

Imperialism, Russia and Syria

*The question of Syria and attitudes to Western intervention, Russian intervention, the Syrian Revolution and the Assad regime have generated much heated debate on the left internationally and in Ireland. We are responding to this debate with articles by **John Molyneux** on imperialism and Russia and by **Memet Uludag** on the Assad regime and their joint article on the political conclusions that follow from this analysis.*

Imperialism and Russia

John Molyneux

The Marxist analysis of imperialism was developed in a mixture of debate and cooperation by a number of great Marxists, principally Luxemburg, Bukharin and Lenin, just over one hundred years ago. It argued that the logic of capitalist development had led to a new international imperialist stage of the system, characterised by giant monopoly corporations operating globally and, with the aid of their various capitalist states, occupying, dominating and dividing up virtually the entire world.

The main imperial powers of the time were Great Britain, Germany, France, Russia, USA and Japan with more minor ones such as Belgium and Austria-Hungary. The Marxist theory of imperialism was concerned not only with relations between these imperialisms and their colonies, i.e. how Britain exploited India, South Africa and Ireland, how France oppressed Algeria, Morocco and Martinique or Russia ruled Latvia, Georgia and Uzbekistan and so on, but also with the rivalries between the major imperial powers and how this led to war. Understanding the economic roots of the catastrophe of the First World War was one the key concerns of the whole debate on imperialism and *all* the Marxists cited above,¹ whatever their secondary differences, agreed that imperialism, arising from the fundamental drive of capitalist competitive accumulation, led to war for ‘the division and redivision of the world’.

At that time the central inter-imperialist conflict was between Britain and Germany. Britain as pioneer in terms of capitalist industrialisation had established by

far the largest world empire ‘on which the sun never set’. Germany, by contrast, was a late developer, only becoming a unified nation in 1870, and only entering the world stage at a time when the planet was pretty much already carved up. But in terms of industrial and financial strength (and therefore military strength) Germany was overtaking Britain. German imperialism therefore demanded its ‘fair share’ of colonies. British imperialism, unsurprisingly, was resistant to this idea of sharing out its ‘property’. And it was around this central conflict that systems of alliances formed – France and Russia and later the US with Britain, and Austria-Hungary, Italy and the Ottoman Empire with Germany – that fought it out on Flanders Fields and the Eastern Front.

One hundred years on it is widely accepted that the First World War was a humanitarian catastrophe and, in left wing circles, probably that it was an imperialist catastrophe, but this was far from being the case at the time and it is worth briefly recalling the various ‘left’ political responses to the war. First we should note that the large majority of what today would be called ‘the left’ supported the War. By this I mean they backed ‘their own’ nation, supported their own ruling class, in the War. This was true of almost all the leaders of the numerous socialist parties that made up the Second International and of various other syndicalists and anarchists, including the Russian anarchist, Kropotkin and many Russian SRs (Socialist Revolutionaries). Many of these leftists advanced ‘left –wing’ arguments for their position. The German socialists said they were fighting against Tsarist barbarism, the Russian and British said they were fighting against German

(sometimes Prussian) militarism. Where it was popular, eg. in Ireland, it was said they were fighting for the rights of small nations such as ‘poor little Belgium’. The Marxists who opposed the War such as those mentioned above along with the likes of Karl Liebknecht and Clara Zetkin in Germany, Leon Trotsky, James Connolly, and John MacLean in Scotland, were a tiny minority. Amongst these revolutionary opponents of the war there were differences of emphasis but the fiercest in his opposition – and historically the most important – was Lenin, so it is worth setting out his position in his own words:

What is this war being fought for, which is bringing mankind unparalleled, suffering? The government and the bourgeoisie of each belligerent country are squandering millions of rubles on hooks and newspapers so as to lay the blame on the foe, arouse the people’s furious hatred of the enemy, and stop at no lie so as to depict themselves as the side that has been unjustly attacked and is now “defending” itself. In reality, this is a war between two groups of predatory Great Powers, and it is being fought for the partitioning of colonies, the enslavement of other nations, and advantages and privileges of the world market. This is a most reactionary war, a war of modern slave-holders aimed at preserving and consolidating capitalist slavery. Britain and France are lying when they assert that they are warring for Belgium’s freedom. In reality, they have long been preparing the war, and are waging it with the purpose of robbing Germany and stripping her of her colonies; they have signed a treaty with Italy and Russia on the pillage and carving up of Turkey and Austria. The tsarist monarchy in Russia is waging a predatory war aimed at seizing Galicia, taking territory away from Turkey, enslaving Persia, Mongolia, etc. Germany is waging war with the purpose of grabbing British, Belgian, and French colonies. Whether Germany or Russia wins, or whether there is a “draw”, the war will bring humanity fresh oppression of hundreds and hundreds of millions of people in the colonies, in Persia, Turkey and China, a fresh enslavement of nations, and new chains for the working class of all countries.²

