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The Politics of Lesser-Imperialism

Where Does the Killing End?

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR



Ruins of a bombed hospital in Mariupol, Ukraine. (CNN)

“We no longer saw the war as one between trade-rivals: its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder.”

— Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*

The big dilemma: what’s an “anti-imperialist” to do when one imperialist country invades the protectorate of an imperialist coalition? Find refuge in the politics of lesser-imperialism?

That certainly seems to be the default position taken by the online clique that calls itself the anti-imperialist left. One doesn’t refer to them as a “movement,” since they rarely move,

except from Twitter to Facebook, Instagram to Parler. You won't find them on the street corner with the Quakers and Catholic workers protesting the war.

I hesitate to call them "left", as well, since few evince any class consciousness, most scoff at anti-militarism and recoil from racial and gender solidarity. Activism isn't their thing. You won't find them hopping the fence at Los Alamos, chaining themselves to the gate at Fort Benning, or doing a banner-drop at Raytheon's HQ, although some pitched in a few bucks to the go-fund-me accounts of truckers needing gas money to get home to Winnemucca from the Freedom Convoy's busted occupation of DC. You also won't see very many of them providing sanctuary for immigrant families, since some of the most prominent "anti-imperialists" are ardent nationalists.

It's a weird kind of anti-imperialism that writes amicus briefs for a regime that Lenin and Trotsky would have been toiling night and day to overthrow. Of course, the briefs themselves never dig too deep before hitting the bedrock of their own absurdity. Instead, they function as a kind of meme factory, endlessly the shallow tropes of the day, such as "false flags over Ukraine." In a month, the Ukraine war has yielded up so many allegations of "false flags" that the assertions themselves begin to seem like false flags: the bodies on the streets of Bucha were staged; the bombed Mariupol theater was being used by the Azov battalion; the Kramatorsk train station was hit by Ukrainian rockets. And on and on...



Much of what advertises itself as the "anti-imperialist" left operates as little more than a mirror image of the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy, a propaganda mill to rationalize atrocities and war crimes, which is coldly indifferent to the people who'd been living in tenements Russian airstrikes turned to rubble, writing them off, when they mention them at all, as Nazis or Nazi sympathizers or the families of Nazis or the human shields of

Nazis. The Russian press these days even talks of “passive Nazis,” in the same manner the Stalinist used to condemn “passive Trotskyists”: “However, besides the elite, a significant part of the masses of the people, who are passive Nazis, are accomplices to Nazism. They have supported the Nazi authorities and indulged them.” (“What Russia should do with Ukraine” by Timofei Sergeitsev, RIA Novosti, April 4, 2022). People who don’t profess verboten beliefs themselves, but fail to denounce or inform on those who might, are deemed equally guilty.

The victims of invasion and occupation, from Vietnam to Gaza, must be de-humanized in a totalizing way, because even the invaders know there’s no telling who their missiles might kill: priest, nurse, child, cancer patient. And the dead must deserve their fate. When Yevgenia Ginzburg confronted one of her inquisitors about her abusive treatment in the prison in Kazan by asserting that Soviets “don’t treat people as dirt,” her tormentor replied dismissively, “Enemies are not people. We’re allowed to do what we want with them. People indeed!” (See: *Journey Into the Whirlwind*)

You get the drift; you’ve heard it before from the likes of Ari Fleischer and Ned Price, every time a wedding party is droned or a baby milk factory is bombed or humanitarian workers are killed in a missile strike. Blame your enemy for your atrocities and declare those you’ve killed or maimed unworthy victims: terrorists or Nazis or infiltrators. Proclaim that you were forced to “intervene” (aka, invade) because of the threat of yellowcake uranium shipments or aluminum tubes or mobile chemical weapons vans or biolabs. Everyone knows the script by now and they’re all playing from the same one with minor variations on the theme.

The US bears responsibility for all of the carnage now unfolding. All right. Likely true. To a degree. Now what? Overthrow the US? Godspeed. But there is this system called capitalism and it’s gone global. All the rival powers—even the ones which might eventually overwhelm or undermine US hegemony—practice it. Live by its ruthless rules. Are empowered and enriched by it: China, Russia, India, Brazil. Take your pick. The question is—or should be—how long *any* nation will survive under an economic system that is rushing to deplete the planet’s life support system.

The Left—especially the international Left—used to see capitalism as the unifying threat, the systemic enemy. But you rarely hear it talked about these days, even though its fangs are sharper than ever. Perhaps that’s because the old socialist powers have cashed it in and joined the mad scramble to commodify all that remains. Communist China now boasts 1002 billionaires, 400 more than the cutthroat capitalists in the US. To paraphrase Mao: who’s running with the imperialist dogs now?

Yes, we know NATO is bad news. I’ve been writing about NATO’s belligerent and criminal actions for nearly 40 years now, including weekly dispatches on its wars in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. I’ve written about NATO’s provocative creep ever-eastward. Its

remorseless campaign to bully, bleed and isolate Russia at any cost. And yet. While the war in Ukraine had many co-authors, it only had one agent.

Putin may have been tempted, lured, baited or even duped into invading Ukraine. He may have been lied to by his own generals and spymasters. He may not be the grand strategists so many thought. But he alone pulled the trigger. His tanks crossed the border. His bombs destroyed city blocks, hospitals, train depots. His army is occupying foreign ground. Excuses can be made. But they only mitigate his crimes, they don't exculpate them.

But here's what's worse. In rationalizing Putin's crimes in Syria and Ukraine, the anti-imperialist left in effect validates America's own in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Read closely this paragraph from Putin's February 24th speech, justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine:

Properly speaking, the attempts to use us in their own interests never ceased until quite recently: they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen. No one has ever succeeded in doing this, nor will they succeed now.

He's not ranting about Javelin missiles to the Azov Battalion or F-35s to Poland, but alleged Western cultural "decadence." It's the kind of coded language reactionary demagogues have used for the past 130 years and you don't need an enigma machine to know who and what he's talking about.

Is this a man who is really interested in suppressing Nazism, whatever that term means in today's world?

Are there neo-Nazis in Ukraine? Sure. Just as there are in Russia, France, Sweden, the UK and the US. The same as there are far right nationalists in Hungary, Brazil, Poland and Israel.

I live in Oregon. There are Nazis of the neo- and retro- varieties next door in Idaho. Should the Governor of Oregon send the National Guard across the Snake River to wipe them out, when there are several enclaves here in Oregon, some of them embedded in the Portland Police Department? Should suspected Nazis be shot on sight, like the family of Randy Weaver? Incinerated like the families of the Koresh compound down in Waco?

Police agencies and armies tend to attract Nazi-types. Invasions and occupations breed them. Take Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh. Didn't the images of Waco in flames light the fuse in his already war-rattled mind that sent him to Oklahoma City with a U-Haul packed with ammonium nitrate and acetylene?

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