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‘We are still living in the shadow of the defeat of the USSR’

written by Dmitry Strauss
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The Labor Russia movement rallied on Moscow's Red Square against the counterrevolutionary policies of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, Nov., 7, 1991. Photo: Labor Russia

The following interview with Struggle-La Lucha co-editor Greg Butterfield was originally published by the website Ukraina.ru as part of a retrospective series on the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

Dmitry Strauss: On Dec. 30, 1991, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev announced his resignation, marking the end point in the history of the USSR. What were you

doing in those days, what were your political views? Did you support the process of the disintegration of the USSR or were you against it?

Greg Butterfield: In 1991 I was a young communist activist. I had moved from the U.S. Midwest to New York City a year before. I was working as the assistant to Marxist theoretician and organizer Sam Marcy, who had recently written a [critical analysis of Gorbachev's "perestroika" program](#) and its likely consequences. At this time Marcy was beginning to gain attention within the international communist movement as one of the few serious Marxist critics of Gorbachev and his treacherous collaboration with U.S. imperialism. So I was very fortunate as a young activist to help Marcy with research for his articles at that critical moment in history. It was a great learning experience.

Beginning in August 1991, when the [State Emergency Committee](#) attempted to halt the worst of the counterrevolutionary "reforms," through Boris Yeltsin's first visit to the U.S., and then the "Black October" events in Moscow in 1993, our comrades organized many street protests and educational meetings in New York, San Francisco and other cities. We picketed the Russian Mission to the United Nations to protest the arrests of the State Emergency Committee members, the banning of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Pravda, and later the massacre of the defenders of the House of Soviets. I participated in all of the New York actions.

Thirty years later, I'm proud that I was on the right side of history in defending the Soviet Union and socialism.

DS: What do you think about the current situation in so-called post-Soviet states?

GB: The destruction of the USSR was the greatest setback for the global working class since the crushing of the Paris Commune. The burden of that defeat has fallen hardest on the peoples of the former Soviet countries. We know about the calamitous events of the 1990s, when the life expectancy of people in Russia and

other Soviet lands fell at the fastest rate in history outside of wartime. We watched as the tremendous achievements of Soviet industry, built up by the common effort of the workers, were sold off piecemeal or allowed to crumble to dust. And workers and professionals educated under socialism were forced to emigrate and sell their skilled labor for low wages in the West.

Today, none of the post-Soviet states has come close to achieving the economic and living standards of Soviet times. A few people have gotten very rich, many have fallen into poverty, and most workers struggle on the edge of disaster – just like in every capitalist country. Some of the post-Soviet states have become neocolonial subjects of U.S. imperialism and the European Union. Those that have tried to maintain their independence are subject to sanctions, constant threats of war and “color revolutions.”



Boris Yeltsin. Graphic: Labor
Russia

DS: Thirty years after the disintegration of the USSR, there is a new geopolitical

conflict between the USA and Russia fighting for their hegemony in the world. China and the European Union actively participate in this process. Do you think these processes are somehow related to the disintegration of the USSR or not? If you think they are related, then in what way?

GB: Absolutely! The conflict between the U.S.-NATO and Russia, and that between the U.S. and China, are a direct result of the USSR's destruction.

Russia inherited the nuclear defense capabilities built up by the Soviet Union. Once the new oligarchic capitalist class of Russia got to its feet – with the first election of Vladimir Putin – they believed they could be recognized as an equal by Washington and the European imperialists. They thought they would be welcomed into the club. But this was not the case. The imperialists, particularly in the U.S., did not want to open up space to the Russian novices; they wanted only to continue the neocolonial relationship that existed under Boris Yeltsin.

In my view, modern Russia is not an imperialist power, despite the pretensions of some of its political elites. The idea that Russia is an existential threat to the U.S. is a myth built up by the West for purposes of expanding NATO and getting public support for new military adventures. But the Western ruling classes actually see the Russian Federation the same way they see the smaller post-Soviet states – as a potential source of raw materials and cheap labor.

In 1992, that is, immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, a Pentagon policy document was published by the New York Times. It explained that the long-term U.S. perspective was to prevent the rise of any new competitor at the level of the Soviet Union. In particular, in the cases of China and Russia, the policy would be to work toward breaking up these large states to make them easier to control politically and to digest economically. For 30 years, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, this outlook of the U.S. ruling class has not changed.

Today, we see how this imperialist outlook is leading inevitably toward a new large-scale military conflict – one that could quickly engulf the whole world.

DS: The collapse of the USSR led to the creation of the so-called unipolar world, which lives according to the patterns defined by the U.S. government. From your point of view, what is positive and what is negative in this unipolar world system?

GB: I can't think of any positive qualities of this situation. The U.S. unipolar system has been an unmitigated disaster for the people of the world.

The USSR, despite its political shortcomings from a revolutionary viewpoint in the post-Lenin era, was nevertheless a bulwark of the global people's movements – of workers, of national liberation struggles, of civil and human rights everywhere. The very existence of this socialist powerhouse that united many nationalities in peaceful common work was a tremendous argument in favor of socialism. It helped to force capitalist countries to raise the living standards of workers and grant civil rights. It provided material and diplomatic support to anti-colonial struggles and governments that wanted to be independent.

In contrast, U.S. unipolar rule has meant the fall of living standards and loss of rights for the working class and oppressed people in both rich and poor countries. Here in the U.S., we have suffered three decades of setbacks to union rights, voting rights of Black people, the basic rights of women and other oppressed groups. Every worker in the world was materially harmed by the destruction of the USSR, whether they realized it or not, and we continue to be harmed by it today.

Since the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 1999, there have been several bright spots that show the struggle for socialism is destined to reemerge. But up to now these are still premonitions of future victories. We are still living and struggling in the shadow of the USSR's defeat.

DS: Based on your personal experience, in the last two decades, why have there been so many wars? What is the force that generates them? Why hasn't the world become more harmonious, more humane and more compassionate since the collapse of the USSR?

GB: The U.S. ruling class promised workers a "peace dividend" after the destruction of the Soviet Union. This never came to pass, and never could.

Capitalist imperialism, as Lenin explained so eloquently more than a century ago, is constantly driven to war to expand its markets and redive the world. For decades the power of the USSR was a check on this unbridled imperialist war drive. Without the giant socialist state to reckon with, the imperialist war drive was unleashed, leading to the unprecedented "endless wars" from the invasion of Iraq with Gorbachev's cooperation in 1991 up to this day.

It does not take any special understanding of Marxism to see that the level of U.S. aggression today toward Russia and China will inevitably lead to a new and devastating world war - unless the global working class is able to stop it by revolutionary means. This war drive is completely connected to the destruction of the world climate and the resurgence of fascist tendencies around the world. Our foremost task as revolutionaries is to build the movement to defeat them.

DS: Finally, are there any other topics that I may have missed and you consider to be important about the collapse of the USSR?

GB: I would like to take the opportunity to draw attention to the antifascist struggle of the people of the Donbass republics since 2014. Their ongoing fight against the U.S.-Ukrainian forces of reaction is a bright red star shining in the former Soviet lands. The tremendous sacrifices of people in Donetsk, Lugansk, and inside Ukraine itself, show that the Soviet people can and will win again.

Source: [Ukraina.ru](https://ukraina.ru)

