

Where is Ukraine going? And where is Europe Going?

Balazs Nagy 26 March 2014

“The Ukrainian question is destined in the immediate future to play an enormous role in the life of Europe.” (Trotsky)

All commentators on the revolutionary process unfolding in Ukraine manifest general confusion mingled with anxiety; their confusion arises from an inability to understand what is going on, while the anxiety is provoked by the pervasive threat of war. They are at a loss, and it shows in the wide range of explanations and solutions on offer and programmes proposed, programmes which, themselves born of the widespread confusion, also help to feed it. But, broad as the variety of conceptions and proposals seems to be, they all amount, either directly or as a variant, to one of two opposing bourgeois programmes: either they accept and even support the new regime in Kiev and its capitalist European and American godfathers, or they “understand” or are inspired by the Great-Russian ambitions of the bourgeoisie that Putin represents. The stance always more or less varies, of course, according to the particular nature of this or that movement or organisation and its specific place in the political spectrum.

An independence struggle the bourgeoisie perverted – and some people deny!

And so for its part the European bourgeoisie asserts that this here is a movement inspired by western democracies which seeks to join their European Union. This refrain is orchestrated across the piece, with development and variations provided by bourgeois propaganda, not forgetting the petit-bourgeois second violins. Listening to them, you might be excused for believing that the Ukrainian people are ready to die on the

barricades for the kind of democracy exemplified by Hollande and company. When that Europe – with its unelected leaders answerable to no-one, its peremptory decrees and its Troika dictatorship – tries to play the champion of democracy and national independence, the sheer pretentious arrogance deserves nothing but contempt. The low cunning this involves reveals a profound contempt for Ukrainian workers, making a travesty of their aspirations to real independence and genuine democracy, and imagining that they don't know what kind of democracy you actually get from Brussels, or what was done to Greece, for example.

Against this vicious and ridiculous lie is ranged the other bourgeois version, that of the Great-Russian neighbour led by Putin, whose menacing, ape-like brutality many people find more repulsive than the honeyed but deceitful blandishments of Europeans whose rough edges have been smoothed by centuries of cheating and hypocrisy. But Ukraine's revolutionary movement developed precisely against Yanukovych, the front man for Putin representing the *parvenu* rapacity of the Great-Russian bourgeoisie. A few thousand agitators rattling their weapons, protected by a thinly-disguised foreign army and venal officials, cannot drown out this whole great people's obvious desire for independence.

Only a Marxist analysis can grasp this whole reality and provide a coherent explanation, above all by asserting that, despite all the commentators, this national independence struggle is an objective, and even fundamental, fact of the Ukrainian workers' movement and not some unwholesome blemish. What distort its content and deform its significance are the fake solutions proposed by the managers of European capitalism and their Ukrainian acolytes, up to and including fascists. Even their ostensible predominance and apparent influence prove, in their own way, the powerful vitality of this desire for national independence.

This is not some recent invention of the European bourgeoisie,

nor a diabolical fascist plot. It has a long history nourished by centuries of tradition. There is no point in going over here in detail all the struggles for the independence of Ukraine, trapped between the feudal Polish state's desire to expand and the Muscovite state's efforts to centralise. After the glory decades of this struggle in the 17th century, the country was broken up between the two oppressors, and then above all by Russia, and although the fight was never abandoned it also never recovered. Here lie the roots of the inseparable link, nay inextricable entanglement of social problems with those of national independence. This close embrace is what, historically, has determined the overall situation in Ukraine right up to the present, as in many other Eastern-European countries. On this point there undoubtedly is a kinship between the struggle in Ukraine and that waged by working people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, however different the forms they take. The close correlation between these profoundly mingled problems has been reproduced in a particular form at every historical stage. In the 19th century, in particular, national independence was integral to the demands of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Not only was it indissolubly linked to them in every one of these countries, it formed the indispensable pedestal on which they rested.

