his speech. To distinguish Soviet patriotism from the reactionary monarchist Black Hundreds, Lenin wrote in *On the National Pride of the Great Russians*:

“Let us, Great-Russian Social-Democrats, also try to define our attitude to this ideological trend. It would be unseemly for us, representatives of a dominant nation in the far east of Europe and a goodly part of Asia, to forget the immense significance of the national question—especially in a country which has been rightly called the “prison of the peoples,” and particularly at a time when, in the far east of Europe and in Asia, capitalism is awakening to life and self-consciousness a number of “new” nations, large and small; at a moment when the tsarist monarchy has called up millions of Great

Russians and non-Russians, so as to “solve” a number of national problems in accordance with the interests of the Council of the United Nobility and of the Guchkovs, Krestovnikovs, Dolgorukovs, Kutlers and Rodichevs.

Is a sense of national pride alien to us, Great-Russian class-conscious proletarians? Certainly not! We love our language and our country, and we are doing our very utmost to raise her toiling masses (i.e., nine-tenths of her population) to the level of a democratic and socialist consciousness. To us it is most painful to see and feel the outrages, the oppression and the humiliation our fair country suffers at the hands of the tsar’s butchers, the nobles and the capitalists. We take pride in the resistance to these outrages put up from our midst, from the Great Russians; in that midst having produced Radishchev, the Decembrists and the revolutionary commoners of the seventies; in the Great-Russian working class having created, in 1905, a mighty revolutionary party of the masses; and in the Great-Russian peasantry having begun to turn towards democracy and set about overthrowing the clergy and the landed proprietors.”

Lenin distinguished what he considered socialist patriotism from bourgeois nationalism and its promotion by the Soviet state was not confined to the time after his death as it is widely portrayed. Constantly likening Putin to Stalin, the contemporary pseudo-left considers the post-Lenin period a revision of original Soviet federalism, when they fail to remember that Lenin supervised his Georgian-born Commissar of Nationalities in the writing of [Marxism and the National Question](#) where Stalin provided the Marxist-Leninist definition of ‘nation’ itself in unambiguous terms:

“A nation is a historically originated stable community of people, originated on the basis of a common language, common territory, joint economic life and common mental characteristics revealing themselves in a common culture.”

Regardless of whether, if Ukraine constitutes a real nation per se distinct from Russia, Putin deserves credit for delivering a thoughtful speech providing historical context, however imperfect, on its formation in order to communicate to the Russian people the reasons for the special operation, something Western leaders seldom if ever do to their constituents when they go to war.

It is little wonder why no corporate outlet would dare broadcast the speech in full, for it might remind Americans how incompetent their own politicians are. His remarks expanded upon a lengthy [op-ed](#) “*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*” authored last year which is worth examining as a companion piece.



[Source: ne-np.facebook.com]

While he may not fall on the left of the political spectrum, Putin's Bonapartism arguably saved the Russian state from complete collapse by re-nationalizing the energy sector after the economic genocide of the Yeltsin era. This is the main reason the former KGB officer consistently polls at more than 70% approval in Russia, a figure that has only risen since the start of the intervention in Ukraine. It is true that Putin has many faults, but the misrepresentation of his words by the pro-NATO Left is more worthy of condemnation.

Rosa Luxemburg's and Putin's critiques of Lenin may be a century apart but they converge in one crucial respect. They both assert that the Russian revolutionary declaration that all nations have the right to self-determination was excessive. By endorsing self-determination, the Bolsheviks ensured the outcome seen now in the numerous ethno-territorial conflicts in post-Soviet states.^[1]

It is worth noting that Lenin broke from Karl Marx in his emphasis on nationality, though the latter's position evolved during his final years regarding the Irish question where, even though the Irish nationalist movement was not necessarily socialist, Marx came to regard it as progressive, prompting attacks from the Russian anarchist thinker Mikhail Bakunin.

That Bakunin's teachings influenced the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno, whose forces were accused of anti-semitic pogroms during the Russian Civil War, perhaps might explain why contemporary anarchists often take the de facto side of Ukrainian nationalism in the current conflict whose brand is anything but progressive.

Some on the U.S. left today are infected with such amateurishness.

Like their maturation on Irish republicanism, so too did Marx and Friedrich Engels later convert on the Polish question. On the other hand, Rosa Luxemburg adamantly opposed Polish independence until her death and deviated from Marx and Engels on nationalism as much as Lenin, advocating socialist revolution and self-government for her country of origin but within the boundaries of the former Russian Empire.

More than a century after Luxemburg's death, the German-naturalized revolutionary left

behind a complicated legacy, one whose theoretical shortcomings in a denial of the need for revolutionary vanguardism in Western Europe may have contributed to her own murder by social fascists in the Spartacist uprising of the failed German Revolution. Nonetheless, Rosa's unheeded premonition regarding the Ukrainian question still resonates today and revisiting her dialogue with Lenin can help the Western Left better grasp the difficult processes driving the bloodshed between peoples of a foreign land.

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Notes

1. Although conversely conflicts might have been avoided by giving each ethnic area the equivalent of Commonwealth status and limited control of local affairs, as states have in the U.S.

Featured image is from Kim Petersen

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