

Russia defending itself: An interview with Vijay Prashad

P.S: I'm using the term "West" in its ideological, rather than geographical, sense. When I refer to Putin, I refer to him not as a person but as a representative of the Russian capitalist class interests.

Events are accelerating on the global arena, with communications and mediations on the one hand, and sanctions and threats on the other, the most prominent of which was Russia's raising the readiness of its nuclear deterrent forces to "the special duty regime" in a scene the world has not been familiar with since the Bay of Pigs crisis. The Ukrainian war did not start on February 24 –logically any event must have premises that can predict it. Rather, it dates back to 2014. The explosion of battles in 2014 also had its causes, which essentially aren't rooted in identities, even if these identities were used as a fodder to the discourse of war and to obscure its economic and social roots.

However, the attitudes towards this war varied substantially. Within the ranks of the Left, the same variation was noted. But what is certain is that the world is going through a pivotal moment today, in which it is open to all possibilities. In this interview, we talk with the Indian historian, author, journalist, university professor and Marxist intellectual Vijay Prashad on the current crisis. Vijay is currently the Director of the "Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research" and the Chief Editor at the Indian publishing house "Left Word Books". He has taught at many universities around the world and held the Edward Said Chair at the American University of Beirut. Adopting Marxist position from a third world perspective, Vijay is a prolific author, his works have been translated into several languages, a very active journalist writing for various newspapers, and a constant participant in seminars and conferences.

Let's start this interview with history. Would you please inform our readers about the historical context of Post-Soviet Ukraine and Russia and the critical histories leading to the present confrontation?

No people anywhere in the world live homogenous social and cultural lives. Our heterogeneity is what makes our lives richer. For most of its history, what becomes Ukraine was divided up between various empires – of the Poles, of the Lithuanians, and of the Tsars. When the Soviet Republic was formed, a key debate took place around the idea of nationality and citizenship. Everyone who lived in the Soviet Republic was a Soviet citizen, so that nationality (whether narrowly seen as ethnicity) was not to define citizenship. Apart from that, each major nationality was set to govern itself through a series of legally equal republics that then only joined together as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Ukraine was one of them. Within Ukraine, the cultural world was varied, with a majority Ukrainian population and minority speakers of Russian, Hungarian, Moldovan, and Romanian. Their languages and traditions were respected within the outlines of the Soviet Constitutions and by the Ukrainian state system. There are obviously flaws in the model, but by and large, the system remained intact, and ethno-nationalism did not exert itself. The problem, as Lenin identified early in the Soviet Republic, was going to be how to manage Great Russian chauvinism. It is always the case that the demographically largest section in a formal democratic system will exert its own cultural traditions and experiences on minorities. To Lenin's credit, he raised this for public debate as a serious concern. As well, Lenin argued that self-determination of nationalities should be a principle but not an abstract one; if a counter-revolutionary and socially offensive gang seizes power of a national project, does one accept their right to self-determination when 'self' has been reduced to a small gang of capitalist thugs? These debates in the early USSR were rich and important.

When the USSR collapsed in 1990-91, many of its republics faced a serious challenge. Soviet nationality was gone. Within Russia, Boris Yeltsin (president from 1991 to 1999) revived forms of Russian nationalism, which were heightened by Vladimir Putin (his party is called United Russia). Several of the Soviet republics began to see the stresses and strains of ethno-nationalism; this was there in the European and Asian republics. These strains were heightened in the former communist states of eastern Europe – with the breakup of Yugoslavia as the most dramatic since it took place through brutal ethnic cleansing and a NATO war (1991-1999), but also with the breakup of Czechoslovakia in a more peaceful fashion. The war in Georgia (2008) was a harbinger of what happened recently in Ukraine.

