

## Siding with the enemy



**A FRIEND OF MINE** was “surprised and disappointed” by my last column. She sadly reflected on my siding with the enemy and upon my lack of historical perspective. My offence was deciding to back the West and to support the efforts of NATO members in arming Ukraine.

Now, let's turn to one element of the historical question. During the nineteen-twenties and thirties the working class was roundly defeated by the fascists. There were heroic battles from Cable Street [October 1936] to Jarama [February 1937], but from Berlin to Milan, from Madrid to Bucharest, the fascists were victorious. Tens of thousands of working-class militants were murdered or ended up in concentration camps and prisons as the fascists seized control of state power in one country after another. By the late thirties in Britain the appeasers were firmly in the saddle, in Paris Leon Blum's second government had

fallen, and Francisco Franco had entered Madrid. Then in August 1939 Stalin went into alliance with Hitler, invading and partitioning Poland, supplying the Third Reich with raw materials, waging war on Finland, and annexing the Baltic States. It was a terrible end to what has been called “the Devil’s Decade”.

So it was, that in May 1940 with the help of Labour MPs and with the support of the wider labour movement, Winston Churchill, arch imperialist, became Prime Minister. With widespread support amongst the working class, he refused to negotiate with Benito Mussolini or Adolf Hitler, and made clear that Britain would fight fascism rather than surrender.

Despite this the class struggle continued. Strikes took place in defiance of wartime regulations, popular organisations took direct action to ensure that London’s Underground stations became air-raid shelters. There was mass squatting of buildings to house the homeless. Deep suspicion of the Tories continued; Winston Churchill enjoyed mass support, woven together with implacable hatred. Indeed, this is why Churchill was unceremoniously pitched out of office in July 1945.

The Second World War was won by the forces of imperialist general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the armies of Marshall Zhukov. In Spring 1945 the Red Army entered Berlin on American boots, driving Studebaker’s and Jeeps. During the war the American imperialists delivered 400,000 jeeps and trucks to the Soviet Union, along with 7,000 tanks, five thousand other armoured vehicles, more than 11,000 planes, and almost two million tons of food. American imperialism was key to defeating fascism in Europe and across the Pacific; the working-class movement at the time in Britain and the United States did not doubt any of this.

Today, things are radically different the working-class movement is a mere shadow of its former self, as deindustrialisation, technical innovations, and an array of other social changes have eroded collective

bargaining, and any coherent political presence of the working class in Britain. Consequently, as the shells and bombs rain down on Kyiv and Mariupol we cannot appeal to an independent working-class movement, we cannot conjure an independent socialist position from thin air.

We can aspire to build a more rational humanist progressive campaign free from the taint and skulduggery of Western imperialism, but for now, in the present emergency, the Ukrainians need guns, missiles, body armour, drones, and jet fighters. They need Russia to be sanctioned and isolated. They need the support of NATO and the West.

There is considerable incoherence in all of this, accompanied by sociological speculation concerning the failure of Western elites to cultivate a sense of duty and loyalty amongst the young. The absence of a warrior spirit is bemoaned. It's rather like that moment in 1927 when the Cambridge Union passed a notoriously pacifist motion. Six years later, in February 1933, in what became known as the 'King and Country Debate' the Oxford Union voted that "This House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country." After the murderous slaughter of the Great War, there was little appetite for military valour or sacrifice. Yet seven years later young men and women in Britain rose heroically to the struggle to defeat Hitler.

We can have no reason to doubt today that this generation is any less capable of sacrificing its special fashions, fads, and conceits, its mad opinions, in defence of democracy and the nation.

Whilst the leaders of the West are rightly condemned for criminal irresponsibility, savage and blood-soaked commitment to regime-change in one country after another, for cosying up to murderous Arab potentates, NATO is attacked for wanting to avoid an open war with Russia. The Alliance is simultaneously accused of provoking the Russo-Ukrainian War by extending membership to Poland and the Baltic States, and criticised for being woefully

unprepared for the revenge of history as older national interests reassert themselves. Imperialism doing too much and not enough.

This has created confusion on the left, from tiny groupuscules to more mainstream elements where anti-imperialism is an overriding commitment. We are told Russia is not the Soviet Union, Putin's security concerns must be understood, some kind of accommodation must be reached with Moscow. After all is said and done, we cannot expect Russia to accept NATO forces along its western borders.