It is hard to imagine a clearer statement of

condemnation. However, to reinforce his opposition, Lenin, following the German revolutionary, Karl Liebknecht’s statement that in this war ‘The main enemy is at home!’ argued that the duty of revolutionary socialists was to support the defeat of their own ruling class, their own government:

A revolutionary class cannot but wish for the defeat of its government in a reactionary war, cannot fail to see that its military reverses facilitate its overthrow. Only a bourgeois who believes that a war started by the governments must necessarily end as a war between governments and wants it to end as such, can regard as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘absurd’ the idea that the Socialists of *all* the belligerent countries should wish for the defeat of *all* ‘their’ governments and express this wish. On the contrary, it is precisely a statement of this kind that would conform to the cherished thoughts of every class-conscious worker and would be in line with our activities towards converting the imperialist war into civil war.³

Two points should be made about this position which are relevant to today. The first is that obviously ‘patriotic’ supporters of the war accused Lenin of being a supporter of Germany and the Kaiser, and even of being a German secret agent, in the way that opponents of the War on Iraq were accused of supporting Saddam Hussein. The second is that treating his ‘own’ i.e. the Russian government as ‘the main enemy’ affected the balance of Bolshevik agitation but it did not at all, as can be seen from the extended quotation above, mean that Lenin abstained from attacking Germany. Nor did he accept the fact that Germany was a lesser imperial power than Britain or, in terms of enslaved nations, Russia was a justification for supporting Germany. He was explicit on this point.

Germany is fighting not for the liberation, but for the oppression of nations. It is not the business of Socialists to help the younger and stronger robber (Germany) to rob the older and overgorged robbers. Socialists must take advantage of the struggle between the robbers⁴ to overthrow them all. To be able to do this, the Socialists must first of all tell the people the truth, namely, that this war is in a treble sense a war between slave-owners to fortify slavery.⁴

Despite the defeat of Germany in 1918 and the punitive nature of the Treaty of Versailles, the underlying

economic and geo-political realities remained such that the pattern of alliances in the Second World War was close to a rerun of those in the First (with the additions of Italy and Japan on the German side). The Second World War, however, brought about a fundamental restructuring of imperialism. Despite its victory Britain emerged decisively weakened and destined to rapidly lose much of its empire. Germany was partitioned and no longer a major power. The USA and the Soviet Union emerged from the War as the world's two leading powers and conflict between them – the Cold War – soon developed.

Was the Soviet Union imperialist?

From the standpoint of the Marxist theory of imperialism it was indisputable that from 1945 onwards the United States was the world's leading imperialist power. This was clear in terms of both its overwhelming economic dominance and its military power. In 1945 US GDP stood at 1.6 trillion dollars compared to the approximately 1 trillion of the twelve main Western European countries.⁵ In 1945 the US share of world manufacturing production stood at over 50 % and in 1956 it accounted for 42 out of the top fifty corporations in the world.⁶ 'America's military might was as great as its economic power. In 1949 US forces were stationed in 56 countries and had the use of 400 bases worldwide'.⁷ Its military budgets far exceeded those of all other countries; it stood at the head of what was by far the world's biggest military alliance, NATO, and above all it had nuclear weapons which it rapidly developed on an almost unimaginable scale – sufficient to destroy the entire population of the globe. This accumulation of imperial power enabled it to intervene, covertly or overtly, on a regular basis to shape events in its interests from Latin America to the Middle East to the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, it is fair to say that, at least by the sixties, an understanding of the role of US imperialism was widespread on the international left.⁸ But what of the US's only serious international rival, namely the USSR or Soviet Union? Was this a rival imperialist power or something entirely different?

