

Open Letter to My Brazilian Friends and Colleagues About the Invasion of Ukraine

by François Chesnais (14 April 2022)

In this letter I would like to explain to Brazilian friends and colleagues my position on the war in Ukraine, namely that it is a unilateral aggression by Russia. I received a message from a friend in which I detected the idea that the war can be understood as a legitimate response to a situation created by NATO. This “campist” position is encouraged by the fact that four Latin American countries that are at the forefront of the fight against the United States – Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and El Salvador – abstained in the vote in the UN General Assembly resolution condemning “aggression against Ukraine”. A dozen formerly colonial African countries did the same. The pro-Russia stance taken by the [Monthly Review](#) may also encourage the “anti-imperialist/anti-US camp” position.

A deep hostility towards US imperialism (nurtured by more than a century of history dating back to the invasion of Cuba under President McKinley in 1898), which is shared with many militants of the South American left, risks make some of my friends and colleagues agnostic about, or even tolerant of, the invasion; unclear about its aims; and indifferent to the methods of warfare directed against civilian populations that are employed by the Russian military. Named a “special operation” by Vladimir Putin and his ministers, it is an aggression on the part of Russia with the aim of ousting the Volodymyr Zelensky government from power; perpetuating the separation of the Donbas regions in the east of the country; vassalising the central and western part of the country; and bringing the whole population to heel.

I recognise that my position is shaped by the fact that Russia falls within my geopolitical framework of thought as a European. The Stalinisation of the Comintern at the turn of the 1930s, and the international influence of Stalinism through the vassalisation of the countries of Eastern Europe, meant that revolutionaries in France, as in Italy and Spain, had to deal with powerful Communist Parties bound by the foreign policy of the USSR. I have a vivid memory of the Russian tanks intervening in Budapest in 1956, and even more so in Prague in 1968 (documented by a good deal of photographic material), to depose elected political leaders. These events certainly have a great influence on my approach in characterising the invasion of Ukraine, as does my belonging to a political tradition where the fight against Stalinism and against imperialism goes hand in hand.

Production and property relations and political system in Russia since 1991

It is important to characterise Russia both economically and politically. In its recent statement about the war, *Monthly Review* sidesteps the issue by adopting the “great power” characterisation used in US debates following the dissolution of the USSR. For the strategists of the State Department, it was necessary to mobilise extraordinary means “to weaken the geopolitical position of Russia permanently and irrevocably before it is able to recover, by bringing into the Western strategic orbit all the states now surrounding it that were once part of the Soviet Union or had fallen into its sphere of influence” (“Excerpts from the Pentagon Plan: ‘Preventing the Re-Emergence of a New Rival’”, *New York Times*, March 8, 1992). For the Atlantic Alliance under US leadership to dominate Eurasia, it was first necessary for it to gain primacy over what [former US National Security adviser Zbigniew] Brzezinski called “the black hole” left by the demise of the Soviet Union on the world stage.

To say that Russia is a great power is very insufficient. It is an imperialist power because of its internal production and property relations and its place in the world market. After what is conventionally referred to as the “fall of communism” – in the years from the destruction of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 to the dissolution of the USSR and the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in December 1991 – the

relations of production and property in Russia became capitalist, and this process was locked in by key legislation of Boris Yeltsin's government. From the perspective of ownership of the means of production and of mining and energy resources, these relationships are marked by a high degree of concentration and centralisation. This trait is characteristic of contemporary capitalism, but it was accentuated in Russia in 1995-97 by the privatisation of state enterprises, a process marked by extreme corruption and the formation of a stratum of oligarchs.

On the political level, the system established after the death of Iosif Stalin in March 1953 and the execution of Lavrenty Beria on the orders of the other members of the Political Bureau in December of the same year, was characterised by the rule of a single party with a collective leadership in which the General Secretary was *primus inter pares*. Following the resignation of Gorbachev, this was replaced, in 1993, by what is formally a multi-party constitutional regime with presidential and legislative elections. Yeltsin was the first president. But, with Putin's accession to the presidency on December 31, 1999 (ten years after Gorbachev's resignation), we saw the gradual establishment of a system of *de facto* military and police dictatorship, marked by a very strong concentration of decision-making in Putin's own hands and accompanied by the absence of any countervailing power. A step in this direction came with the amendment to the constitution in 2008 that, from 2012, increased the presidential term from four to six years, renewable once. Then, in 2020, several further constitutional amendments, endorsed by more than 78% of the vote in a referendum, included one that allows Putin to discount his presidential terms up until now and therefore to be eligible for two additional terms.

For Putin, centuries-old historical reasons make Ukrainian independence intolerable

The dictatorial character of Putin's power and the length of time he plans to exercise it (assuming no unforeseen events) make it important to attempt to define his vision of the world and, particularly now, his relentless antagonism towards the Ukrainian people. In November 1989, when he was Colonel of the KGB [Soviet security police] in Dresden, the fall of the Berlin Wall represented for him, as many writers have emphasised, a first major trauma. But there was a second – a more decisive one – about which the analysts speak less: namely the process of dissolution of the USSR between the middle of 1990 and December 1991, and particularly the declarations of independence of several countries and their exit from the union. The three Baltic countries – Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania – declared independence while Ukraine seceded in a December 1, 1991 referendum, with 90% of voters in favour.

