

Statement on the Present Crisis in Ukraine

Issued jointly by

Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality
Odessa Solidarity Campaign
The Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice

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As this statement is being written, Russia has attacked Ukraine, bombing military installations, airports and other targets. There have been casualties, both dead and wounded.

Russia says it is carrying out these actions because Western political leaders have dismissed out of hand what it considers its legitimate security concerns. As for the U.S. and Canadian public, we're just supposed to go along with the official Washington and Ottawa line or else risk being labeled Russian dupes. As a result, we forget about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (2003), the Gulf of Tonkin "incident" in Vietnam (1964), nonexistent threats to U.S. medical students in Grenada (1983) and dozens of other excuses for U.S. wars that later turned out to be lies.

Since 2016, the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, the Odessa Solidarity Campaign and the Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice have been supporting the anti-fascist people of Odessa, Ukraine. We know that it's impossible to understand the present crisis without first examining the events and processes that led up to it, especially the steady eastward expansion of NATO to the very borders of Russia and the violent, right-wing Ukrainian coup of February 2014.

NATO: An existential threat to Russia

The 30-member North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded in 1949 as a military alliance directed at the Soviet Union, which had been an ally in World War II but was now viewed as a mortal enemy. NATO started with 12 members: the United States, Canada and 10 countries in Western Europe. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, but instead of disbanding, NATO expanded - eastward, toward Russia. Since then, all new NATO members have been former Soviet republics or parts of the former socialist Yugoslavia.

Today, two of the six countries actually bordering Russia's western flank - Latvia and Estonia - are members of NATO. Ukraine, with its 1,200-mile land border with Russia, has declared its intention to join, and NATO says it wants it as a member. Meanwhile, Ukraine operates as a member in all but name. The U.S. trains its military and, with the United Kingdom, supplies its military. Every year, NATO members conduct massive joint air, land and sea exercises with the Ukrainian military, including in the Black Sea, which Ukraine shares with Russia.

And here it's worth noting that, while Russia has nuclear parity with the West, its annual military budget is just 11 percent of that of the United States and just 8 percent of that of all 30 NATO countries combined.

Back in October of 1962, the U.S. almost went to war with the Soviet Union over the placement of nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba. How would Washington react today if Russia had built a military alliance of South and Central American and Caribbean countries and was now recruiting Mexico, while carrying out joint military exercises on the Texas border and in the Gulf of Mexico? Just to ask the question is to answer it, so it should be no great surprise that Russia would view Ukraine joining NATO as completely unacceptable - as an existential threat.

The 2014 coup

Virtually all Western media say the present crisis began in 2014 with a Russian invasion of Crimea and support for breakaway entities in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine. Rarely does the media mention the violent, right-wing coup of February 2014, which preceded and led to the developments in Crimea and Donbass.

In 2013, anti-corruption protests broke out in Ukraine's capital, Kiev, against President Viktor Yanukovich, who favored closer economic ties with Russia, Ukraine's traditional major trading partner. He was replaced by a president who favored closer ties with the much wealthier European Union. What began as peaceful, even celebratory protests were taken over by openly fascist organizations that model themselves after the nationalistic militias that sided with the occupying Nazi forces in World War II. The memory of that war runs deep in both Russia and Ukraine and colors much of the current conflict.

About 17 percent of Ukraine's people are ethnic Russian and about 30 percent speak Russian as their first language. And yet, one of the first acts of the new government was to ban the use of Russian as an official state language. Memorials for Soviet war heroes were torn down and replaced by memorials honoring Ukrainian fascists. Neo-Nazi militias marched in the streets of major Ukrainian cities - when they weren't attacking the camps of Roma people. And on May 2, 2014, at least 42 anti-fascists were murdered when a fascist-led mob set fire to the House of Trade Unions in Odessa.

Crimea, a peninsula on Ukraine's southern coast, had been part of the Soviet Republic of Russia until 1954, when it was administratively transferred to Soviet Ukraine. Before that, it had been part of Czarist Russia since 1783. The predominantly ethnic-Russian peninsula, fearing domination by an anti-Russian, fascist-tolerant government, declared its independence from Ukraine, held a referendum and voted to rejoin Russia. Russia, which feared losing access to Sevastopol, a strategically important seaport and one of the only warm water ports available to it in the Black Sea, agreed.

Meanwhile, in predominantly ethnic-Russian Donbass, popular organizations declared their independence from Ukraine. Ukraine reacted with an attempt to militarily retake the region and the resulting conflict has led to the loss of some 14,000 lives. In recent weeks, Russia has charged that the Ukrainian military was building up its forces near Donbass and increasingly carrying out attacks against what are called the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic.

Viewed in their historical context, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its backing of the separatists in Donbass look less like a land grab than actions taken out of deep concern about the rightward direction of Ukraine's new Western-backed, NATO-friendly government.

Russia attacks

Washington views Russia as an obstacle to its ability to dominate the world for the benefit of U.S. corporations. It doesn't want to go to war with a nuclear-armed Russia, but it does want to weaken it and make it economically dependent on the West. Instead of an economic competitor, Russia would then be reduced to a supplier of raw materials and cheap labor and a captive market for Western goods. This is exactly what has happened to Poland, Hungary and other countries in Eastern Europe, and is exactly the neo-colonial relationship the U.S. and Western Europe have imposed on countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Our analysis is that President Putin believes that Russia was looking at an unfolding U.S./NATO strategy to encircle it militarily and find an excuse to strangle it economically by imposing devastating sanctions. There is precedent for this belief: the U.S. and NATO employed this same strategy against the former Soviet Union. And remember, Russia was invaded by Nazi Germany in World War II, at a cost of 20 million Soviet lives. That experience certainly influences how it views an increasingly powerful, threatening NATO. So instead of waiting for the current process to play out, Putin evidently decided to act now and bring the entire matter to a head, betting that the U.S. and NATO would not attack a nuclear-armed country and that it could survive the resulting sanctions.

Whether or not Russia should have carried out its attacks can be debated for its morality, legality and wisdom, but Russia clearly sees the attacks as a pre-emptive strike necessary for its own survival.

No to war, sanctions & NATO!

What position should progressives take in the United States and Canada?

Working people and communities of color have nothing to gain from the U.S. and Canada intervening in this conflict. And we have a lot to lose from the U.S., European Union and Canada imposing devastating sanctions on Russia. Oil and gas prices would go higher than they already are, leading to warp-speed inflation as the price of transporting goods skyrockets.

Then there are the billions of our U.S. and Canadian tax dollars already spent in military "assistance" to Ukraine, the cost of the continued stationing of 90,000 U.S. troops and 1,500 Canadian troops in Europe - 77 years after the Second World War - and massive amounts spent to support so-called "pro-democracy" organizations in Ukraine.

The only correct thing to do in this situation is to demand the U.S. and Canada stay completely out of the conflict. We say:

No to War with Russia! No to Sanctions! No to NATO! No to the Wars at Home & Abroad!

For a more detailed explanation of the background to the present crisis, see the Winter 2022 edition of The Virginia Defender newspaper: <https://virginiadefender.org>

The **Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality** is an all-volunteer activist organization founded in 2002 to work for the survival of our communities through educational projects and social justice actions.
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The **Odessa Solidarity Campaign** was founded in 2016 after the Defenders organized a delegation of U.S. peace activists to stand with the people of Odessa, Ukraine, as they marked the second anniversary of the massacre of scores of progressives by a fascist-led mob.
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The **Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice** is an all-volunteer activist organization founded in 2003 in Canada to end inequality and injustice and to fight for a better world through education, participation, and social justice action in unity with all oppressed people worldwide.
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