This organic and uninterrupted connection was naturally reproduced in Ukraine during the Soviet period insofar as the counter-revolutionary turn on the part of the Stalinist bureaucracy installed a political regime which fell far short of bourgeois-democratic freedoms, not to mention those of a socialist character. In his fundamental critique of the Stalinist bureaucracy, Trotsky revealed that this anti-working class caste from the outset erected its counter-revolutionary political policies on the wreckage of political freedoms, including those of a bourgeois-democratic nature, and that what necessarily crowned its regime was the Great-Russian

oppression of all the peoples of the USSR. It was no accident that he placed the question of national independence at the very heart of what he wrote on Ukraine.

“Nowhere did restrictions, purges, repressions, and in general all forms of bureaucratic hooliganism assume such murderous sweep as they did in the Ukraine ... (which) became an administrative division of an economic unit and a military base of the USSR.” (“The Ukrainian Question” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky [1938-39]*, Pathfinder Press New York 1974, pp. 302-303.) That same year he devoted several articles to Ukraine, clearly explaining the need for a struggle for national independence as a major factor in this fundamental interdependence.

In the light of this one and only thread capable of guiding our current orientation, the positions that some have adopted, even if they fraudulently present themselves as Marxist or even Trotskyist, look dangerously simplistic and mistaken. This is true of the “World Socialist Web Site” of the American David North and Co. which, in their inveterate sectarianism, squarely refuse to recognise the authentic popular character of the independence struggle. They write that: “Washington and Berlin ... are stoking an explosion of tensions between various ethnic and religious groups...”, having already declared that: “The principal responsibility for the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine rests with the United States and Germany”.

(*The Crisis in Ukraine*, <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/03/03/pers-m03.html>)

This sectarianism in relation to national demands goes hand in hand with identifying the whole movement, including its democratic demands, with the fascist contortions acting on its surface. “Nor is there”, they say, “the slightest democratic content to the fascist-dominated protest movement in Kiev and western Ukraine ...”

What chiefly characterises explanations of this sort is the

almost total disappearance of the working masses, who at most appear as frail and impotent playthings of the bourgeois manipulators of Europe. On the other hand the bourgeoisie, German and American – or even Russian! – in this case, are seen as the overwhelming, ubiquitous powers able to unleash and organise this whole movement.

Sadly, Comrade Melanchon in France has also fallen victim to this confusion. In a hasty initial reaction to the Ukrainian events in his personal blog, he found Putin's reaction to the machinations of the European Union understandable. Without defending the EU, we still have to say his opinion is wrong, especially since it brings a discordant note into party devoted to serving the interests of working people. As it goes, he later corrected this mistake inspired by a superficial impressionism, but his position remains at the level of vague, contemplative generalities that hardly go beyond the narrow limitations of the bourgeois view.

Again on national independence and how to solve it

There have been relatively few serious efforts, overall, to go beyond interpretations which steer away around the immediate surface of things. You can find such efforts in the accounts provided by some workers and/or their trade unions who are present as participants in or observers of these movements. Their testimony is unanimous: This is a general popular movement against the destructive policies of national oppression on the part of the then existing government. Onto this groundswell a variety of bourgeois programmes have been grafted which have tried to channel it into this or that direction. On the other hand, you can see the same sort of thing in commentaries by those outside Ukraine who have been through the school of Trotskyism or still lay claim this Marxism of our day, and who conceive these current upsurges, however vaguely, as class movements and struggles. An article by Comrade Philippe Alcoy of the New Anti-Capitalist Party's (NPA) Revolutionary Communist Current contains reflections of

this type. But sadly his efforts also remain at the level of the superficial contemplation of simple facts, even though one should not identify him entirely with other appreciations, which can be criticised for the various imperfections, the most significant of which are closely bound up with the problems raised above.