There is no reason why the rich cultural history of Ukraine could not have found a sensible political form. Other countries have been able to find it (such as Czechoslovakia, as I mentioned). The fuel to the fire was put in place by the behaviour of the United States, which was eager to use Russia's neighbouring states as a lever against Moscow. The eastward expansion of NATO plays a role in Ukraine, but this was not by itself sufficient since France and Germany were not keen to allow Ukraine to join NATO as a full member. Because NATO was not going to be the full instrument, the United States engineered a coup against the Ukrainian government in 2014 (it is wrong to consider that government – led by Viktor Yanukovich from 2010 to 2014 – as pro-Russian, since he was not able to get a necessary loan from Russia that led him to turn to the Europeans at that time). After engineering the removal of Yanukovich, the US brought in the government of Petro Poroshenko, which drove an openly anti-Russian, ultra-nationalist Ukrainian agenda. President Poroshenko (2014–2019) drove a Ukrainian nationalist agenda around the slogan *armii, mova, vira* ('military, language, faith'), which became reality with the end to military cooperation with Russia (2014), the enacting of legislation which made Ukrainian 'the only official state language' and restricted the use of Russian and other minority languages (2019), and the Ukrainian church breaking ties with the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow (2018). These measures, along with the empowerment of neo-Nazi elements, shattered the country's pluri-national compact and produced serious armed conflict in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, which is home to a substantial Russian-speaking ethnic minority. Threatened by state policy and neo-Nazi militias, this minority population sought protection from Russia. To mitigate the dangerous ethnic cleansing and end the war in the Donbass region, all parties agreed to a set of de-escalation measures, including ceasefire, known as the Minsk Agreements (2014–15). The present confrontation, egged on by the United States, emerges out of this history.

In his address to the Russian people, Putin elaborated extensively on the history of Ukraine. There is no doubt that history is part of the overall picture, but not the whole picture. In your opinion, how true is it to say that the current crisis is due to US and EU non-compliance with the security arrangements and guarantees provided to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Then what is the nature of this crisis: is it what Putin said? Or is it a crisis of capitalist accumulation, more precisely, a crisis of Russian and Ukrainian bourgeoisie who did not find a foothold in the world system, or something else?

When it became clear that the two Germanys were going to unite in 1989, the USSR sought a guarantee from the United States and NATO that they – that is, NATO – would not move beyond the eastern border of the united Germany. That was a handshake agreement. No treaty was signed to that effect. That is why there are denials of the precise nature of the agreement, although the record shows that such commitments were made. With the fall of the USSR in 1991, the entirety of eastern Europe and of Russia (now as part of the Commonwealth of Independent States) sought a new alignment with Europe. Typically, the new governments – even if made up of former Communists – felt the urgency of making a deal with the powerful European countries. The two avenues for this deal were through the European Union (for political and economic relations) and NATO (for military relations). Indeed, Russia became a NATO Partner for Peace

and joined the G-7 when Yeltsin was the president. Russia, under Putin, did not stop seven Eastern European countries from joining NATO in 2004. The issue of security guarantees is beyond NATO expansion. As long as Russia's leadership was subordinate to the United States, all was well. When Russia began to exert itself as an independent power, the US intervened to put it in its place.

Over the course of the past decade, Europe has attempted to develop independent relations with Russia and China to diversify its troubled economic situation. Russian energy – via the pipelines that run through Ukraine and NordStream that comes under the waters – is essential to Europe's energy needs and as inputs for European industry (including its food system). The Chinese-initiated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is very attractive to European countries, with a dozen and a half of them signing up for it; Italy has become a crucial beachhead for the BRI. Europe, once entirely subordinated to the Dollar-Wall Street-Pentagon complex was now being drawn – logically – into the orbit of new developments taking place in Asia. Part of the US push against Russia and China in Europe has been to exert its own dominance on the continent and to ensure that no independent European project emerges. The European Union is all very well, as long as it does not push too hard against US interests.

The current conflict is more a result of these geopolitical anxieties than it is a mirror of the crisis of the Russian and Ukrainian capitalist sections. In fact, this war will damage their interests more than it will enhance it.

Our previous question leads to a key question for any concrete analysis: Does the current crisis appear to be a struggle between anti-imperialist and imperialist forces? Or an inter-imperialist conflict, or let us say (to avoid diluting the concept of imperialism) a conflict within the capitalist camp over re-dividing spheres of influence and resources, reinforced by poor economic performance worldwide?

The war in Ukraine is not an imperialist war, if we use the term 'imperialism' in a Leninist way. It is a war that – it seems to me – is taking place for the following objectives:

1. To defend Russian speaking peoples in eastern Ukraine.
2. To prevent Ukraine from becoming a Western launch-pad for aggression on Russia, which would not be a war, but which would – as Putin said – be annihilation.
3. To build a land-bridge between the Russian border and Crimea, which hosts a warm water port for the Russian navy, and which has been running out of water due to a blockade from Ukraine.

