



A Worldwide Anti-Imperialist Left: Why It Is Needed, And What It Must Do

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Introduction

Capital organises globally yet workers do not. As the US-led NATO powers escalate the Ukraine conflict into a new world war, this imbalance is becoming intolerable. This paper presents the case for a worldwide anti-imperialist Left, representing ordinary people committed to a just and peaceful multipolar world order. This will serve both the national interest of every country, and the general interest of humanity.

We base our case on an historical assessment of the last such organization, the Communist International or Comintern for short, founded in 1919 and dissolved in 1943, and its two predecessors, the International Working Men's Association or 'First International', founded in 1864 and dissolved in 1872, and the Second or 'Socialist' International, founded in 1889 and dissolved in 1914.

The Comintern, the third attempt at a single world organisation of the working class, was as much a child of the world-historic 1917 revolution as the Soviet Union. Many Russians, including President Vladimir Putin, are reconsidering the wisdom of dissolving the USSR; it is time to also reassess the decision to abandon the project of an international organisation of propertyless people.

Our case is controversial because in the West, those parties that identify as 'Left', headed by the allegedly left-leaning US Democratic Party, almost unanimously endorse the US-led proxy war on Russia. Further confusion arises because many governments of the Right, such as India, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, actively oppose sanctions, promote alternative trading relations to those hitherto imposed by the USA, and insist that Russia's legitimate security concerns be given due consideration,

This has led many in the nationalist wing of Russian politics to conclude that the interests of their country require alliances with the parties of the Western Right – notably the Trumpist Republican Party. Conversely the Western 'Left' parties justify their support for NATO's war aims as necessary to defeat Right wing forces, with whom they lump the current Russian government.

What exactly is the ‘Left’?

Neither the evidence, nor logic, we argue, supports either of these views. The origin of the confusion is a false conception of what the ‘Left’ consists of.

As regards the Right, Nazism was the sworn enemy of the Russian people, killing over twenty million Soviet citizens in the Great Patriotic War. Moreover, as Russian leaders themselves recognise, Banderite fascism is the animating principle of the Kiev régime and supplies the shock troops, such as the Azov battalion, that spearhead NATO’s onslaught. It makes no sense to try and defeat fascism by allying with its kindred.

But the position of the Western ‘Left’ is equally nonsensical. According to pro-American authors Kelly and Laycock (2015) the USA ‘has invaded nearly half the world’s countries and been militarily involved with all the rest, except Andorra, Bhutan and Liechtenstein.’¹ The idea that it constitutes a force for peace and justice, or that the Left can profit from a victory of its enemy in every modern battle from Vietnam to Venezuela, defies reason.

So what, actually, is the Left? Historically, it emerged from the French Revolution, during which parties and social movements were defined by the classes whose interests they represented. In response to the Right, which defended the property-owning classes, the Left created *parties of the people*. In contrast, the ‘Left’ parties of the West are *parties of the state*. It no longer makes sense to describe them as ‘Left’.

¹ For an exhaustive list of US military actions abroad see *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2022*, Congressional Research Services (<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42738>, accessed 3/2/2023)

What was Communism?

Ceaseless anti-Russian and anti-Chinese propaganda paints Communism and Fascism as two sides of the same coin. When challenged they go on to argue that modern Communism, specifically the USSR, substituted some kind of monstrous distortion of the original ideal. A proper balance sheet of the Left's achievements and failures is necessary, but should not start from this caricature of its sworn enemies. After looking at the ideas of its founders we therefore consider the historical evolution of the movements that arose from them.

The first issue is the meaning of the word 'Communist'. First used by Marx and Engels, it was adopted by the Comintern, and the ruling Parties of China, Cuba, and Vietnam are still called Communist. Yet the name is reviled in the West and even now regarded in Russia, the world's first Communist-led State, with suspicion and distrust.

This is an Achilles Heel of both Russia and the genuine Left. The West's hybrid regime-change narrative is devoted to the claim that Russia has no legitimate modern heritage. We beg to differ. Any nation that wishes for a future must grapple with its past. It must therefore return to its true origin: the Communist Manifesto.

First off, the Manifesto's Communism did not signify extreme economic radicalism. Marx and Engels did not seek to introduce a socialist utopia immediately, and the Manifesto's economic programme is quite limited – almost Keynesian – in character. Its defining feature was its approach to *power*:

The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy... The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible. (Marx and Engels 1848:26. Emphasis added) ²

The key point is the refusal to accept that property owners should have the right to tell workers what they can and cannot do.

Historically, the genuine Left was (Rudé 1994) that wing of the democratic movement which agreed with the Manifesto that ‘the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law.’ It was therefore, above all, a movement dedicated to changing the state.

What does it mean to change the state?

The parties of the Left were revolutionary parties. Much vilification is heaped on the Left on these grounds. Yet most modern countries, including the United States itself, were created by revolutions. The right to revolution is even part of the US constitution. If we calmly set aside the rhetoric, a revolutionary party is one which, when the state obstructs the needs of the people it represents, seeks to replace that state with a different state.

Many revolutionary processes are violent – but this arises not from the radicalism of the revolution, but the ferocity of the reaction. The issue is not therefore the use of forceful or tyrannical methods. It is that the Western ‘Left’ parties accept the states of their own countries as they are. Since capitalists dominate these states, these parties become intermediaries whose function is to impose the demands of these same capitalists. This negation converted the Left parties from champions of the people to their policemen.

² All quotations in this section are taken from this source.