Comrade Alcoy's view is that the struggle for Ukraine's national independence – even if he personally thinks that it is a real struggle – is not worth talking about and he obviously thinks it is even something of an embarrassment. Unlike those quoted above, he does not take a hard and fast position, but sort of manoeuvres around this annoying obstacle. More exactly, he considers social problems as the only valid ones and the national problem as a useless and dangerous surrogate, and so gets it off his back. He frankly writes in the second sentence of his article that “popular discontent is a response to much deeper causes than simple “European aspirations”. Having thus set aside the disturbing question of national independence and the struggle for it, Comrade Alcoy can formulate his bookish and stereotypical demands in the third subtitle of the article: “Put economic, social and political demands of the exploited at the centre of the dispute!” Here you find the same attempt to replace Marxist analysis of a movement as it is, i.e. in its multiple and contradictory living reality , with a voluntarist construct with its demands dictated by the rigid schemas of a supposed “Marxism”, a well-known method of many cadres and leaders of the Fourth International deformed by Pablo and Mandel. In the event, he turns his back on the actual struggle being waged for national independence and thus presents the abstraction of a social demand in itself detached from its context, which confers on it a lifeless character. (And anyway he is completely unable to specify what social demands!) This fact obliges me not only to insist on the importance of this national question in general but to put it, as it is presented in reality, at the centre of this article,.

The combined and unified existence of social and national problems and the way they are entangled neither contradict nor detract from the struggle for social demands. On the contrary, their mutual embrace fertilises and strengthens each of these struggles in their respective domains. The whole of history, especially in the 20th Century, serves to illustrate and emphasise that struggles for national independence have strongly enriched social struggles, giving them greater prominence and redoubled vigour. One can only repeat that it was not just some caprice that led the banner of Ukrainian independence to be raised anew in the struggle against the social gangrene of the bureaucracy, and integrated into the general struggle to liberate the working class.

Now, like many NPA activists, Philippe Alcoy has completely forgotten these teachings of Trotsky's, including his articles on Ukraine. It may very well be that he now rejects these conceptions which were still accepted until quite recently. In any case, the fact that he has gone over to a bourgeois position does not stop our analysis, based on Trotsky's, nor does it prevent us from affirming that if fighting for national independence spurs on the social struggle, the maturity and historical level of the latter in turn determine the character and concrete configuration of that independence. That is why Trotsky firmly stated the only road to Ukrainian national independence: "The program of independence for the Ukraine in the epoch of imperialism is directly and indissolubly bound up with the program of the proletarian revolution." (Ibid. p. 305). And he replied in advance to all those bourgeois or "socialists", or even alleged "Marxists", who seek a solution within the confines of the existing context defined by the bourgeoisie.

The way he describes this remains valid today: "... only political cadavers can continue to place hope in any one of the factions of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie as the leader of the national struggle for emancipation". (ibid. p.306).

How true this assertion is leaps to the eye when you see Ukraine being tossed around between two wings of the mafioso comprador bourgeoisie grouped around either Yanukovych or Timochenko, or, indeed, gnawed away – and threatened – by predatory mafias whose Great-Russian appetites have been whetted in Chechnya and in the Caucasus. Trotsky re-emphasised his conclusion and extended its scope: “Only hopeless pacifist blockheads are capable of thinking that the emancipation and unification of the Ukraine can be achieved by peaceful democratic means, by referendums, by decisions of the League of Nations, etc. In no way superior to them, of course, are those ‘nationalists’ who propose to solve the Ukrainian question by entering the service of one imperialism against another.” (Ibid p. 304.)

And so he arrived, as the logical culmination of his analysis, at the demand for an independent, soviet Ukraine, even then routing more than one schematic “Marxists” along the way. But since then there have been big historical changes which have done more even than war to change the face of the world. And in line with this concrete historical development, this same demand put forward by Trotsky, although identical at bottom, is posed somewhat differently in its form, in line with considerable alterations in the general context.

On what the collapse of the USSR means

The greatest of these changes is beyond argument the fall of the USSR, of which Ukraine was an integral part, brought about by the policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Now if many sincere socialist who have lost their way and even many so-called “Marxists” consider the national struggle of Ukrainians to be a futile waste of time or even dangerous, then they are completely missing out this change in the general context. In what they say about Ukraine in particular, they completely leave out the considerable phenomenon of the collapse of the USSR and what it means.

