

Misconceptions about imperialism, and anarchist collective traumas

Antti Rautiainen

26 May 2022

Contents

What is wrong with theoretical approaches to imperialism?	3
What would be a suitable definition of imperialism?	4
Anarchist traumas	6

Ever since the beginning of the Russian invasion against Ukraine, we have seen statements by anarchists, communists and leftists not from Ukraine, on how Ukrainian anarchists, communists and leftists should not defend themselves against attack of Putin, but lay down their arms and flee instead.

Any kind of dialogue with these people would probably be of no use. But we could discuss, how anarchist and leftist theory has ended up in such pitiful state. I do not have an answer ready, but I suspect there are two core reasons. Firstly, a weak leftist theory on imperialism, which has also spread among anarchists, as well as anarchist collective traumas due to historical failures. Secondly, many anarchists and leftists analyse any situation from the perspective of their own local context and history, and do not understand reality of the other places.

Before the anarchist failures in 1920's, 1930's and 1940's, anarchists never made such senseless statements. For example in Finland and Korea, anarchists joined struggles for national independence, and anarchists from the empires, for example in United States, Great Britain, Netherlands and Japan were struggling against colonialism and imperialism of their own governments. Back then, no anarchist ever asked national liberation movements to lay down their arms and run away.

What is wrong with theoretical approaches to imperialism?

The weakness in the left's theory on imperialism is, at least in part, the fault of Lenin. According to Lenin, imperialism was the final stage of capitalism, in which capitalism is bound to expand, conquer the periphery and eventually destroy at a global scale the free competition, which once created capitalism. The Leninist definition of imperialism was handy for Lenin himself, as in the context of this definition, assaults against Poland, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia led by Soviet Russia under Lenin were not imperialistic invasions.

The Leninist definition also hinders us from understanding many historical examples of imperialism. Often conquest is not motivated by profits, but by a security interest of creating buffer zones. This is especially the case with the imperialism of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. When Tsar Alexander I conquered Finland in 1809, Finland was the poorest country in Europe, and thus only incurred costs for Russia. The only reason to conquer Finland was to create a security buffer zone around Saint Petersburg.

Although Russia today is otherwise completely different from the Russian empire, one of the main reasons for Putin's attack of Ukraine is the same as Alexander's reasons for the conquest of Finland – to create a security buffer zone. Even if Putin were to win the war, the attack destroys more capital than it creates, in any time interval of less than hundred years. It was not Russian oligarchs and capital, which initiated the war. Segments of the top of Russian capital, such as the leadership of the Lukoil oil company, have even openly protested against the war.

In a very general sense, capitalism is behind all modern wars, because capitalism incentivizes competition instead of cooperation. But the mechanism through which capitalism creates wars is more complicated than the left thinks. Attempts by the left to reduce all wars to being plots by capital are often feeble, especially when there is no oil around in the areas targeted by the conquest.

In 1999, the left argued that Nato and USA were conspiring to build an oil pipeline through Kosovo, and this was the reason behind the bombing of Yugoslavia. After 23 years, the pipeline

is still not there. In 2001 the left argued, that the plan was to build an oil pipeline through Afghanistan, and this was the reason behind invasion. The pipeline is still not there. The reasons behind these invasions was not oil, but they were not noble or humanitarian either. The reasons were starkly ideological: to establish a certain international legal order, and to avenge previous humiliations.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine is motivated by similar reasons. Besides establishing a security zone, Putin wants to avenge humiliations, that took place during collapse of the Soviet Union from the point of view of a KGB-agent. He also wants to achieve a local ultra-nationalistic vision of turning all Russian speaking territories into a single state. The brutality of the carpet artillery and missile strikes is not a goal in itself, but due to Russia not having the advanced military technology to pull off air supremacy and precision strikes.

Successful conquests of course benefit capital. Some capitalists benefit whatever the outcome, as long as it is not a nuclear war. But this does not mean, that capitalism is somehow coupled with only one single superpower. The USA is still the leading capitalist state, but capitalism will not get any better or worse, even if it is replaced by another state. A multipolar world is not necessarily less, or more capitalist than the current order. So it is rather uninspired to propose that American imperialism is more dangerous than other imperialisms just because the USA is the leading capitalist country in the world.

The left in Greece, the Balkan countries and Latin America have had very bitter experiences with the United States and Nato. In these areas, there is little understanding for relying on the Western camp against other enemies. But there are no universal situations, or universal hierarchies of oppression, where at the core of all oppression there is capitalism, and the enemy in each struggle is the United States.

If you are gay in Chechnya and get discovered, you will be murdered, without capitalism being involved. In this situation, patriarchal homophobia would be a more acute problem than capitalism. The War in Ukraine is not an inevitable consequence of capitalism, the main reason is the twisted understanding of reality by a single person. Capitalism would have been doing just as successful, probably even more so without the war in Ukraine. The most dangerous oppression, the worst enemies and the best potential allies against them vary depending on time and space.