How the Left changed into its opposite

What caused the left parties to be transformed into their opposite? The answer lies in the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The 'Socialist' parties of Europe were specifically formed (Braunthal 1967) in opposition to this revolution. In short, they were born of a class compromise whose primal undertaking was to leave the existing state intact, reducing their aims to what could be achieved via that state, thereby confining these aims those acceptable to the existing ruling class – the property-owners. But the historic mission of the Left until 1914 was to pursue the needs of working people regardless of whether these were acceptable to the owners of property.

Yet the true origin of this change was the '1914 moment' (Freeman 2022), when they opted to support the war aims of their own capitalist classes, deciding thereby it was better to slaughter their working class sisters and brothers abroad than fight their own capitalists at home. With this act, they chose to support their state instead of their class.

The issues of Revolution and Communism come together as follows: it is impossible to override the absolute right of the capitalists to make workers obey them without a new state. The Communists of the Manifesto, and of the Comintern, aimed to establish such a state, a state whose early form Weydemeyer (1852) famously described as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Contrary to Western propaganda, this signified not the abuse of power but its morally legitimate use to override misuses of property that conflicted with the rights of the people.

Communism has been identified, as a result of exigencies imposed on the infant Soviet State by the Civil War and the following economic blockade, with a model of Central Planning in which capitalist entrepreneurs have little or no place. But the Manifesto clearly did not call for the immediate abolition of capitalist property, but its subordination to the power of the working class:

Of course, in the beginning, this [the programme] cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production; by means of measures, therefore, which appear economically insufficient and untenable, but which, in the course of the movement, outstrip themselves, necessitate further inroads upon the old social order, and are unavoidable as a means of entirely revolutionising the mode of production.

The Western 'Left' in contrast came to conceive of socialism as enacting reforms that preserved the rights of the owners of property intact. This is the origin of the misleading notion that socialism means redistributing wealth, rather than exercising power over it.

This is not all. The character of any state is determined by the source of income of its ruling classes – which in the West means Imperialist Capital. Its income derives from the labour not just of its own workers but that of the other four-fifths of the world. The Western 'Left' parties therefore entered a Faustian compact which lies at the heart of their militarism, their racism and their current hostility to Russia. They undertook to leave intact the right to exploit the entire world in return for a share of the spoils. To speak of such parties as 'Left' is an offence against language, reason, and morality.

Yet if they are not 'Left', what are they? They are best understood as parties of *middle class liberalism*, using the term 'liberal' correctly to mean the political project of the anti-aristocratic capitalist parties of the French and American Revolutions. As Losurdo (2011) explains, 'Liberty' for these parties meant the unhindered freedom to own and use private property. The only issue that divides 'Left' liberalism from Right neoliberalism is how this freedom should be used – not, as for the genuine Left, whether it should be granted at all.

When we speak of the 'Left', therefore, we refer to those parties and movements that sought or claimed to represent the independent needs of the propertyless classes. This is not an antiquarian project. As the world enters a period of tumultuous change, the need for a mass world Left will, we believe, again come to the fore. This calls for a strategic debate on the kind of parties, and the relations between them, that are needed.

We present our case in military, historical, geopolitical, class, and economic terms; above all, however, this case is a human one. Hundreds of millions of people have given their lives for the causes we outline.

Unless the military-colonial activities of the collective West are halted, it is tragically possible that millions more will perish. This can be avoided; that is why we submit this document.

The military case

We make no excuse for placing the military case first. This does not mean a philistine disregard for differences between economic and philosophical viewpoints and does not exalt violence; it simply means such differences are ultimately settled in struggle. Moreover war is, historically, the harshest test of analytic capacity. The USSR did not defeat Nazi Germany merely because it fought better (though it did) or was more heroic (though it was) or had an industrially superior military apparatus (though it had) but because all these were informed by an understanding of what war requires, not only militarily but also economically, socially and ideologically, that, for all its weaknesses, was superior. Every modern war puts understanding to the test in the urgent form 'how can reaction be defeated'?

The basic fact of the present dangerous new phase of imperialism is that the West will only abandon war when it is given no other choice, whether by its own people or by its international adversaries. Any notion of a 'peaceful' world order while NATO exists will only leave the door open to conflict, possibly nuclear,.

Russia today stands on the front line of this conflict. It never asked to be placed there. But we do not yet live in a world which lets us choose our destinies. The idea that those oppressed by the NATO powers can triumph on the back of a Russian defeat is a utopian delusion. A worldwide alliance is therefore required to minimise the risk of such an outcome: indeed, the shape of the war is already being defined by the emerging alliances it catalyses. Yet such an alliance cannot be composed of national governments alone: it must count on the support of their peoples. That is why, we argue, a mere alliance of governments is insufficient.

Wars are won by armies; and armies are drawn from peoples. Hitler's defeat was secured by those who decided it was better to die fighting than live under fascism. In Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan

the USA was defeated by peoples who, despite technical inferiority in armaments, were more determined to fight than the people they fought against.

The countries oppressed by NATO-led imperialism need a vision that their peoples consider worth fighting for. This is not a Liberal cliché: it is a condition of military victory. All military experts agree that an army's capacity to fight depends on its morale; this in turn depends on its will to win. In short, if a country expects its people to die for it, it must offer a future worth living for. This is the terrain of the Left. It seeks solutions that benefit the propertyless by standing up for *all* of them against the propertied, on the basis of universal human rights.

