

The Russians Are Here

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Abstract

Russia's war on Ukraine inaugurated the new Cold War most feared, and some wanted. It demanded that countries pick sides. African countries and their elites have been reluctant to do so, not least because for some their food or energy supplies will be affected, while for others Putin's authoritarian governance model is seductive. Other countries and movements are reluctant to weigh in for fear of being swept up in an elite-serving great power conflict using Ukraine as its proxy and that the invasion exposes hypocrisies. More than anything, peace and a more humane future - another kind of world, underlined not by great power competition, but solidarity binding ordinary people across borders - is even more elusive.



More than four months into Russia's war with and occupation of Ukraine, the global geopolitical fissures are clear. Russia's defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, announced that the country would stage an "anti-fascist" conference in August, with the list of planned invitees so far including China, the UAE, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia. Russia has continued its propaganda that it is rooting Nazis and racists in Ukraine. African countries did not follow Abiy Ahmed's increasingly despotic regime into joining this coalition of "anti-fascist" (read anti-liberal) states. Africa's voting patterns on UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1—one against, 17 abstentions, and eight absentees—gave us a better idea of how close African countries were playing their cards to their chests. Indeed, Russia's aggression has since been cast—after an obligatory mention of the Ukrainians—as a challenge to the liberal international order.

These are the terms on which this war is now framed. The great confrontation of the 20th century was between capitalism and communism, the one before us, so we are being told, between liberalism and illiberalism. Receding into the background are the Ukrainians themselves, and further still, the notion that both the West and Russia bear responsibility for this situation. As *Jacobin* staff writer Branko Marcetic (2022) summarised it at the start of the war: "The latest escalation in the Ukraine crisis requires us to hold two ideas at the same time: that Vladimir Putin bears much responsibility for the immediate crisis, and that the long-standing US refusal to accept limits to NATO expansion helped bring it about." Anatol Lieven, senior research fellow on Russia and Europe at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and the author of *Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry*, made the same point in an interview with *The American Prospect* (Meyerson and Cooper 2022).

Yet this nuance evades most mainstream coverage and commentary. American liberals—the most powerful of that orientation globally—are now warmongers. They want a deathmatch with Putin, who, to be sure, is deplorable. But for them, this is about reinforcing America's great power status as Russia and especially China threaten to bring about a properly multi-polar world. Observing the latter is not an endorsement, just a statement of fact. There is no reason for NATO to exist, nor is there any reason for it to expand. Still, and at the encouragement of mainly the US and UK, Ukraine was encouraged to join NATO even though there had never been a sincere intention to mobilise NATO's defensive capacities to Ukraine's aid were it to come under attack (Meyerson and Cooper 2022). As a matter of political realism, top foreign policy thinkers have been warning for years about how this would end (Bertrand 2022). The deafening silence to Zelensky's pleas for more Western support is the surest proof. The

West sold Ukraine a dream. Anatol Lieven again:

We never had the slightest intention of defending Ukraine, not the slightest. Even though Britain and America and the NATO secretariat to the Bucharest Conference in 2008 came out for NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia (the NATO HQ was completely behind it on American orders), no contingency plans were drawn up, not the most remote or contingent ones, for how NATO could defend Ukraine and Georgia. There was no intention of ever doing that at all (Meyerson and Cooper 2022).

Even so, while sharply criticising the West's role in creating the conditions for conflict is one thing, it is another to exonerate Russia completely and claim its posture is defensive. So goes the bizarre line being peddled by tankies and Russophiles eager to construe Russia's aggression as an anti-imperialist advance. According to this thinking, the United States is the one true evil, and anyone standing up to Uncle Sam is a hero. Nationalists (and nationalists parading as leftists) in Africa justify solidarity for Putin's invasion by referencing the close ties between the Soviet Union (of which, lest we forget, Ukraine was a part and played a larger role than Moscow) and various anti-colonial movements during the Cold War (Lynd 2022). This is true, but assuming ideological continuity between the former Soviet Union and Putin's regime betrays both ahistorical fantasy and wilful stupidity. Putin himself attributes Russia's seemingly inferior position in world politics to the communists of yesteryear while being viciously anti-communist today (Milanovic 2022).