Besides Lenin's analysis of imperialism, the Left approaches have also been defined by a fear of Nuclear war. For example, according to Chomsky, the best way to handle Putin's hatred of the West would be to offer to him some countries as a buffer zone,¹ as anything else could lead to nuclear war. But these kind of solutions have problems, for example the most obvious one being that Chomsky is not about to ask the people living in his planned buffer zones if they would agree to this. Furthermore easy victories and submission usually do not decrease the appetites of those blinded by their power, but instead increase it. I would not like to be in a situation to choose between submission to Hitler and nuclear war. This is one more reason why we should aim to overthrow Putin, instead of appeasing him.

What would be a suitable definition of imperialism?

Imperialism is when a state pursues to conquest other territories, and reach the status of leading superpower.

¹ Noam Chomsky: A No-Fly Zone Over Ukraine Could Unleash Untold Violence truthout.org

This definition is similar to a number of dictionary definitions, but I have decided to discard the expansion of the definition to economic and cultural hegemony. For example, the popularity of American movies in comparison to domestic ones is not comparable to the leveling urban centers with artillery in order to conquer them.

While imperialistic domination has continuously failed (such as the case of the US invasions to Iraq and Afghanistan), or they have become altogether impossible (such as in the case of Belgium, Netherlands and Portugal), the left has shifted towards the discussion of the malaise of economic and cultural imperialism. But calling cultural hegemony imperialism is an inflation of the concept, which has led to a poor analysis of the left, that equates the expansion of NATO to the Russian attack on Ukraine.

In fact there is a tendency in post-colonial discourse, developed in the United States, to assume that wars of conquest are no longer an issue, and consequently experiences and threats within Eastern Europe are either irrelevant, or as serious of an issue as the cultural hegemony of the United States. In a way, post-colonial theory itself has a colonial bias. East-Europeans, who attempt to use the concepts of post-colonial theory in their own analysis are actually part of the same problem, because inter-ethnic violence in Eastern Europe seldom takes place within the colonial framework of the post-colonial theory. In Eastern Europe, the target of violence is the enemy, but not exotic "other" without human value, a similar human being with a different identity. Not all imperialism is colonial.

A smaller country forming an alliance with a bigger one is entirely different to an assault on a smaller country, and subsequently forcing it to submit to one's own sphere of influence. One could use moralistic arguments against the plans of Eastern European countries to join NATO, because of the US's outrageous and one-sided interventions in places like Latin America or the Middle-East, and also in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. But the purpose of Estonians supporting NATO membership is not to suppress Palestinians, Kurds, Iraklis or Kosovo Serbs, but the wish not to be conquered by Russia. I do not support Finland, or any other country joining NATO, but I also do not oppose "Estonian imperialism", because there is no such thing.

The Spanish republic attempted to get support from Great Britain and France. When the loss of the Kronstadt uprising was imminent, rebels attempted to appeal to Entente-countries to get some help. On the other hand, most of the anti-colonial movements of 50's, 60's and 70's asked and received support from the Soviet Union. I do not condemn any of them. The friend of my friend does not necessarily have to be my friend.

Hundreds of thousands of people are moving from poor countries to rich ones every year. Are they agents of imperialism? Perhaps, a consistent revolutionary would rather join a social struggle wherever they were born, no matter how poor the place. But the urge to raise ones standard of living is a natural urge, and moralising it would not take anarchists a single step further. In Eastern Europe, the choice to join the EU and NATO was a popular one, and it was made in order to increase living standards and security, not in order to loot Africa together with the French.

There is also no such thing as Ukrainian imperialism, although I have also come across this kind of argument among the Left. Ukrainian politics during the move towards independence have been shaped by (ultra)nationalist conflicts, the status of the Russian language being only one of them. For example, Ruthenian activists have had serious problems with Ukrainian nationalists

and government officials.² In Donbass, there have been weekly, and usually daily shooting since the 2014–2015 ceasefires, and both sides have constantly shelled civilian buildings, a war crime. But all of these conflicts have taken place inside the borders drawn in 1992, so there is no way one can define them as imperialistic. Occasional war crimes do not yet qualify as genocide, whatever Putin's claims may be.

Perhaps the war could have been avoided, if the Ukrainian policies around language and nationality were less nationalistic. But this is not a simple issue. Should every minority group have a right to national self-determination, even Putinists? Did Sudeten(Bohemian) Germans have the right to separate, in a context where 88% of them were voting, and 40.6% were members of a pro-Nazi party? After the beginning of the war, these difficult questions were pushed to the background, as the scale of destruction by Putin is at a completely other level compared to the problems of Ukrainian nationalism. But after the war, these issues may be back on the agenda, and even during the war if Ukraine has a chance to go on the offensive at some point.

Of course even "small" and local nationalism may be brutal. There are countless of examples of this, such as massacres against Russians during the final stages of the Finnish civil war. Thousands died of starvation in concentration camps build for the Russian civilian population in Eastern Karelia during the Continuation War (Second Soviet-Finnish War). But even such a case, nationalism and imperialism should not be confused, because nationalistic movements are not only building empires, but also destroying them.