The Right, in contrast, leaves property intact and divides the propertyless into 'superior' and 'inferior' peoples. These may be Aryan and Jewish, Christian or Hindu and Muslim, Caucasians and Hispanics, Israelis and Palestinians, White and Black, Men and Women – or European and Russian. This project stands opposed to that of all three workers' Internationals. It is impossible to unite any people, living on the same territory, by declaring that one group is more entitled than any other. If the tragedy of Ukraine proves nothing else, it demonstrates this fact. Therefore, only a Left movement can lead the world towards the final, necessary defeat of the architects of World War Three.

The historical case

Marx and Engels advanced the clarion call at the end of the Communist Manifesto: 'Workers of all Lands Unite!' Marx (1864) repeated this in his Inaugural Address to the First International.³ From its formation in 1864 to its disintegration in 1872 he devoted enormous attention to it:

³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karl-Marx/Role-in-the-First-International>. Accessed 4 January 2023

As a member of the organization's General Council, and corresponding secretary for Germany, Marx was henceforth assiduous in attendance at its meetings, which were sometimes held several times a week. For several years he showed a rare diplomatic tact in composing differences among various parties, factions, and tendencies. The International grew in prestige and membership, its numbers reaching perhaps 800,000 in 1869

His address contained the following prophetic observation:

If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfill that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure?... [Such conflicts] have taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent, to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to vindicate the simple laws or morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations. The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes. (Emphasis added)

The successor to the Workingmen's International's, the Second International, founded in 1889, was the origin of Europe's mass socialist parties. It fell apart in the Great War and was re-formed in 1923 as an alliance of its anti-Comintern remnants.⁴ The Third International was thus doubly defined: by its opposition to imperialism, and its commitment to the infant Soviet Republic.

The project of a world Communist organisation was thus at one and the same time the continuation of the project of Marx, Engels and the early Communists, a product of the painful experience of the Second

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_and_Socialist_International Accessed 4 January 2023

International, and a Siamese twin of the USSR. For all the faults that are the fate of any world-shaping experiment, Russia's place in the world today is a product of this historical endeavour.

The project of a worldwide Left is thus not the idle fantasy of a coterie of detached intellectuals; it is a great historical project. It is therefore timely, in parallel with the re-examination of the USSR, to reconsider the ideal of a mass worldwide organisation, or organisations, dedicated to the class interests of the propertyless people of the world and including, in this commitment, the interests of its oppressed nations.

The Geopolitical Economy case

As the self-appointed leader of the capitalist world, the US also leads its imperial wars. Today, we can identify at least five: the proxy war on Russia, the military-economic offensive against China, the struggle to control Middle Eastern Oil, the Monroe-doctrine-based interventions in Latin America, and the bloody resource wars of intervention in Africa. Together, they comprise a worldwide military and economic conflict with two sides: the imperialist world, whose composition has hardly changed since 1914, and everyone else.

This is a World War in all but name. It is no less costly in human suffering than the previous two: if we include the victims of hunger, dispossession, disease and neglect arising from the havoc wreaked by neoliberal policies, military adventures, or by coercive, punitive and illegal sanctions, and by West-imposed dictatorships and massacres, it has killed many times more than the last two combined.

However, it differs from its predecessors in respects which everyone must work to understand. The foremost problem is the relation between the military aspect and the economic aspect of this war.

The West's purpose since the discovery of America in 1492 is to control the resources and labour of the rest of the world – that is, to preserve historic privileges derived, ultimately, from robbery. However the political independence and economic development of its prey has forced it

to seek to impose its will by a hybrid combination of military, political and economic measures, stalling the development of the nations of the Third World so they may be confined to being suppliers of primary commodities and cheap labour, whilst robbing them of these same resources to feed its wealthy and pacify its poor. This has an insidious result: the causes of the Third World's misery are disguised. The West ascribes it to 'natural' causes, or pins the blame on the victims.

Even so, it is no longer sufficient to stave off the West's own decline. It now therefore resorts to ever more belligerent military action, to the point where, as Sergey Lavrov has noted, it is on the verge of an open war against Russia, and quite possibly China. Why? Because the failure of its own economy leaves it no recourse but to try and drag the rest of the world down with it.

Its method for so doing has hitherto been limited, by virtue of its own weakness, to inflicting *damage*, intended to render impossible those challenges which its own economic failures make inevitable. Capable only of destruction, it devastates entire peoples and lays waste country after country: think only of Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan. Even this would pale into insignificance, were it to achieve its current military aims – which extend well beyond Ukraine to the destruction of Russia as a nation and a slaughter amounting to genocide against the Russian-speaking peoples of the world.

Now, it finds itself in an end game. The realignment of the global South, in response to sanctions, is unleashing the implacable logic of a NATO-free security system, a multipolar order, and a dollar-free trading system.

A complete military victory of either side is impossible; the only result of any attempt to change this equation is nuclear annihilation. Yet the West responds to all its internal problems with external aggression. The world can only resolve the underlying economic conflicts peacefully when the West is compelled to abandon, once and for all, the idea that they can be resolved forcefully.

A new way of life can therefore be achieved neither on the economic terrain alone nor on the military terrain alone. The alliances required to end World War Three must seek both freedom from war, and freedom from want. They must, therefore, be led by the Left, with its historic agenda of 'Peace, Land and Bread'.

Therefore, such movements must eliminate the circumstances impelling the West to its adventures. These arise in the West. There is no concession the Third World can make which will rectify this fundamental fact of the modern world order. A peaceful and just future requires a thoroughgoing reorganisation of the economic foundation of the societies of the West, currently based on the increasingly unproductive pursuit of profit and imperial rent, at the expense of the rights of their peoples. This too is the historic agenda of the Left.