As far as the large majority of the global left were concerned, with the exception of the pro-US social democrats, it was axiomatic throughout the second half of the twentieth century that the Soviet Union

was not, and could not be, imperialist. This was because they associated imperialism with capitalism and believed that the Soviet Union was, in some sense or other, a socialist society and therefore essentially anti-imperialist. The Soviet Union itself put a good deal of effort into cultivating this image. It presented itself always as the advocate of 'Peace' and instructed its supporters globally (members and fellow travellers of the numerous Communist Parties) to participate in the various peace and disarmament movements of the time, such as CND and could also cite its material aid to various anti-US national liberation movements eg. in Vietnam. Even Trotskyists who rejected the official Soviet propaganda and refused to regard it as socialist nevertheless tended to accept that the Soviet Union was a (degenerated) workers' state, because of the state ownership of the means of production,⁹ and therefore could not be imperialist.

But if we set aside the question of these labels and look not at what the Soviet state said about itself but instead at what it actually did, it becomes abundantly clear that its behaviour was highly imperialist.

As the Second World War was drawing to a close Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill met at Yalta in October 1944 to discuss the post-war settlement. There they decided to divide up Europe between them with the East being under Soviet control and the West going to the US and Britain, completely over the heads of all the peoples concerned.¹⁰ It was a classic imperialist carve-up directly reminiscent of what was done in the Middle East with the Balfour Declaration and the Sykes-Picot Treaty and what was done at the Treaty of Versailles. In so far as what actually happened differed from the agreements reached in advance this was due to the disposition of Russian and Allied forces on the ground at the end of the war.

The Soviet Union then used the combination of the Red Army and the respective Eastern European Communist Parties to, a) insist that the whole of Eastern Europe from Poland to Bulgaria came into its sphere of influence and under its control; b) adopted the Soviet economic and political model and c) used that control and that model to subordinate the economies of the Eastern bloc to the needs of the Russian economy. This was done by means of extreme war reparations, mixed companies and unequal trade. Chris Harman describes

this process in detail in his *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe 1945-83*¹¹ and on the final element comments: 'The method of exploitation was quite simple: Eastern European goods were bought at below world market prices, at times even below cost price, while Russian goods were sold in Eastern Europe at above world prices'¹²

This economic exploitation and subordination was widely understood and resented by 'ordinary' people across the Eastern bloc and is one the main reasons, along with the police state methods of the regimes, why Eastern Europe is characterised by a succession of 'anti-Soviet' rebellions throughout the post-war period. The first of these rebellions was in Yugoslavia in 1948. It was led by Marshall Tito and the Yugoslav Communist Party and centred precisely on the Yugoslav's unwillingness to be economically subservient to Stalin and the Soviet Union. The next was in the workers uprising in East Berlin in 1953, followed by revolts in Poland and Hungary in 1956. The Hungarian revolt turned into a full-scale revolution. Then came the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the Solidarnosc uprising in Poland in September 1980. The Soviet response to all these revolts was invariably repressive and imperialist: on two occasions – Hungary '56 and Czechoslovakia '68 they mounted full scale military invasions. The cycle of revolt and repression ended only when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Communist regimes collapsed right across Eastern Europe and in Russia itself in the years 1989-91.

Soviet imperialism, however, was by no means confined to Eastern Europe. It operated also within the boundaries of the USSR and in Asia.

The old Tsarist empire was infamous as 'the prison house of the people's' and was regularly denounced as such by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Their position was to defend unequivocally the right to self-determination, including the right to secede, of all the various and numerous oppressed nationalities of the Russian empire – of Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Uzbeks, Kazaks and so on. Under the Stalin regime all the old oppression of these nations was restored. Although granted formal 'autonomy', all their economic, political and cultural life was strictly controlled from Moscow through European Russian party secretaries and there was a general process of cultural Russification.

In extreme cases whole supposedly, autonomous National Republics were dissolved, and entire national populations were deported: this was the fate of the Volga German Republic in 1941, the Kalmuk SSR in 1943, the Checheno-Ingush SSR and the Crimean Tartars in 1946. Communists leaders from these oppressed nations were also systematically persecuted. Tony Cliff writes: 'Altogether in the big purge of 1937-8 the whole or majority of thirty national governments were liquidated. The main accusation against them was their desire for secession from the USSR'.¹³ And the outcome of this imperialist oppression was that the moment the centralised Communist regime fell apart almost all these nationalities decided to secede in much the same way as the moment the British empire was weakened, the British colonies in India and Africa all established their independence.

