

Syria and the left's realpolitik

ALEXANDER YAKOVENKO, Russia's ambassador in London, argues in the *Guardian's* 'comment is free' space, that, "Russia went to Syria to fight terrorists". He's quite emphatic about the positive role of his country's air force and military advisers in helping to rid Syria of terrorists by supporting Assad's "legitimate government". Indeed, Russia has performed a service to the international community by saving Syria from terrorism.

A year after Russia sent in its air force, reacting to a request from the legitimate government of Syria, the picture looks different. Isis is in retreat, having lost more than 4,600 square miles of territory and up to 35,000 fighters. The Syrian army and local militia freed 586 towns and villages from Isis. Their leaders – who a year ago promised to bring slaughter and chaos to other regions, including Europe – went remarkably silent.

This is an extraordinary view of events, given that we know full well that the fight against Isis has been led by Kurdish forces in both Syria and Iraq, and by Shia and Sunni forces assembled by the government in Baghdad, ably supported by the USAF and the RAF. The Russians, on the other hand, have concentrated on bombing the myriad enemies of the Damascus government with the specific object of keeping Assad, the leader of Syria's "legitimate government", in power.

I am left wondering, not so much at the ambassador's attempt to finesse the Russian military intervention in Syria's civil war, but about what makes Assad's government legitimate? Neither he nor his father was elected by anybody in free multi-party

elections. Bashar al-Assad inherited his dictatorship from his father, Hafez al-Assad, and has evidently learned a great deal from his father's methods of quelling unrest and opposition. In 1982 Hafez ordered the destruction of Hama and many thousands of the town's inhabitants in much the same way as his son is doing right now in Aleppo, and for much the same reason.

Hama in the eighties was a hotbed of the Muslim Brotherhood, the sworn enemies of the Assad dictatorship and of all the other secular dictators and potentates in the Arab and Persian world. Consequently, Russia's ambassador thinks history is repeating itself.

The combat is tough in Aleppo, where the Syrian army is wrestling with the rebels, over half of whom belong to Jabhat al-Nusra, an offspring of al-Qaida, internationally recognised as terrorists. After long talks, the US agreed to exert influence on the moderates to separate them from the proscribed terrorists. This didn't happen.

So, it is Russia, not the US, which is fighting the good fight in 'the war on terror' for Syria's "future as a secular, pluralistic nation."

This account has grabbed the attention and stirred the imagination of much of the left and is being deployed to buttress the Stop The War Coalition's campaign against Western intervention in Syria while remaining largely silent on Russia's role in the war. These stern opponents of America's 'war on terror' are entirely sanguine with Russia's efforts to defeat separatism and Islamism at home and abroad. (Who could forget the flattening of Grozny by Russian forces in the winter of 1999-2000.) Our Stop the War peaceniks are also strangely silent on Putin's defence of his military and naval base at Latakia, and the long-established strategic alliance between the Syrian

dictatorship and the incumbents of the Kremlin, both before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The STWC and the leadership of the Labour Party see imperialism and military bases when it involves Nato but are much less concerned with Russia's fixed interests in Syria, its incursions in Georgia, its annexation of the Crimea, the 'low intensity operations' Putin is deploying in Eastern Ukraine, and the threat of invasion and annexation, inherent in Putin's assertion that he will defend the rights of ethnic Russians in all the states that border Russia.

This selective vision, common on the left, of seeing imperialism and dictatorship in the West as a problem, but not observing it anywhere else has an extremely venerable history. Ostensibly, it arises from the idea that "the enemy is at home". This is based upon the notion that 'the workers have no country' and that in any conflict between states working people should regard their own rulers as the enemy, refusing all the while to be drawn into imperialist rivalry which might involve working class men slaughtering each other on the battlefield on behalf of their respective governing classes.

So far, so good.

However, with the advent of Soviet Russia in 1917 things got more complicated as many left-wingers felt duty bound to defend the Soviet Union against all comers. (Even Trotskyists believed in defending the 'gains' made by the working class in Stalin's Russia.) This was extended as time went by to defending the strategic interests of the Soviet Union throughout the world. For the first twenty-two months of the Second World War, for example, this conception led to defending Russia's participation with Nazi Germany in the partition of Poland, and supplying petroleum and other war materials to the fascist authorities in Berlin.