The Class case

The Comintern was not founded because the infant Soviet Union found it convenient, but because the parties of the Second International voted in 1914 to support their governments in a fratricidal war. This forced them to consider the relation between their original purpose and their actions in sending their own workers to die fighting the workers of their neighbours.

This led to a critical addition to the project of the first two Internationals: opposition to imperialism. The Comintern's 1920 congress adopted Lenin's conditions for admission. Point 8 reads:

Parties in countries whose bourgeoisie possess colonies and oppress other nations must pursue a most well-defined and clear-cut policy in respect of colonies and oppressed nations. Any party wishing to join the Third International must ruthlessly expose the colonial machinations of the imperialists of its "own" country, must support—in deed, not merely in word—every colonial liberation movement, demand the expulsion of its compatriot imperialists from the colonies, inculcate in the hearts of the workers of its own country an attitude of true brotherhood with the working population of the colonies and the oppressed nations, and conduct systematic agitation among the armed forces against all oppression of the colonial peoples..

The Comintern declaration was never dropped and never featured among its many disputes. Since these disputes are still remembered, this agreement is significant. Indeed, it strengthened as time went on, notably in the 1921 conference which adopted M. N. Roy's 'Theses on the Eastern Question', which included the following passage:

By converting the peasants and artisans of the subject countries into an agricultural and industrial proletariat, imperialism brought into existence another force which is destined to contribute to its destruction. This being the case, the overthrow of the capitalist order in Europe, which to a great extent rests on its imperial extension, will be achieved not alone by the advanced proletariat of Europe, but with the conscious cooperation of the workers and other revolutionary elements in those colonial and subject countries.

Did the Comintern's addition of colonial liberation to the demands of the workers' movement change the ideals of the founders, as claimed by critics who see the anti-imperialist struggle as extraneous or indeed, counterposed, to class struggle? We don't think so: far from negating world working class unity, the Comintern extended it. It recognised that the working classes (which in the era of the mass dispossession of the landed we may more accurately term the propertyless classes) now include a huge 'agricultural and industrial proletariat' which imperialism 'brought into existence'.

These declarations therefore do not contradict the First International. They incarnate Marx's principle that 'no nation that enslaves another can ever itself be free'. They concretise the Manifesto's view that 'the Communists have no special interests of their own, other than that they represent the most general interest of all workers', in the context of the fratricidal war of 1914.

Workers, the Comintern says, can only act worldwide if the workers in the imperialist countries side with the far larger proletarian army of the colonies. The Comintern, an explicitly anti-imperialist alliance, remained a Left alliance because, like its predecessors, it wanted to represent the interests of the propertyless against those of the propertied on a world scale.

The Economics of Imperialism

Roy provided the Comintern with a startlingly ‘modern’ analysis of imperialism which adds a further crucial dimension: the practical experience of the peoples of the colonial world.

As a result of the War, the world finds itself divided today into two great colonial empires, belonging to two powerful capitalist states. The United States of America endeavours to assume supreme and exclusive right of exploiting and ruling the entire New World, while Great Britain has annexed to its empire practically the entire continents of Asia and Africa ... the control of world finance, which has been for a century the monopoly of the British capitalists, [has] been to a great extent transferred to the hands of the American capitalists, who cannot be considered to have reached the period of decay and disintegration as yet...

Economic and industrial development of the rich and thickly populated countries of the East would supply new vigour to Western capital. There are great possibilities in these countries which will provide cheap labour power and new markets not to be exhausted very soon. Therefore the destruction of its monopolist right of exploitation in the vast Eastern colonial empire is a vital factor in the final and successful overthrow of the capitalist order in Europe.

Roy’s theses cannot easily be pigeonholed as the view of some single misguided person. They represented a general view among colonial revolutionaries. Other documents, such as the Congress of the Toilers of the East, testify that the anti-colonial struggle not merely supplemented, but ultimately *defined* the Comintern’s politics. Certainly, Roy’s theses were adopted, and form an unignorable part of the Comintern’s historical identity.

The salient point is that the Comintern identified imperialism as an economic phenomenon. Roy explains what makes the imperialist countries wealthy, namely their 'monopolistic right of exploitation'.

Capitalist imperialism reached its apogee in 1914, after which it began its long decline thanks to inter-imperialist rivalries that led to world wars, communist revolutions and national independence and assertion of former colonies in a great 'revolt against the West'. It has been the fate of the US to lead the imperialist world in this period. Unable to re-create the formal imperialism of the past, US leaders have sought to present their economic empire, which seeks to enslave its victims as cruelly as if its banks were armies, as the outcome of a liberation struggle for which they claim responsibility by ousting the 'old' Empires of Britain, Spain, Portugal, France and Holland. Denying any historical role to the peoples who achieved it arms in hand, whilst taking over these empires from dynasts (as in the Philippines), as Desai (2013) explains, the USA perfected the system for exploiting the conquered in a modern and specifically capitalist form: just like wage labourers, formally free but economically enslaved.

This propaganda and reality of imperialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has given rise to two distinct views of imperialism. The Comintern tradition, which continues, holds that imperialism is a means for exploiting poor people of subordinated nations, something that the West continues to seek, if against the rising resistance, through development, of the Second and Third Worlds. In the ensuing wars, military and hybrid, the US seeks to limit it to nineteenth century style formal colonialism, in which the US played, at best a marginal role. In this view, imperialism is about occupying territory. Since the West cannot, in any case, continue formal imperialism, and since its military actions are confined to provocations and proxy wars, accusations of imperialism can now be made against the very countries that seek to defend themselves against imperialism.

