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The provocation in Crimea and the threat of world war

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The abortive terrorist attack launched against Crimea by elements of the Ukrainian secret services, undoubtedly with the full backing of Washington, has plunged Europe into one of its most serious crises since the end of the Second World War.

The US-backed government in Kiev has placed Ukrainian military forces on the highest state of combat alert, while the Russian military has launched a series of military exercises in the area. Russia reported Friday that it had deployed its advanced S-400 air defense missile system to Crimea, and the country's prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, indicated that Moscow might break diplomatic relations with Kiev. For its part, the US has indicated it is preparing further economic sanctions against Russia.

The *Financial Times* of London bluntly characterized the situation in an editorial, declaring, "Ukraine and Russia stand once again on the brink of open war." The newspaper added that "the Ukraine situation remains the biggest threat to European peace since 1945." In keeping with the bellicose policies of both the Obama administration and the British Tory government of Prime Minister Theresa May, the newspaper advocated a further escalation of threats against Russia.

The evidence presented by Moscow points to an utterly criminal operation staged by the US-backed regime in Kiev. Special operations squads made two attempts to cross into Crimea

between August 6 and August 8, backed by supporting fire from Ukrainian regular forces. One member of the Russian security services and a Russian soldier were killed in the attacks.

The Ukrainian commandos carried improvised explosives, land mines, grenades and assault weapons. Russian state television broadcast part of the confession given by one of the operatives, who said they had aimed to blow up a ferry, an oil refinery and a chemical factory, as well as other targets.

For the past two-and-a-half years, the US and its NATO allies have invoked the fate of Crimea as the pretext for a steady buildup of military forces on Russia's borders, supposedly to counter Moscow's "aggression" and "expansion." NATO battle groups consisting of 1,000 troops each are being deployed to Poland and the three Baltic Republics. They are backed by a newly created Rapid Reaction Force, which is capable of deploying 40,000 troops to the region in a matter of days. Continuous military exercises are being staged on Russia's western flank.

The crisis in Ukraine and the developments in Crimea are the direct outcome not of Russian aggression, but of the US- and German-orchestrated coup to topple the elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. Spearheaded by fascist militias, this operation, funded and directed by Washington and Berlin, brought to power an extreme right-wing, anti-Russian regime under the oligarch Petro Poroshenko. Mired in corruption and under constant threat from the neo-Nazi thugs who were the coup's shock troops, it has presided over a deepening economic crisis and an ongoing war against the civilian population in the predominantly Russian-speaking Donbass region.

In the immediate wake of the coup, Crimea, whose population is predominantly Russian-speaking, voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to break with Ukraine and become part of Russia. Under the Soviet Union, the peninsula had been part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic only in 1954 in an administrative action meant to promote Soviet development as a whole.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union transformed the significance of this territorial transfer. The city of Sevastopol on the Crimean peninsula had been the base for the Russian and then Soviet Black Sea Fleet since the 18th century. For Russia, the fate of Crimea is an existential question, bound up with its access to the Black Sea as well as the Mediterranean.

The present crisis is, in the final analysis, part of the terrible price being paid for the Stalinist bureaucracy's final betrayal of the October 1917 Revolution, which established the workers' state. The bureaucracy in 1991 liquidated the USSR and launched the process of capitalist restoration.

In seeking to draw Russia into an armed conflict over Crimea, US imperialism is carrying out a policy that is breathtaking in its recklessness. But then, this has been the nature of US foreign policy over the past quarter-century of unending and ever-expanding wars throughout the Middle East.

The confrontation being provoked over Crimea is not separate from these wars. It is bound up with US frustrations over the debacle of its regime-change operation in Syria, where Russian backing for the government of President Bashar al-Assad has succeeded in driving back the Al Qaeda-linked militias that served as Washington's proxy forces on the ground. This crisis of American policy has been compounded by the failure of last month's US-backed coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the subsequent deepening of rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow.

The Russian government, representing a layer of criminal oligarchs who enriched themselves through the theft of state property following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has no coherent policy to confront the escalating crisis. Elements within the government of Vladimir Putin want to avoid a confrontation and reach a deal with the West at all costs. But appeals to the US for reason fall on deaf ears.

Others invoke Great Russian chauvinism and the military force, including the stockpile of nuclear weapons, left over from the Soviet Union as the country's defense against the Western drive to militarily encircle it and reduce it to the status of a semi-colony. Without any clear and integrated strategic orientation, much less the ability to appeal to the antiwar sentiment of the world's peoples, the Putin regime stumbles from crisis to crisis, intensifying the war danger.

The profoundly dangerous developments in Crimea make clear the significance of the anti-Putin hysteria that has been whipped up in both the US election campaign, with Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's neo-McCarthyite attacks branding the Republicans' fascistic candidate Donald Trump as a virtual Russian agent, and the hypocritical crusade to ban Russian athletes from the Rio Olympics. Both of these campaigns are designed to prepare public opinion for a military confrontation with Russia.

The US is gearing up to go to war with a nuclear-armed country, yet the issue is debated neither in the election campaign nor in Congress or the corporate media. No information is offered as to what the casualties would be in a war between Ukraine and Russia, much less the catastrophic implications of such a war drawing the US and NATO into a nuclear exchange with Moscow.

While the American ruling establishment has traditionally sought to hold off the initiation of new wars until after elections, to prevent the question of militarism from becoming an issue of national debate, given recent developments, it is far from clear that the war being prepared will wait until after November.

If there is a postponement of a new eruption of American militarism, it will be of only a short duration. The crisis of world capitalism and the irresolvable contradictions of the nation-state system are threatening to drag humanity into another world war. It can be halted only through the unification of the international working class in the struggle against war and for socialism.