Well, given the history of Russia's invasions and annexations in Poland, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Bessarabia, the eagerness to join NATO at the collapse of the Soviet Union is easy to explain. These territories all experienced Joseph Stalin's tender mercies, *before* and *after* dealing with those of Adolf Hitler. It is historical ignorance of the most astonishing kind to wonder why these territories would seek protection from Russian invasion and annexations on the disintegration of the USSR.

Ukraine was prevented from seeking similar security by Moscow's client government in Kyiv. Then, when the Maidan revolution of 2013-2014, broke out President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Moscow. Russia responded by annexing Crimea and NATO membership became a dead letter – the Alliance cannot consider applications from states like Ukraine or Georgia that are engaged in territorial disputes with neighbours.

We find ourselves at a terrifying crossroads. Whilst members of Verkhovna Rada in Kyiv assert that the Third World War has already begun, we know in our hearts that these sentiments are not florid exaggerations. There is a sense in which we can all grasp the truth of what they are saying. Out of an apparently clear blue sky an entrance to the mouth of Hell has suddenly opened up. The Apocalypse might be upon us. Just and easily, it might not. NATO's much derided caution may save us all from a wider European War which would, if allowed to get out of

hand, slide rapidly into a worldwide conflict with missiles flying at five times the speed of sound, carrying the capacity to set the air afire, or even detonate nuclear devices.

In Mariupol a quarter of a million civilians are trapped and starving. Can this really be allowed to happen, as it was in Aleppo or is happening now in Yemen? Can this challenge to elected governments and relatively free and open societies be allowed to pass unanswered? At some point the bourgeois democracies are going to have to stand up and defend themselves against the territorial ambitions of tyrants and dictators. This is the lesson of history.

Whatever the doubts and suspicions of those on the socialist left concerning “imperialism” and all its works, they are going to have to acknowledge that Biden and Johnson are not Putin or Xi Jinping. Washington is not equivalent in any sense to Moscow. The freedoms that people enjoy in the West may be threatened by corruption, racism, or cynicism, they may be undermined by billionaires and corporate double-dealing, but they are nonetheless real.

No doubt Vladimir Putin, the Tsar of absurdly long tables and white columned halls, thinks that Western freedoms are simply decadent. He supposes that, here in the West, we cannot do without Kim Kardashian, *Louis Vuitton*, McDonalds, and homosexuals. In this he is absolutely right, particularly with regard to homosexuals. I’m pretty sure I can’t do without them. In his ludicrous prejudices the leader in the Kremlin has forgotten our ability to discuss widely divergent opinions, freely elect politicians, operate the rule of law, and defend the right to found campaigns of all sorts to hold the authorities to account. These freedoms are certainly worth fighting for, because fighting against oppression, fighting for socialism, is simply unimaginable in the despotisms which prevail in Moscow, Beijing, or Pyongyang.

It is quite right to fear the disintegration of Russia into fratricidal warfare or disorder, and everything needs to be done to find Russia some

credible way out of the bloody corner into which Vladimir Putin has painted his country, but this cannot be done at the expense of Ukraine, national sovereignty, or democracy. Some way must be found to end the current war without surrender to the Kremlin. This is the challenge facing Western Imperialism and we must hope that NATO finds a way out of this burning maze.

We need to cultivate a positive spirit of criticism and discussion in which the actions of Western states are discretely examined, and their leaders held to account. We need, as fast as we can, to replace general and blanket condemnation with democratic scrutiny and insist upon the widest information – closing down *Russia Today*, for example, was a serious mistake. We should insist upon the maintenance of free speech and refuse to accept restrictions on information or opinions. Similarly, cultural boycotts have no positive role and the arts should not become casualties of economic sanctions. Russian dance, music, literature and theatre should be openly celebrated as representing Russia's positive contribution to our civilization.

Relying upon Western imperialism does not mean that we should hate all things Russian or suspend the class struggle or any other action against exploitation and oppression. The P & O sackings make abundantly clear that we must continue to battle the arbitrary power of capital. We must not sleepwalk into uncritical 'trust'. Every action of Western governments must be examined, and the rich and powerful held to account. But, suggesting that there is some solution to the Russo-Ukrainian War other than one largely in the hands of Western imperialism is criminally irresponsible, or simply idiotic.