This is how so many Western 'Left' writers who conceive of imperialism in the American Liberal sense accuse Russia of imperialism. To them it is of no account that the citizens of Donbass have been shelled

day and night for eight years, or that Ukraine's government and its Azov fascists suppress the Russian speakers of their country by means ranging from prohibition to imprisonment, torture and terror: for these writers, the historic residents of the Russian-speaking regions are squatting on Ukraine's national *property*; they have no right to be there and should be ethnically cleansed. Scratch the surface of this racist conception, and it reveals the genocidal impulse that drives the liberal agenda.

Any world anti-imperialist movement should therefore rest on a clear concept of what imperialism *is*: a world economic system of differential exploitation imposed on four-fifths of the world by one-fifth. This has two consequences.

First, anti-imperialism cannot stop at opposition to the military actions of the NATO powers. It must oppose everything that robs the peoples of the non-imperialist nations, in which we include Russia, of the fruit of their labour: debt-slavery, grossly unfair terms of trade, restrictive intellectual property laws, financial dictatorship, the denial of economic sovereignty, and sanctions. Anti-imperialism starts and ends with the defence of the rights of people, not property.

The imperialist 'Left' denies the link between capitalism and imperialism, claiming that Marx posited no such (Desai 2020). They are then free to characterise the Russian revolution as some kind of departure from Marx, and its leaders, notably Lenin, as an authoritarian aberration. Nothing could be farther from the truth as a single statement shows: 'If the Free-traders cannot understand how one nation can grow rich at the expense of another, we need not wonder, these same gentlemen also refuse to understand how within one country one class can enrich itself at the expense of another' (Marx 1848/1976, 4645).

Second, there is no *other* imperialism than that of capitalism's largely Western original homelands. Russia is not an imperialist power, full stop. Nor is China. Nor is South Africa, nor Turkey, nor India, nor any alleged 'sub-' or 'regional' imperialism of any country whose working classes are oppressed between five and twenty times more by the imperialists than even the most ambitious or oligarchic of their own capitalists. These countries, therefore, have no destiny inside the imperialist world; their future lies in independent development dedicated to the service of their peoples. This, too, is the agenda of the Left.

What kind of New International is required?

The idea of a new international organization of the Left is not a nostalgic proposal. As the world enters a period of tumultuous change, the need for it is increasingly coming to the fore. Fulfilling it requires a strategic debate on the kind of parties, and the relations between them, that are needed. Each of the first Three Internationals was adapted to its distinct historical circumstances. What historical parameters affect any new International? We can identify five:

- Socialist revolutions, so far, have occurred not in the imperial homelands of capitalism but outside them; they take the complex dual form of anti-imperialist struggle combined with an anti-capitalist struggle.
- The USSR's dissolution took the form of a kind of self-abnegation, renouncing both its origins and its achievements. There will be no return to models of economic organisation imposed, at a specific point in history, by the low level of industrialisation the USSR inherited, and a near-total Western blockade. Yet the renunciation of its Communist legacy has led it to cast aside measures it sorely needs for both development and military success: planning, management of trade and capital flows, financial regulation, social equity and state ownership.
- A powerful new socialist state, the People's Republic of China, has emerged, along with the socialisms of Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea. These owe a debt to the USSR but have charted their own path. China is today the principal economic challenge to the imperialist world order. Genuinely socialist methods have removed extreme poverty, afforded the majority of its citizens a meaningfully good standard of living, and charted an increasingly attractive alternative trading system to the neoliberal alternative offered by US-led imperialism.

- The neoliberal reaction to the growth slowdown of the 1970s has decisively weakened the economies of the West, fuelling a vast expansion of financial activity that further exacerbates their productive debility (Freeman 2019b, Desai 2022). This decline is the root of the West's loss of grip and the emergence of a new pluripolar order. Western countries are in a tailspin of economic decline, social division, political logjam, and cultural disintegration.
- Deprived, one by one, of the economic levers it once held, aggression is now the only recourse open to the West. The battle for peace – which means forcing the West to abandon any idea of resolving its economic problems by military means – has thereby become the single most urgent task facing humanity.

The West's reaction to these facts is catastrophic. The world can only resolve the underlying conflicts peacefully when it is compelled to abandon, once and for all, its imperialist pursuit. This above all else is the task of any new association of the world's peoples.

Imperialism and the basis of unity between peoples

From the standpoint of American Liberalism – of which, as we have noted, the Western 'Left' view is merely a variant – any country that defends its people is imperialist. In a fantastical inversion of reality, NATO's drive to encircle Russia, overturn its government and carve it into pieces is a battle for freedom, while Russia's defence of the victims of the Ukrainian fascists is an act of aggression.

This arises from a deep misunderstanding of the economic essence of imperialism. Though the Western 'Left' is indescribably confused about this, the theoretical principles are a remarkably simple part of its Marxist heritage: all wealth derives from labour, and all class systems transfer this wealth to people that did not produce it. The wealth of the imperialist nations, which make up one-fifth of humanity, is produced by the labour of the remaining four-fifths.

The key point is that the colonial-era division of the world, into a small group of wealthy nations and the rest, is in full force in modern times, as President Putin and other Valdai speakers have pointed out.⁵ This is reflected in the West's military structures – only one NATO member, Turkey, belongs to the global South.