The Nazis brought an end to this unseemly alliance by invading the Soviet Union in June 1941 and thereafter everybody on the left could support the

alliance of Moscow with the Western Imperialists. Workers in Britain and America were then actively encouraged by communists and the left in general to support the official war effort being fought to defend the interests of their employers by defeating fascism. The enemy was decidedly 'not at home'. Following 1945 things became complicated again as the Western powers bankrolled anti-communist dictatorships in Latin America, Indonesia, and Vietnam, and supported warfare against communists in Korea, in Malaya, and in Southern Africa. In all of these conflicts national liberation movements, led by dictators congenial to Moscow, were ranged against the reactionary potentates and 'puppet regimes' friendly to Washington and London.

In these struggles the left invariably sided with national liberation tyrants and implicitly with the communist dictators of Russia and Eastern Europe. I well remember the horror expressed by my many of my lecturer colleagues when I routinely referred to the Castro brothers as dictators, and to the Cuban regime as a dictatorship. Many clearly thought that local political participation organised by Havana's party officials (and excellent healthcare), did not deserve the epithet, "dictatorship".

Indeed those of us on the left have over the years found many reasons to apologise for communist and nationalist tyrants, and to laud dictatorships like those of Ho Chi Min, Fidel Castro and Mao Zedong, while simultaneously rehearsing chapter and verse the crimes (and cataloguing the death squads) of regimes ratified by Washington, Paris, and London. For us, the enemy is always at home, and we appear implicitly (and sometimes actively) always to support the repression and dictatorships of those ranged against the bourgeois democracies of the West.

Time and time again most people on the left have lined up with tyrants and dictators against the bourgeois democracies. Time and time again reasons have been found to justify the violation of human rights and basic freedoms of free speech, independent trade

unionism, and free political organisation, while simultaneously arraigning the enemy 'at home' in London and Washington with much the same crimes.

It is in line with this tradition that much of the left, along with Labour's current leadership, finds itself in step with Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad. In the exigencies of war and revolution most of the left have endorsed dictatorship. Remember that it was Vladimir Lenin himself that set up the secret police under the leadership of Felix Dzerzhinsky with plenipotentiary powers to torture, imprison, execute, or simply 'disappear' opponents as early as December 1917, by the end of the following year all the other socialist and anarchist parties in Lenin's Soviet Russia had been suppressed, their members in hiding, in exile, in jail, or in the grave. The communists had clearly started as they meant to go on.

The rationale for this policy of repression is well known and has been repeated tirelessly by most people on the left to justify murder and mayhem carried out by communist and national liberationists on an industrial scale in one situation after another over the century since the October Revolution.

However, today the situation is (like that of 1939-41), more confusing because with regard to struggles against Israel and America the left has been prepared explicitly to support the Islamists of Hamas and Hezbollah, while trenchantly opposing Washington's "War On Terror". Yet now it is manifestly hankering after endorsing the anti-Islamist fighters, Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad, as they hammer Aleppo and her inhabitants into the ground on behalf of "a pluralistic and secular" Syria.

There is, of course, a real difficulty here. There are indeed many Islamists, of different stripes, involved in the struggle against Assad. In Aleppo they are probably more numerous and better organised than those fighters opposed to allowing religious authority to govern society. It is clear that this struggle against Islamism is going to take many different forms in many different places, but it certainly cannot be won

by endorsing the dictatorships of Bashar al-Assad, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, or Vladimir Putin. It is certainly true that in the past secular dictators from Ankara to Baghdad, and nowadays from Damascus to Cairo have attempted to defeat Islamism to no avail.

Evidently, Islamism – the belief that religious authority should govern society – has many different instantiations. In Al Raqqah the Caliphate must simply be crushed by military force. But in Ankara and Istanbul, defeating Islamism will take a prolonged struggle on the part of civil society against Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision to opt for a policy of repression against his opponents. In Egypt the struggle against both the military dictatorship and the Muslim Brotherhood will involved another kind of desperate and at times bewildering struggle for democracy.

Clearly Bashar al-Assad in Aleppo, like Vladimir Putin in Grozny, believes in a 'Carthaginian Peace', but annihilating entire cities will not result in the defeat of Islamism in Syria or anywhere else. Freedom and democracy is the only antidote to Islamism and attempts to defeat it with secular tyrannies are, I think, doomed to failure.