It is highly characteristic that these people view the effervescence in Ukraine – if they recognise its popular character at all – as being exactly like similar movements which have animated southern Europe and then shaken the Arab countries and also appeared elsewhere. Indeed there is a link between these movements, however much they differ in form, as singular movements of a re-launch of working people's resistance to capitalism. Their outbreak is a clear sign – of course partial and full of gaps, imperfect and contradictory, but very real – of a step forward in and growing maturity of an awakening of the movement of working people. That is the basis of their shared kinship and certainly the turmoil in Ukraine is part of that. But we all know that here it embodies a quite different reality from similar events elsewhere, i.e. the collapse of the USSR.

But all commentators without exception, including “lefts”, pseudo or ex-Marxists, also “forget” this fact, although it is heavy with meaning. The world working class lost its state, its forward bastion in its class war against capital, for all that it was in an advanced state of dilapidation, undermined as it was by the parasitical bureaucracy. This loss constituted an historic loss for the whole working class, quite apart from the differing (and often opposed) views on these matters by various currents around the world. It marked the end of an epoch and the start of a new one, the latter marked by a radical swing in the international balance of forces in favour of the bourgeoisie and thus of the triumphant advance of that class's reactionary neo-liberal wing, based on immense losses and successive retreats by the working class.

If the commentators mentioned so obviously avert their eyes from the collapse of the USSR, the reason is that they clearly do not know what to make of it, either at an international level or as regards Ukraine in particular. And that is why they elect to remain silent on this embarrassing question, as if nothing had happened. That is why their views on Ukraine

lack all perspective and depth and are reduced, apart from empty and inappropriate recipes, to a banal description of events. Having summarised the international effects of the collapse of the USSR, we should examine its consequences in the countries of which it was made up, Ukraine in particular. That is the only way to understand events and sketch a viable solution.

While the USSR has collapsed, the Stalinist bureaucracy itself has not disappeared from the country but, like matter in nature, it has changed. In the counter-revolutionary process of dismantling the USSR, the major part of it has simply been content to mutate into the new bourgeoisie of each country in the former union. No-one has the right to ignore this significant fact, although bourgeois propagandists like to conceal it, while the whole of the more thoughtful "left" use sleight of hand to do so. This new class has completed this reactionary turn, which is bound up with its own consolidation, with a cupidity that is all the more rapacious and a brutality that is all the more determined for it having arrived as the latecomer to the world bourgeoisie's feast, stretching from Russia's Putin with his Great-Russian dreams and his unacknowledged idols including the Tsars and Stalin, to Ukraine in the hands of the Timochenko and Yanukovych clans, by way of Kazakhstan and Belarus.

This liquidation of the USSR and its counter-revolutionary social transformation took place in bitter class struggle in which the Soviet working class, initially aroused by the hope of achieving its own aims against the bureaucracy, mobilised massively. But very quickly this struggle itself turned into a series of defensive struggles lasting a whole decade to protect its social gains against the painful installation of the new bourgeoisie. Of course, bourgeois propagandists had a material interest in keeping completely silent about these struggles, and we can only sketch them in summary form here.

This movement started in July 1989 in the great Kuzbas

industrial and coalmining region in western Siberia, and it immediately spread to the miners in the Donbas in Ukraine and those in Vorkuta in the high north of Russia. After this first wave of great strikes, there was a second in 1993 in Ukraine, with 1.5 million miners, electricity workers and engineering workers on strike, centred in the Donbas. As Comrade Alcoy wrote in another article, in this strike "... the Donbass miners, seeing the disastrous effects of the application of pro-market reforms, came into conflict with the new Ukrainian authorities." They brought down the first president of the new Ukraine, Kravchuk and, alongside their wage demands, lent support to pro-bourgeois formations.

In fact, from the very start these movement were marked by a flagrant contradiction. Besides typically working class demands, and other, broader ones which seem to have come straight off the page of the programme worked out by Trotsky (which workers found out of their spontaneous class instinct), they advanced the demand for a market economy against the bureaucracy's monstrous planning system. That was how they were duped and their movement exploited by bourgeois formations and conned by this or that clan in the nascent bourgeoisie. And so, disappointed by the Timoshenko clan's rapacious policies, they most recently supported "regionalism", that special form of nationalism of the clan which finds its living incarnation in Yanukovych.