It's no surprise, then, that upon further scrutiny, those pro-Russia types are the same characters prone to glorify authoritarianism elsewhere—be it Paul Kagame in Rwanda or Narendra Modi in India. For them—like for those populist sympathisers of former South African president Jacob Zuma (Reddy 2022)—the Bonapartism embodied by Putin makes for a seductive model of governance. As resonant is Putin's anti-West, supposedly nationalist worldview, which, reading Tom Parfitt's (2014) interview with ex-Kremlin adviser Geb Pavlovsky in *The New Left Review*, dovetails with the ambitions of Zuma's "radical economic transformation" and sets the standard for state capture:

[Putin's] thinking was that in the Soviet Union, we were idiots; we had tried to build a fair society when we should have been making money. If we had made more money than the western capitalists, we could have just bought them up, or we

could have created a weapon which they didn't have. That's all there is to it. It was a game and we lost, because we didn't do several simple things: we didn't create our own class of capitalists, we didn't give the capitalist predators on our side a chance to develop and devour the capitalist predators on theirs (Parfitt 2014).

Putin and his apologists are anti-West simply because they long to be in its commanding place. Not against schoolyard bullies, but irritated that they aren't the biggest ones. Nationalism, as authors like Adom Getachew (2019) carefully show, was a positive force in the 20th century. Anti-colonial nationalists sought not only independence for themselves but also the reconstruction of the international state system along egalitarian lines. Now, nationalism is a spent force, made redundant by irreversible globalisation. Putin's to-do about Russia's glorious past and his role in preserving it serves mostly to legitimise the billionaire class that his regime spurred (Khachaturian 2022). And, like nationalisms elsewhere, it mystifies class cleavages in society and the economic stagnation wrought by it. Often overlooked in the analysis of the crisis is its political economy, as a clash motivated less by national feeling of the many, but monied avarice of the few. As pointed out by Sam Greene (2022) before the invasion—and before Russia would find out that invasion would prove a grave economic miscalculation (Leusder 2022):

The expansion of EU influence puts insurmountable pressure on the Russian political economy to move from a rent-based, patronal model of wealth creation and power relations, to a system of institutionalized competition. Having satellite states that are governed in the same patronal mode as Russia gives Moscow geo-economic breathing space, adding years or decades to the system's viability. Losing those satellites removes those years and decades (Leusder 2022).

The anti-imperialist stance is not on the side of the West nor with Russia (and, by extension, China) (Spectre Editorial Board 2022). It is refusing to pick a side in an elite-serving great power conflict using Ukraine as its proxy. The anti-imperialist position is non-alignment from below and encourages our states to follow such a foreign policy. The African proverb that history's great purveyor of non-alignment, Kwame Nkrumah, was often wont to recite goes: "When the bull and elephant fight, the grass is trampled down." Non-alignment, then, does not mean indifference—it means solidarity with those who stand to suffer from war most, and against war because it causes suffering for

most. Therefore, we must be unequivocally anti-war and unconditionally in solidarity with ordinary Ukrainians—and ordinary Russians who did not sanction this war and will endure greater repression as they take to the streets to oppose it (Socialists Against the War Coalition 2022).

The best advice for the rest of this is from Gregory Afinogenov (2022), an assistant professor of Russian history at Georgetown University, in *Dissent Magazine*.

Those in the West who sympathize with the plight of Ukraine have no choice but to trust in Ukrainian and Russian resistance to Putin's war. Thousands of Russians have already been arrested for protesting against the war, a number that is sure to grow significantly as the war expands. Millions of Ukrainians don't want to die in bombings, live under imperial rule, or be forced into emigration; millions of Russians don't want to be immiserated by sanctions or be conscripted into an invasion that gains them nothing. In our response to the war, we should be careful not to simply echo Russia's nationalist elites—they think blaming NATO will shift attention away from their increasingly repressive, kleptocratic, and militarist rule at home. Our loyalties must lie with the people of both Ukraine and Russia, and with the cause of peace.