The 'Collective West', or as the Brandt Commission termed it the 'global North' was, at the height of the neoliberal era in 1995, twenty times richer, in terms of money GDP per person, than the rest of the world excepting China, and ten times wealthier than Russia (Freeman 2019a). It defends a monopoly of high technology products which it exports at high prices to the rest of the world, and strives by dollar hegemony, economic blackmail, debt slavery, military intervention, punitive sanctions, and regime change, to force the South to sell it cheap labour and primary products at extortionately low prices.

But this is precisely why the Imperialist Club is selective: it admits no new members. Since 1914 (Freeman 2019a) only South Korea has been allowed to join, and that was to prevent Korea becoming united and socialist. To grasp this point, it must be understood that Monopoly is the highest form of competition and not, as neoclassical economists claim, an alternative to competition. The history of modern imperialism consists of keeping all possible rivals out. After World War I the Allies imposed the punitive peace of Versailles on Germany, to no small degree provoking World War II. Japan and Germany were then let into the club only to prevent them going socialist, and on condition that they were supervised by the USA.

Therefore no matter how much the capitalists of the South may *aspire* to become imperialists, they will not be allowed to. The Europeans humiliated Turkey for two decades by dangling the fake promise of joining Europe on the end of a string. The US consistently works to reduce Russia to a subaltern status by severing all its links to Europe, in the process perpetuating its domination over Europe itself.

The imperialist division of the world therefore, *by the decision of the imperialists*, excludes Russia, Brazil, Turkey, India, Saudi Arabia,

⁵ See: Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 19th Annual Meeting. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-club/>

South Africa, Indonesia or any 'rising' power, no matter how much their governments may mistakenly aspire to any role in the imperialist system other than puppet.

This is why opposition to the imperialist world system, not to the alleged aspirations of the non-imperialist countries, is the basis for the unity required. But given the wide diversity of social and economic systems to be found in these countries, is there any further 'condition for admission' to consider? This is one of the more radical elements of our proposal: that opposition to imperialism does *not* imply endorsement of any particular domestic politics in the oppressed nations. This is a matter for the peoples of those countries. This is because the worldwide defeat of imperialism creates the best conditions for the victory of the propertyless in every nation, including those oppressed nations in which capital remains in the ascendant.

The real choice to be made, we argue, is that such a movement must be based on a rejection of the divisive politics of the Right. That is why we propose a *Left* anti-imperialist movement, and eventually, organization. However, the matter is not entirely simple because of the necessary distinction, which we made at the outset, between *governments* and *parties or movements*. We turn to this point in conclusion.

Is there a Right-Wing anti-imperialism?

In the fog of war, matters express themselves superficially, and political leadership must distinguish appearance from essence. It is undeniable that the Western 'Left' endorses NATO's proxy war on Russia, and that parliamentary opposition to this war, in the collective West expresses itself in currents of the Right in domestic politics such as Trumpism, Le Pen, Meloni, the AfD, or Orban.

In this respect, a separation between the tasks of governments and those of mass movements or parties is essential. An oppressed nation has every right to exploit any split in the ranks of its enemies

it chooses, including tactical alliances with any government that stands with it against this or that imperialist offensive. This however is not a strategic matter, and should not be confused with building effective mass movements or parties.

This in no way affects the fact that the *parties and movements* of the Right have no place in an anti-imperialist movement. They divide working people: but the function of the Left, is, and has always been, to unite working people. The principles of any genuine popular alliance must include explicit rejection of all and every attempt to exploit divisions between working people. This is, indeed, the original class concept of 'Left' that went into the foundation of the First International. Its founding declaration reads:

That the emancipation of the workers must be the workers' own doing: that the workers' efforts to achieve their emancipation should not be geared towards the establishment of fresh privileges, but rather to establishing the same rights and the same duties for all;

That the worker's subjugation to capital is the root of all slavery; political, moral and material;

That, on that basis, the workers' economic emancipation is the great goal to which all political activity should be subordinated;

... On these grounds:

*The under-signed members of the Council elected by the gathering held in St Martin's Hall, London, on 28 September 1864 declare that this International Association, as well as all its affiliated societies or individuals will acknowledge that their conduct towards all men should be founded upon Truth, Justice and Morality, **without regard to colour, creed or nationality.** [our emphasis].*

The Second International, it has to be said, was more than ambiguous on this point. It was already infected with the Imperialist outlook that was to determine its parties' reaction to the war. Probably the touchstone is the issue of anti-Semitism. Whilst not the only form of racism to be found in these parties, it was critical in the formation

of European socialism because Jews, the most oppressed people of Europe, formed the most consistently revolutionary wing of the workers' movement, whilst anti-Jewish racism formed the spearhead not only of the compromise with imperialism but also of what was to become Nazism.

The Second International included, not just in its ranks but among its leaders, such notable anti-Semites as the British leader Henry Hyndman. It sought a 'consensus on the Jewish question', that is to say, it sought to defeat racism by agreeing with the racists. The futility of this approach was illustrated by its decisions: having passed a unanimous resolution condemning anti-Semitism, it promptly passed an amended resolution from Blanquist delegates Dr. A. Regnard and M. Argyriades targeting 'philo-semitic tyranny,' noting that many Jewish bankers were 'great oppressors of labour.' The *Times* reports that the resolution was 'greeted with applause and was passed with only minor opposition.'⁶

The Third International returned to the classical Left agenda of uniting working people and was therefore unambiguous in its rejection of racism in all forms. Its preamble states that

The Communist International breaks once and for all with the traditions of the Second International which, in reality, only recognised the white race. The task of the Communist International is to emancipate the workers of the whole world. In its ranks are fraternally united men of all colours – white, yellow and black – the toilers of the entire world.