This spectacular lack of any political clarity of vision is entirely due to the heritage of the Stalinist dictatorship since the end of the 1920s, which established its power on the total annihilation of the Leninist party and maintained itself by falsifying revolutionary ideas and the revolutionary past and one after another eliminating all the genuine cadres and activists of the working class, hermetically isolated from the international workers' movement. The result of this process, this unnatural deviation of the workers' movement can be compared with what had happened with Solidarnosc in Poland a

decade previously, where the Catholic Church played the role of seducer. Since then, first the bureaucracy and then the new bourgeoisie which arose from its ranks, massively applied in these countries the tactic of the carrot and the stick in order to divide, hijack and corrupt these workers' movement.

So it is hardly surprising that by the end of the 1990s a "certain demoralisation" had taken hold of Ukrainian workers, as comrade Alcoy says in one of his articles.

But when in his latest article the same comrade writes: "A certain basic weakness in this movement (recent events in Ukraine) is the absence the organised working class", he speaks completely in – the abstract. In particular he leaves out the *concrete* fact that this movement is not just absent, but has been conned, de-natured and weakened by a series of disappointments and defeats. So the "absence" is not just due to some sort of inattention but a from a long run of defeats, so that the Ukrainian working class on the one hand is economically and socially bled white and on the other has not yet been able to grasp , digest and overcome its serious disappointments and grave errors of judgement. So comrade Alcoy is right, but – only abstractly. But in the concrete situation of this defeat, his recommendations about "advancing social demands of the exploited" rings false, since the advice has no traction in real life. To get out of this reality of a tragic blind alley, Ukrainian workers don't need incantations of this sort, they need a lightning bolt from the international workers' movement.

Meanwhile all the evidence indicates that the situation in Ukraine and all the countries of the former USSR confirms Trotsky's sombre prognosis in the case of a possible counter-revolutionary turn by the USSR, not just on the social level but also in relation to the national independence of the various peoples. Without looking this evidence in the eye, there can only be a blind groping forward.

Since 1989 workers have been hard hit by persistent and

monstrous inflation of the order of several hundreds of points along with unrestrained privatisation accompanied by massive closure of unprofitable factories and mines, late and deferred payment of wages and the unemployed living in poverty. Even bourgeois western economists recognise that these countries have experienced “the highest levels of inequality even measured” and that between 1989 and 1995 per capital incomes, despite the wealth of unscrupulous Mafioso businessmen, fell by 62 in Ukraine and 42% in Russia, but “only” 26% in Poland. (*Le Monde*, 13 March 2014). The list goes on, leading to a natural conclusion: the only road to solving these severe problems is socialism. This is the main conclusion that Ukrainian workers could – and should – reach, as a whole, rather than some vague, neutral and uncertain “social demand”.

In general it can be established that the working class of the former USSR, and therefore also its Ukrainian fraction too, suffered a crushing defeat in 1989-1992, followed by a series of retreats and a general worsening in its situation. But for all that, it should not be said that the victorious bourgeoisie was able definitively to consolidate its power.

Throughout the former USSR, with the exception perhaps of Russia, local economies have only been able to integrate into the world economy as its most ramshackle portions, largely subordinated and exploited as colonies. Only the new Russian bourgeoisie can attempt to offset its economic weaknesses and backwardness by adopting Great-Russian aggression towards the other former soviet countries. Everywhere these bourgeoisies, feeble and rickety because, like the mafia, they are based on economic predation rather than on a rise in production, are torn apart by vicious struggles between various local clans. They are, therefore, quite incapable of furnishing a solid foundation for political authorities which are profoundly unstable and can only maintain themselves through merciless dictatorships. These are instable regimes of permanent crisis,

which have been unmasked as such by recent movements in Ukraine and which render this victory of the bourgeoisie dicey and relative.