This is, therefore, a regional war to defend Russian interests rather than a war inflamed by inter-capitalist conflict between two governments that represent different fractions of the global monopoly sections. I think the Russians are claiming that this war is a defensive war to protect their immediate interests rather than an aggressive war to seize resources and so on. It actually speaks a little to why the Russians intervened in Syria in 2015. It was not so much to protect the Assad government, per se, but to defend the Russian war water port in Tartus. Russia's navy has only two warm water ports – Sebastopol (Crimea) and Tartus (Syria). Both of its military interventions outside its borders have been to defend these ports. Therefore, I tend to accept the view that this is a 'defensive' war, to 'defend' Russia's security interests, rather than a war with possible positive implications for the Russian bourgeoisie. Recall, this bourgeoisie is highly mobile and has interests across Europe; this war has already hurt them.

One of the less remarked features has been the conflict over Brexit in the UK and the tensions in Eastern Europe. When the countries of eastern Europe integrated into the European Union, workers from the east marched to the west as the borders dissolved. They provided a crucial labour reserve and helped capitalist entities in the west to thrive. After the credit crisis of 2007-08, western European countries – especially the UK – turned on these labourers rather than on the cowboy capitalists that created the crisis. Anti-immigrant feeling against eastern Europeans grew, with the image of the eastern European worker as key to the Brexit case. It was almost as if Europe's hideous anti-eastern Europe record could be erased by the championing of

human rights against Russia in the east itself. There is a knot here that requires more data and more analysis, but I wanted to put it on the table for further investigation.

It appears from the international positions that the current crisis is a crisis within Europe, not a global crisis (although it is part of the global crisis) as the Western media tend to portray it. The United States (the biggest winner, according to Michael Hudson) stands apart and has left the Russian task to its vassals in Europe (in particular Germany), while it, with Britain and Australia, signed an alliance directed against China (AUKUS). With this last alliance and the proceeding of rearmament in Europe and Japan, it seems there are three main blocs (European - Anglo-Saxon - Eastern) gearing up to the next round. Historically speaking, this pattern of events is not unique -though not a good omen too. So is it possible to anticipate what awaits the world soon?

Things are very tense these days. I'm not sure we have blocs in play. What we have are a great deal of moving parts. Since 1991, the United States has tried its best to ensure that no global rival will appear in perpetuity. It developed a trade and development model rooted in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and through the older institutions such as the IMF that are subordinated to the Dollar-Wall Street-US Treasury system. Economically, the US pushed for globalisation of capital and production because it felt that the new intellectual property regime developed as TRIPS would allow its near-monopoly firms to have an advantage for a very long time. Wars were fought, such as against Iraq, to discipline any challenger and to send a message to anyone else that the US was the main player in town and that no-one should attempt to be outside its orbit. Russia, under Yeltsin (1991-1999), was entirely subordinated to the US agenda. To a great extent, China, under Jiang Zemin (1993-2003) and Hu Jintao (2003-2013), kept its head down; it did not confront US power directly.

A decade ago, Chinese firms revealed that they were able to directly challenge the near-monopoly Western firms particularly in key areas – telecommunications, high-speed rail, green energy. This was when the US started to put a great deal of adverse pressure against China. China and Russia, then, began a process to come together, both developing confidence that their approach to world affairs was not identical to that of the US. The Chinese Belt and Road (2013) and the Russian intervention in Syria (2015) signalled the arrival of these two countries in different ways. The US, under both Obama (2009-2017) and Trump (2017-2021), tried to push back with their Pivot to Asia and trade war against China. These moves by the US, including the Indo-Pacific Partnership and AUKUS, strengthened the linkage between these large Asian powers.

Europe came under US pressure to buckle, as did several Asian countries (India, Japan). But in Africa and in Latin America the countries continue to try and make pragmatic decisions about whether to borrow money from the BRI or the IMF. The emergence of BRI has offered countries space to develop their own agendas.

We are in a period of great tectonic shifts.