True, the Comintern was less than clear in its formal stance on the oppression of women, and the phrasing above is no more a model of gender-sensitivity than any text of the day. There is no mention of the Suffrage struggle within its statutes. In practice, however, the labour movement has not only been the most consistent ally of the struggles of the mass of working class women, this has long roots. As testified by Clara Zetkin (1919[1971]) both the First and the Third International stood on the foundation of a long commitment to the struggle of working class women for equal rights dating back to the Saxon Spinners and Weavers

⁶ Second International – Wikipedia. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_International accessed 28 January 2023

Association which formed the bulwark of Marx's tendency within the First International.

In sum, there is no sound basis to include, in a coherent anti-imperialist movement, any party or movement that exploits divisions in the working class, whether on the basis of 'colour, creed or nationality', or any other distinction or separation including gender or gender preference, that by conferring a privileged status on one section of the propertyless, sets it at the throats of another. 'Left' means universal rights for the propertyless. Full stop, no exceptions.

Are there any grounds to modify this? Can we characterise projects such as that of Orban – or Le Pen, or Meloni – as merely 'nationalist'? Due to the failures of the Left, a battle is now under way between the ideology of the Left and that of the Right in which people are passing in both directions.

In practice the question should be answered in a different way: working class anti-imperialist movements should not only draw a line against all divisive practices but side with the actual struggles of the oppressed of the day. Those influenced by the Right will then confront the historic choice of the working class – 'Which Side Are You On?' This is why, for example, it is essential to side with those who took the streets against the police murder of George Floyd in the USA; it is therefore, we believe, a mistake to portray mass struggles for Black, Women's and Gay Rights as a manifestation of 'Wokism'.

'Wokism' is a Straw Enemy; when the US Liberal establishment resorts to tokenist gestures for the well-heeled few, abandoning millions of working Women, Black People, and Gays to their fate in a neoliberal system which only entrenches their specific oppressions as it deepens material inequality. Opposing that is the diametric opposite of supporting those like Orban, who spearheads racist physical attacks on migrants and Roma, or Le Pen on Arabs, the AfD on Turks, Meloni on Africans, or Trump on Mexicans. They are just targeting the victims of imperialism who have the temerity to show up in the imperialist world. Nor can the Left side with the likes of Modi, with his anti-Muslim pogroms, or Bolsonaro with his contempt for the Indigenous and Black people of Brazil

The dictatorship of what? Left, Right, and Independence

Two further points in the Comintern declaration command attention. First, Comintern parties in the imperialist countries had different duties from those in the oppressed countries, a point forgotten by the Western Left who, consumed with the arrogant Liberal conviction that their social systems are superior, suffer an apparently uncontrollable urge to tell everyone else what to do.

As noted above, the Comintern prescribed that its members in the Imperialist countries must *in their own country* act ‘not only in words but in deeds’ in support of ‘every liberation movement’. This is the opposite of Liberalism which starts from the premise that Western values – rooted in private property as the highest freedom – are a universal principle the whole world must accept. The conduct of Western Leftists in the Ukraine conflict, not to mention Yugoslavia, Iran, Iraq or Afghanistan, would have been ample grounds to deny them admission to the Comintern; their duty would be confined to getting their own governments out of the conflict.

This ‘non-interventionist’ principle of relations between the peoples of the oppressor and oppressed nations thus corresponds quite precisely to the respect for national sovereignty which is required in a multipolar world.

The Comintern principles also oblige Western Communists to support ‘every’ liberation movement – not just ones they like. But not all liberation movements are socialist. Some, such as Cyprus’s struggle to escape British Rule, included explicitly fascist leaders. Peronism in Latin America has a complex relation with fascism which still casts its shadow over Argentina.

The Comintern principles do however establish a distinction between the governments which like Ukraine convert themselves into imperialism’s puppets, and those who stand up against it. These do not

necessarily have Leftist governments. Members of today's emerging coalition against sanctions on Russia, like India, have distinctly far-right, even fascist governments (Desai 2014), whilst others such as China and Vietnam are to the left of anything the Comintern encountered in its day. This variety is why Hugo Chavez's term 'pluripolar' is apt, because it describes a world, as described by President Putin at the Valdai Club's 2022 conference,⁷ containing a wide variety of social systems. Does this conflict with the principle of proletarian internationalism?

History is still unfolding, and we believe the resolution of this problem is one of the primary tasks of the mass movement that needs to be created. Controversially, we believe it is not to be resolved by writing 'socialism' into the principles of a new international movement. As we have noted, the early Communists were committed not to an economic system but the unequivocal defence of the rights of the propertyless. Moreover, as is clear from the history of socialism since the Bolshevik Revolution, the path to socialism winds through distinct anti-imperialist formations making their own distinctive ways to socialism, it winds, in short, through pluripolarity.