An "opponent of any kind of nationalism" is also an opponent of many anti-colonial movements, and ends up on the wrong side of history. Such an analysis may find support at the center of empire, but never in a country where the experience of colonialism and imperialism are still a living memory. The weakness of anarchism after the second world war is not due to "mistakes" made in Russia or Spain, but one of the factors might be the anarchist failure to intervene in support of anti-colonial movements. The Soviet Union did what anarchists failed to do, in its own brutal way which caused lots of unnecessary (but also necessary) destruction in the global south. Any contribution by anarchists against liberation movements pushes the anarchist movement backwards in territories that have suffered from imperialism and colonialism. Opposing imperialism and colonialism is true internationalism.

Anarchist traumas

The history of the anarchist movement is full of stories of betrayal and lost opportunities: Leninists betrayed the Russian revolution, crushed the free territory of Maknovitschina and the Kronstadt rebellion. The republican government of Spain first halted the social revolution, and then were crushed by the Falange. The victory of the allies in the Second World War did not result in a wave of revolutions, and support for anticolonial movements did not result in the emergence of anti-capitalistic societies. From these examples, some anarchists have drawn conclusion that they should not struggle against fascism, imperialism or colonialism in the first place.

Theory and good analysis of the situation may win revolutions, but it may not win wars. Wars are won first of all with material superiority, occasionally also with motivation and cunning strategy. The cards to win or lose are usually dealt at the beginning of the war, and during the

² Year 2018 news: crimea.ria.ru (You may need VPN to access the link from EU area)

war, one may only play the cards one has in hand. Anarchists did not lose in Russia or Spain due to theoretical weaknesses, but because anarchists did not have enough guns and fighters.

These defeats were so traumatic, that anarchists have crafted some corrections to their ideas, which they suppose could have won these wars. For example, many anarchists believe, that Makhno should have never forged any alliances with the Leninists, who eventually betrayed him. Leninism may even be a contagious disease, which will infect anarchism in case of contact.

Many anarchists also believe that the alliance with the Popular Front government of Spain against the Falange was a mistake. Perhaps anarchists could have won, if they simultaneously declared a war against both Popular Front and Franco?

These theories are obviously moronic, military alliances have nothing to do with ideas. Any allies can betray you. Leninism and anarchism are not compatible, sooner or later the conflict is inevitable. But the alliance with Leninists did not speed up, it postponed, the defeat of anarchists in Spain and Russia. The defeat was predefined, as anarchists did not have the resources necessary to win, nor the connections to access those resources. In the beginning of the war, one should have enough resources, or allies to provide said resources, in order to win the war. Anarchists did not lose because they had allies, anarchists lost because the enemy had even more allies.

Obviously the question of alliances has ethical implications. One should not forge an alliance with a side whose victory could be create an even worse case scenario than a victory by the enemy. One should not give up autonomy, possibility to criticize allies, or to whitewash the ally. One should not tolerate political persecutions organised by allies, and even less so participate in them, as was done by some anarchists during the Russian revolution. But nowadays these conditions are rather obvious, and it would be an underestimation of our comrades to imagine that not all anarchists would understand this.

The analysis of the anarchist defeat in the Spanish civil war has been influenced by the Friends of Durruti-group, which was active in 1937–1938 and later in emigration, as well as anti-authoritarian council communism, a tendency which developed in Netherlands and Germany in 1930s. Both the group and this tendency share a criticism of the Spanish popular front government, including the leadership of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT-FAI which joined the government. And indeed, it is rather obvious that joining a government is hardly a consistent move for anarchists.

But alternatives presented by the Friends of Durruti and council communists were diametrically opposed. In the pamphlet "Towards the new revolution", the Friends of Durruti advocated a rebellion against the popular front government.³ But they were not about to give up struggle against the Falange, but they committed to continuing war and putting army of the popular front "under control of the workers".

But the Dutch Marx Lenin Luxemburg Front, which started as a Trotskyist tendency in the 1930s, and later developed in the direction council communism, called on all soldiers of the ally armies to desert the front,⁴ as according to the council communists, capitalism was equally as evil in Great Britain, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. According to modern adherents of this tendency, Franco was also just as bad as the Popular Front in Spain, making anti-fascism and fascism equally bad; thus anarchists should have rejected the anti-fascist struggle in Spain and everywhere.

³ Friends of Durruti: Towards a Fresh Revolution theanarchistlibrary.org

⁴ International Communist Current: The Dutch and German Communist Left. London, 1990.

Since then, council communism has influenced the French Socialisme ou Barbarie-group (1948–1967), and through them the Situationists. One of the problems of revolutionary theory is that it increases in quantity every year, whereas the opposite can be said as to its quality. At some point, most stupid theories should be thrown out, if not into the trash then at least to placed at the very bottom of the book stack, regardless of whether it's been written by anarchists, Leninists, communists or leftists. From time to time, one could dig them up and to wonder how the theory degenerated so far. One could also do with less theory, as is proven by the praxis of previous generations. Before the Second world war, no anarchist anywhere made calls to put down arms in front of an imperialistic attack.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Antti Rautiainen
Misconceptions about imperialism, and anarchist collective traumas
26 May 2022

Retrieved on 27th May 2022 from avtonom.org

usa.anarchistlibraries.net