Under these circumstances it would be a mistake to think that the overall process unleashed in 1989 has been completed as a movement. On the contrary. It is experiencing a new upsurge in Ukraine whose impact on other countries is still not easy to assess. In any case, the Ukrainian (and other) working classes may have lost a lot of battles, but no one has the right to say they have lost the war, whereas we can say already that all the anaemic bourgeois regimes established on the ruins of the USSR are interregnums, a historical accident, just an unhappy interlude in humanity's development.

Ukraine and the Question of Europe

The other big change which has altered not just the general framework of politics but also to a large extent its content and form has been the attempt at European unification and how it has evolved. This problem raises a number of questions in relation to Ukraine, too, especially since Ukrainians themselves treat it as something central and also because the issue has been pretty well muddled by the comments of both supporters and opponents of this unification.

From the outset I should emphasise how wrong it is to condemn out of hand the desire of working people in Ukraine to join Europe without examining more thoroughly the circumstances and the content of what they are asking for. After all, even organisations to the left of the socialist party are in this Europe and the only organisations agitating to get out of it are those of the – fascists.

It would be a gross error to think that the European aspirations of working people in Ukraine is somehow a desire to line up behind Barroso and his ilk. It would be a massive over-simplification, since people who have only just shaken

off a clique of predators in order to achieve national independence are certainly not about to carry out the kind of “recommendations” that come out of Brussels or submit to the Troika whose cruel voracity far outstrips all the Ukrainian oligarchs and Putin’s lot put together.

So, contrary to the majority of bourgeois commentators who quite a lot of working-class activists unfortunately take as good coin, the only Europe the working people of Ukraine want to join is one that is truly free and genuinely democratic, just like their French, German or Greek sisters and brothers. There is no major difference between them, even though some Ukrainian working people do still have illusions in Brussels’ Europe. The division that you can be sure exists is between Ukrainian and European workers on the one hand and the oligarchy in any and every country on the other. And we all know very well that fascists don’t want Europe either, not the French ones, not the ones in any other country, and certainly not the ones in Ukraine either.

These are the basic facts of the problem, which are more decisive than any fleeting impressions or passing illusions one might have. So this is the basis on which to look for a real solution, and certainly not by turning your back on it.

The European question is not just considerable in importance, it is absolutely fundamental. Even back when there was still a USSR – and not European unification of any sort, Trotsky drew his organisation’s attention to how decisive the relationship between Ukraine and Europe was:

“The Fourth International must clearly understand the importance of the Ukrainian question in the fate not only of Southeastern and Eastern Europe but also of Europe as a whole.” (Ibid. p. 304).

Today, Ukraine’s importance to Europe has grown even further while, in return, Europe’s has grown perhaps even more for

Ukraine. In fact it is obvious to all that Ukraine is in a complete blind alley if it stays where it was on the eve of the present big movements. Its opposition to one of the big clans of oligarchs has been exploited to achieve the victory of a different clan, without the workers' conditions improving, in fact just the opposite. In the same way, her struggle for national independence was perverted into an extreme bourgeois nationalism which faced it with a false choice between the European bourgeoisie and Putin's Russia, leading to the brink of war. Cooperation between the Ukrainian and Russian working class, which is a necessary condition if the process of their respective defeats is to be turned around into a united movement against the oligarchs running these countries, has been severely compromised by the out-and-out nationalisms on both sides of the border.

The only way to break the deadlock is to overcome the national frameworks which prevent a satisfactory solution. That can only be done at a European level. Not in a bourgeois Europe which we know and which, by the way, so far from being united faces dislocation under the pressure of its contradictions. It requires all those organisations which speak on behalf of working people to go beyond the stage of mere opposition to this bourgeois Europe, a stage which does not amount to a policy but merely paralyses all these organisations within an outmoded national framework. Only the struggle for a working people's Europe can bring a solution not just to the problems faced by working people in the west but also that of Ukrainian national independence. It is also the only way to overcome the defeat inflicted by and in the liquidation of the USSR by raising united working people, including Ukrainians and Russians, against all oligarchs in Europe East and West. [/threecolumns]