There is a player that participates in this crisis by its absence, namely the Left. On the other hand, the Right is dominating the scene. To add insult to injury, some leftists apply the adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” to Putin’s case forgetting the Leninist blueprint “how to assess the war and what attitude to adopt towards it is this: what is the war being waged for, and what classes staged and directed it.” While he presents himself as a warrior against neo-Nazis in Ukraine and the empire of lies, Putin is a supporter of right-wing (and fascist) movements inside and outside Russia. What is more, he was flirting with the West until recently this is evidenced by the volume of mutual trade with the US and EU. Granted, Putin (as an incarnation of the Russian capitalist class) by no means can be the Messiah of the Left no matter how critical his discourse towards the West. This kind of hijacking of the leftist discourse and the Left weakness coupled with economic distress is somehow recalling the pre-WWII ambience. How do you interpret the muddling state of the Left on this conjecture?

The Left is very weak globally. We have been weakened not by this or that position alone, but by the structural collapse of working-class power due to the globalization of production and capital.

It is hard to build strong unions when firms are merely subcontractors of each other and not major behemoths that require large amounts of fixed capital. If you try to build a union on a small subcontractor on the global production chain, then the near-monopoly firm that buys the goods will simply ignore that firm. The decline of the structural possibility of building working-class power has certainly weakened the left. A weakened left takes refuge in alliances that are not always good for the short-term even. That's a casualty of our weakness and we should not ignore it.

We have to build our own strength. Not good enough to have the perfect position, to develop the perfect line. That is a luxury of small groups of intellectuals who are not accountable to mass movements that are trying to build themselves and confront the enormous power of imperialism on a global scale and the capitalists in their countries. The left must learn to have its debates without blood-thirsty acrimony. We sometimes become our own worst enemies. I saw this during the Syria war. It is now replicated in Ukraine.

Of course, Putin's Russia is steeped in a nationalism and rooted in the power of near-monopoly capitalists. That is certainly the case. However, a weakened Russia will merely allow the United States to extend its subordination of Europe and will enable it to drive an imperialist economic policy that will make it impossible for our countries to develop their own agendas and for our working-class struggles to germinate. So, there is a dialectic here between not wanting the US to prevail and yet wanting to see the working-class in Russia assert itself against the near-monopoly clique. Much the same in the US, where one would like to see the working-class movement and the movement of social minorities prevail against a gangster oligarchy.

That said, what is the correct position to be adopted regarding what is happening today?

Especially with the predominance of false dualistic approaches such as Western dualism: the savage Russians nostalgic for their Asian past (according to an article published by Wall Street Journal) against the Ukrainians, the defenders of freedom and European values; Russian dualism: In the past, the empire of lies (Putin's term) defended its spheres of influence, and we are entitled to defend ours; or liberal dualism: Democracy against authoritarianism.

Our positions emerge out of our struggles and must be accountable to our class. In different countries, this must be thought out based on how we must advance the class struggle. The principal issue is to settle accounts with our own bourgeoisie, which has its own differential relationship with imperialism. Part of the difficulty within the left is the assumption that imperialism is fragmented, that there is not only US imperialism, but also Russian imperialism and Chinese imperialism. I am not sure what definition people are using to describe Russian and Chinese state projects as imperialist. I don't see them as imperialists. I see these state projects as largely defensive. Neither of them have global pretensions and neither have a political economy that relies upon global conquest. So if the analysis begins with the attitude of inter-imperialist struggles, then we have return to the basics and ask, how do you understand the concept of imperialism. I am willing to concede that the struggle between the US and Russia, in particular, is an inter-capitalist struggle over how Europe is defined. But it is not an inter-imperialist struggle. That's hyperbole, to my mind.

I believe that the principal dangers to the world are extinction due to the climate catastrophe, annihilation due to warfare pursued largely by the United States through NATO, and de-civilization through increased social inequality and social toxicity. The Left, I hope, will be able to unite around these themes and work to build the organization of the working-class against the projects of the bourgeoisie. Can we unite around a common programme to advance our struggles? That's what I have been working on with *A Plan to Save the Planet* (which you can [read](#) at the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research website) and with the development of the [International People's Assembly](#). We are fighting to build humanity. That's the real divide: capitalist barbarity against socialist humanity.