It is to these declarations of independence that Putin refers when he says that the fall of the USSR was the most serious event of the 20th century. The degree of seriousness varied case by case. The three Baltic countries had been occupied and annexed only in 1939. But Ukraine lay at the heart of the Tsarist Empire, as did Belarus. Before Peter the Great [1682-1725] promoted the rise of Saint Petersburg, the triangle of Moscow, Kyiv and Minsk formed the basis of the power of the Empire. This is a point that Putin emphasises in the presentations and speeches he has devoted to defining his vision of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. If asked, he would surely have agreed with Brzezinski, who in his *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* wrote that "Russia without Ukraine ceases to be an empire."

Putin posted [a long article](#) on July 12, 2021, after the first phase of the eight-month build-up before the invasion, when he was preparing for it politically on the ideological level. Entitled "Historical unity between Russia and Ukraine," the article was immediately made available in English, making clear that the decisions Putin was about to implement were rooted in Russia's long imperial past:

To have a better understanding of the present and look into the future, we need to turn to history. Certainly, it is impossible to cover in this article all the developments that have taken place over more than a thousand years. But I will focus on the key, pivotal moments that are important for us to remember, both in Russia and Ukraine.

Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory – from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov – were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and – after the conversion of Rus – the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today.

The throne of Kiev held a dominant position in Ancient Rus. This had been the custom since the late 9th century. *The Tale of Bygone Years* captured for posterity the words of Oleg the Prophet about Kiev, “Let it be the mother of all Russian cities.”

Later, like other European states of that time, Ancient Rus faced a decline of central rule and fragmentation. At the same time, both the nobility and the common people perceived Rus as a common territory, as their homeland.

Putin then elaborates on his disagreement with Lenin about the creation, in 1922, of the USSR as a union of states – that is to say, as a federal state bringing together nations that joined after having exercised their right to self-determination. He writes:

In 1922, when the USSR was created, with the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic becoming one of its founders, a rather fierce debate among the Bolshevik leaders resulted in the implementation of Lenin’s plan to form a union state as a federation of equal republics. The right of republics to freely secede from the Union was included in the text of the *Declaration on the Establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* and, subsequently, in the 1924 USSR Constitution. By doing so, the authors planted in the foundation of our statehood the most dangerous time bomb, which exploded the moment the safety mechanism provided by the leading role of the CPSU was gone, the party itself collapsing from within...

... The Bolsheviks treated the Russian people as inexhaustible material for their social experiments. They dreamt of a world revolution that would wipe out national states. That is why they were so generous in drawing borders and bestowing territorial gifts...

... Of course, inside the USSR, borders between republics were never seen as state borders; they were nominal within a single country, which, while featuring all the attributes of a federation, was highly centralised: this, again, was secured by the CPSU’s leading role. But in 1991, all those territories, and, which is more important, people, found themselves abroad overnight, taken away, this time indeed, from their historical motherland.

Closer to home, in Putin’s Great Russian chauvinist view, things got even worse in 1954 when Nikita Khrushchev offered Crimea to Ukraine in recognition of its role in the world war.

A turbulent people who continually create trouble for their governments

Putin, as one might say, celebrated his assumption of the presidency of the Russian Federation in January 2000 by waging the second war in Chechnya, involving the complete destruction of Grozny and the large-scale massacre of civilians – events to which few French militants have paid much attention. In the case of Ukraine and Belarus, as well as with former Soviet republics willing to be docile, he made alliances with politicians from the Brezhnev/Gorbachev era bureaucracy. They were asked to refrain from establishing any relationship with NATO and to repress social movements, starting with those who saw a rapprochement with the European Union on the horizon. It took until 2020 for the Belarusian population to rise up in Minsk, but Kyiv experienced huge demonstrations very early on, raising the issue of fully effective independence – i.e. the right to decide on relations with the European Union. First in 2004 it was against leaders backed by Putin – Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich. Then, on an infinitely larger scale during the winter of 2013-2014, first between November 30 and December 8, then between February 18 and 23. The protests, which at first

consisted mostly of students, began after Yanukovich announced, on November 21, 2013, that he would not sign an Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU. The demonstrators attacked corruption and living conditions; but this should not be seen simply as a kind of “May 68” student protest. The students were joined by opposition parties. Ultra-nationalist political forces became increasingly active and, from December, the initially peaceful and pro-European protest turned violent, culminating in armed street clashes in January. The occupation of public buildings and street battles ended in the resignation of Yanukovich. This ended the movement and became the occasion for Putin’s 2014 *de facto* occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas, as well as the annexation of Crimea.