A more complex issue is that of working class power, to which the First and Third Internationals were indeed committed. The Comintern is renowned for its unequivocal support for the Soviet System. The first point in its Terms of Admission reads:

*Day-by-day propaganda and agitation must be genuinely communist in character. All press organs belonging to the parties must be edited by reliable Communists who have given proof of their devotion to the cause of the proletarian revolution. **The dictatorship of the proletariat should not be discussed merely as a stock phrase to be learned by rote**; it should be popularised in such a way that the practical facts systematically dealt with in our press day by day will drive home to every rank-and-file working man and working woman, every soldier and peasant, that it is indispensable to them. (our emphasis)*

⁷ See: Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 19th Annual Meeting. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-club/>

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that the Third International was a mere creation of the Soviet State. The historical conditions which impelled the Communists to this stance were historically precise and transient. The Soviet Union was the first to replace capitalist power with workers' power. As such, it could be a resource and an ally in working peoples struggles the world over, not the least reason why the fire of all its enemies, including superstar leaders of the Second International like Kautsky, was concentrated on the decision to seize power. For the Communists therefore, it was imperative to recognise the specific form of state power on which they based their rule – namely, the Soviet system – as legitimate.

Not without justification, they proclaimed it a superior form of democracy. Its defence was the frontline of battle. Without it, the primary objective of the first two Internationals – to represent the common interest of all workers – could not be achieved, because the workers would have been deprived of the very means to do what Marx and Engels insisted on, to elevate their class to the status of ruler.

Should the new International we propose similarly privilege any or all existing socialist states? We don't think so. It is now neither necessary nor possible. It is not possible because a specific form of state power, in a world containing a variety of socialist countries, cannot be the basis of unity. The distinct road to working class power to be pursued in each country of a pluripolar world should be the subject of debate, not edict.

Moreover in such a pluripolar world, the International we propose will contain many states that do not identify as socialist, but which are actively opposing imperialism and in which, in many cases, working class interests are prioritised over those of the capitalists.

It will contain not only China or Cuba, but also countries like Iran, the child of a revolutionary process placing it in Imperialism's crosshairs at the forefront of a semi-continental struggle against Western domination of the Middle East, holding to its positions under sanctions, US state terrorism, and daily military assaults and colour revolutions.

It is too easy for Western Liberalism to impose on these distinct processes its own Wilsonian judgement without even attempting to find out, from Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban, North Korean and Iranian

revolutionaries, how their state figures in the class struggle of their country.

The means by which working people can impose their interests on a state is a concrete historical question, to be resolved by practical experience. For example in China and Vietnam the Communist Party is, in effect, the central organ of the state. Though vilified in the West for being ‘authoritarian’ and ‘totalitarian’, these systems have a weighty claim to be significantly more democratic than their self-appointed Western tutors. When one considers that the CPC has more members than the population of any European country, and that its institutions are elected, the claim that this system is ‘undemocratic’ in comparison with the parliamentary dictatorships of the West, loses any serious force. Similar observations can be made of the Cuban and North Korean systems.

How the working class can take power, and make it effective, requires exchanges between the peoples of the pluripolar world at the highest possible level. Indeed, an International is needed precisely so that such discussions may even take place, independent of the interests and involvement of national governments.

Did the Left Internationalist project fail?

As Domenico Losurdo has noted, no historical project can be assessed accurately by discussing what it achieved. Instead we must assess the effect of its ideals. The Communist International failed to bring about socialism in Europe. Instead, its mass parties were defeated by the enemies of the world’s first socialist revolution. Mussolini triumphed in Italy, Franco in Spain, and Hitler in Germany.

In this precise sense, the Third International suffered a great defeat. The forces of revolution in Europe were not just set back, but exterminated. As a result of Hitler’s ascendancy, the USSR was left to face Nazi Germany directly. Without the heroic sacrifice of its peoples, we would not be living in a world fit for their children.

Does this mean the sacrifice of the martyrs of the anti-fascist struggle, inspired by the Soviet example, who went to their deaths in millions in the jails and battlefields of Europe, was in vain? Were their deaths a judgement on the ideal of a worldwide working class International? Should we conclude that it is not worth fighting fascism because we once lost?

This is a fatalist vision. We cannot conclude from a defeat that the battle should never have been fought; only that the war has yet to be won. Imperialism is not dead. Fascism is on the rise. Working people are under attack as never since the 1930s. Giving up is not an option.

Moreover, and perhaps most decisive for a proper historical evaluation, the project did *not* fail outside Europe. The leadership of the wave of revolutions that followed Hitler's defeat, including the Chinese revolution, was formed not just by their own national struggles but by their encounters, in the interwar Comintern, with the ideals and struggles of revolutionary anti-imperialists the world over. The Communist ideal gave inspiration to anti-colonial revolts throughout the world, notwithstanding the fact that each such revolt passed through its own distinct national trajectory.

Finally, we cannot complete any analysis of the historical role of the Comintern without a proper evaluation of the consequences of *dissolving* it, which, we have argued (Freeman 2022) has proven in many senses a great historical misjudgement. The USSR's leaders believed it would persuade the West to abandon its militaristic and oppressive ambitions, by removing the perceived threat that the Comintern would undermine their sovereignty. But the West did not reciprocate. It never ceased its imperialist agenda and never ceased conspiring to overturn the USSR, which it achieved because the USSR was fighting with one hand tied behind its back. Is it not time for the world's working classes to fight once again with both fists?

Nor can we avoid comment on the consequences of the split between the Soviet leadership and other revolutionary movements, including both Yugoslavia and the disastrous split with China, which, by dividing the forces objectively opposed to imperialism, opened the way to many aspects of the present situation.

With a renewed phase of the struggle against imperialism and fascism, and with the very survival of the planet at stake, is not such an International, therefore, more necessary than ever?

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