The well-documented racism and xenophobia against Africans fleeing Ukraine, whether by Ukrainian border guards or their Polish counterparts or by ordinary Poles, has made some Africans tune out or be ambivalent. But why are we surprised? Once again, we must resist the instinct to see the unfolding catastrophe through the prism of culture war. We can both admit the horrendous treatment of Africans and stand with the Ukrainian people and Russians bravely opposing Putin's war from within (Progressive International 2022). Nor should the occurrence of the latter be license to spitefully side with the Russian state—as if Russia is an anti-racist paradise! Some corners of what is dubbed “Black Twitter” online, mainly influenced by American cultural and race politics, have done so over the last few days.

More dangerous is to treat the war as if it had no bearing on Africa. Immediate concerns surround the dependence of some African countries on Ukrainian and Russian imports (Resnick 2022), and given Russia's ramped-up presence on the continent (Jacobs 2022), the implications beyond the short term will be profound (Shoki 2022). In itself, the financial war playing out will have reverberations beyond Europe and North America (Tooze 2022), and if the possibility of nuclear escalation becomes less remote,

well, the global fallout from that should be clear.

There is truth to the Western prognosis that Russia's aggression is a challenge to the post-Cold War, liberal international order. The deeper truth is that it has been crumbling for longer than they cared to realise (Cunliffe 2020). The hypocrisy being called out now on the West's actions in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, Kashmir, the Sahel, and especially Palestine tells us that the "rules-based" international system was a fiction from the start, in place to consolidate Western dominance. Putin is not the first to fight a hugely unpopular war. Furthermore, although the West will inflict as much economic pain on Russia as it can, it will preserve its material interests and will not go as far as prohibiting the trade of Russian oil and natural gas on which its economies are dependent. We must take advantage of this moment and call out the West on its double standards. Why are Ukrainians "freedom fighters" when they pick up arms, but a young Palestinian throwing a stone at an Israeli tank is a "terrorist"?

Outside of the media, the space where we have seen Western double standards on full display the most is sports, especially football. In the last week, FIFA and UEFA, which control global and continental football in Europe, respectively, went from hedging about the war (Russia's national team could still play fixtures but *sans* national colours, anthems, and flags) to an outright suspension of all Russian national and club teams from its competitions. Anyone familiar with FIFA, or any of the other global sports bodies known for their reticence to punish Russia, was surprised. Just last month, the IOC, which organises the Olympics, allowed Russia to compete despite its national teams openly using banned substances to increase their chances of winning. Also, with the exception of the sports boycott against Apartheid South Africa, FIFA has rarely acted against rogue states, especially ones who illegally occupy and oppress others: Saudi-Arabia in Yemen, the US and its various invasions and occupations in the past, Morocco in Western Sahara, India in Kashmir, and Israel over the Palestinians (Africa Is a Country 2022), just to name a few. In Israel's case, it is one that hits closer to home for European football: Israel is a member of UEFA (Jacobs and Bloomfield 2016). Similarly, some of Europe's top clubs, most notably Chelsea (Lawton, McDonald and Hardy 2022), Everton (Agini and Ralph 2022), Schalke (Reuters 2022), and UEFA itself (UEFA 2022), have cut ties with Russia's oligarchs.

Perhaps, after Russia and Ukraine inevitably sit around a table to negotiate a new relationship, another consequence may be ushered in—one in which global hypocrisy and obfuscation (Rawoot 2022), whether by the world's governments, media or public, about the suffering of others that don't look like us, have to face up to their own

light, in which we can together imagine another kind of world, underlined not by great power competition but solidarity binding ordinary people across borders. As Kwame Nkrumah put it, facing neither East nor West but forward.

Probably not. Still, we dream.

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