Crimea and Donbas

Putin took advantage of Maidan and the fall of Yanukovich to put an end to the attachment of Crimea to Ukraine that had lasted for sixty years. He annexed Crimea in March 2014, prompting the formation of an autonomous republic seeking membership in the Russian Federation. Simultaneously the pro-Russian Ukrainian minority regrouped in the East, in the Donbas, and, during the summer of 2014, proclaimed, with Russia’s support, two people’s republics – of Donetsk and of Luhansk. As Ukraine did not recognise them, they became the scene of an undeclared war. In 2022 their recognition and integration into the Russian Federation was given by Putin as a reason for the invasion.

Named a “special military operation” in his February 24 speech, his goal was proclaimed as “to protect people who have been victims of intimidation and genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years. To that end, we will fight for the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine.” An ultranationalist far-right wing, heir to the part of Ukrainians who welcomed the German army in 1941, exists, but its qualification as “neo-Nazi” by Putin is pure propaganda.

The support given Putin by Monthly Review

Putin’s account received the [disgraceful endorsement](#) of *Monthly Review*, which describes the protests in Maidan Square as a coup carried out with the support of neo-Nazi forces.

Yanukovich had been friendly to the West. But in the face of financial conditionalities imposed by the International Monetary Fund, his government turned to Russia for economic help, enraging the West. This led to the Maidan coup only months afterward, with the new Ukrainian leader being hand-picked by the United States. The coup was carried out in part by neo-Nazi forces, which have historical roots in the Ukrainian fascist troops that assisted in the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Today, these forces are concentrated in the Azov Battalion, now part of the Ukrainian military supported by the United States.

Monthly Review [supports](#) the annexation of Crimea and makes Russian military support for the separatist Donbas territories the legitimate response to Ukraine’s attempt to stop them.

Following the coup, the predominantly Russian-speaking Crimea decided to merge with Russia through a referendum in which Crimean people were also given the option of going forward as part of Ukraine. The largely Russian-speaking Donbass region in the eastern part of the country meanwhile broke away from Ukraine, in response to the violent repression against ethnic Russians that had been unleashed by the new right-wing government. [...]

In the war of Ukraine on the Russian-speaking population in the breakaway republics of Donbass, some 14,000 people were killed, and 2.5 million people displaced, most of them taking refuge in Russia. The initial conflict ended with the signing in 2014–15 of the Minsk Agreements by France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, and endorsed by the UN Security Council. According to these agreements, Donetsk and Luhansk were to be given the right to self-government, though remaining in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the military conflict continued and eventually intensified again.

Coming to its February-March 2022 issue, *Monthly Review* accused the Ukrainian government of having “torn up the Minsk agreements”. It sees no problem with the incorporation of Luhansk and Donetsk being amongst Putin’s stated justifying objectives, alongside the hunt for “neo-Nazis”, in his “special operation”.

Where is Putin going?

The purpose of this letter is to explain the causes of the war, not to predict its outcome. I will confine myself to its course in the first six weeks.

The resignation of Yanukovych was followed by the election of Petro Poroshenko in 2014 and then Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019. The first would have continued the conciliatory policies of his predecessor as far as the war in Donbas allowed it, but Zelensky is a staunch EU-oriented nationalist. There is real antagonism between him and Putin. Whatever Zelensky does fuels Putin’s hatred for Ukrainians.

Then there is the matter of timing. It is not clear why it was in March-April-May 2021 that the massive mobilisation of troops on the borders with Ukraine took place, or why it was in the following February that the invasion was launched. The forms of warfare used in the invasion have been tried out in Syria since 2016-17. There have been no notable changes made by NATO in its relationship with Ukraine from the one it established after Maidan. The reasons for the timing are no doubt to be found in Putin’s need, in the context of global geopolitical changes, for a political and military field of action in which to remind the United States and China that Russia is a great power – one equal, or almost so, to them. He failed. He showed that his strength is far inferior to theirs.

The February 24 invasion was marked by strategic decisions based on very significant errors in appreciating the capacities of the Ukrainians for resistance. This in turn revealed the real state of the Russian army at the operational and material levels. Putin, strong in his contempt for the Ukrainians in general and their President Zelensky in particular, and reinforced by the information and advice he received from his close entourage, counted on a *Blitzkrieg*, a “military walk” with a rapid entry into Kyiv and the ejection of Zelensky, followed by his assassination or his flight. The fierce resistance of the Ukrainian army and the actions of the population against the Russian tanks decided otherwise. From then on, the military machine stalled: there have fuel shortages and the partial collapse of functioning supply lines, paralysis of troop movements and increasing losses in men and equipment, tanks in particular.

When the superiority of the Russian army over the Ukrainian army turned out to be less than expected and the resistance of the population higher, the Russian general staff turned to war against civilians and the shelling of cities, both small ones like those around Kyiv and large ones like Mariupol, located on the Sea of Azov. A hundred kilometres south of Donetsk, it has suffered a fate similar to that of Grozny in 2000. The deeper we go into the war, the more Putin stands to lose.

But the work involved in seeking explanations remains important in itself.