Just as the US and the Soviet Union partitioned Germany at the end of the War so they partitioned Korea. The country was split into a Soviet puppet regime in the North and a US puppet regime in the South, a division from which the Korean people are still suffering. Then in 1950 North Korean forces, prompted and backed by the Soviet Union, invaded the South. What followed was a three-year proxy war between the great powers (also with the involvement of China) which utterly devastated Korea and claimed something like 3 million (overwhelmingly Korean) lives without achieving any significant outcome. It was classic imperialist butchery in which ordinary people were sacrificed on an industrial scale by both sides.

The Chinese Revolution of 1949 when Mao's Red Army captured Beijing was hailed as the greatest victory for 'communism' since 1917, but within seven years the Soviet and Maoist Regimes were at each other's throats in a split which divided the international Communist movement, came close to war and affected geo-politics for decades. Ostensibly the split was about doctrine with the Maoists condemning 'Soviet revisionism' and preaching a more 'revolutionary' anti-imperialist line but China's deeds and actual development give the lie to this 'ideological' i.e. idealist explanation. In reality the basis of the split was that the Soviet Union was attempting, as it did elsewhere, to impose its will and its economic priorities on China but Mao, the Chinese nationalist was having none of it. In other words, the

root of the problem was Russian Imperialism.

Yet another example was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 which led to ten years of war costing over 2 million lives and creating 5 million refugees at the end of which Russia was forced to admit defeat and withdraw.

Nor did Russian imperialism come to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. If, as was often argued by right wing anti-communists, Soviet imperialism was driven by ideology, by a political aspiration to force communism on the whole world, then these imperialist wars should have ceased after 1991. If on the other hand Soviet expansionism was, like western imperialism, fundamentally driven by competitive capital accumulation, then one would expect it to continue despite the abandonment of 'Marxist' or 'Communist' language and symbolism, and despite the shift sideways from bureaucratic state capitalism to a mixed semi-state capitalism. Continue it did.

First under Yeltsin and then under Putin Russia waged two brutal wars in 1994-96 and 1999-2000 in and against Chechenya. Amnesty International reported:

'There were frequent reports that Russian forces indiscriminately bombed and shelled civilian areas. Chechen civilians, including medical personnel, continued to be the target of military attacks by Russian forces. Hundreds of Chechen civilians and prisoners of war were extra judicially executed'¹⁴

The Chechen capital, Grozny, was flattened and occupied but guerrilla resistance continued in the mountains for another nine years.

In August 2008 in a short and totally unequal war, Russia invaded Georgia in a dispute about the region of South Ossetia. In 2014 they intervened in the conflict in the Ukraine to annex the Crimean Peninsula.¹⁵

Reviewing this brief survey of Russian imperialism since 1945 it could be objected that is one-sided in that in each instance I have failed to consider the possible justification for Russia's actions as in the invasion of Hungary in 1956 was necessary to prevent 'fascist counter revolution' or the invasion of Czechoslovakia was necessary to prevent it being taken over by the West and the invasion of Afghanistan was necessary to prevent it being taken over by Islamist jihadis and so on. Any power always has its justifications; in the modern world where 'public opinion' (i.e. the consciousness

of the working class) has to be considered even by dictators, no government ever simply says we are imperialist predators. To have considered each of these justifications in turn would have extended this article far beyond the space available, but it is worth noting the pattern. In each case the 'excuse' put forward is the need to combat a demonised enemy: fascists, western imperialists, jihadis, Islamic terrorists etc. The problem is that, with the substitution of evil communists for western imperialists this turns out to be more or less the same list of enemies used by the US and the UK to justify their numerous imperialist interventions.

Two final points should be made about this. The first is that whether Cuba, Vietnam or Nicaragua 'went communist' or not was a matter for the Cuban, Vietnamese and Nicaraguan people alone: the US had no right to any say in the matter. Similarly if Hungary¹⁶ or Czechoslovakia or Poland wished to cease being 'communist' or Afghanistan wanted to be Islamic or Chechenya wanted to be both Islamist and independent that was for them to decide not Russia. The second is that no serious person will believe that in 1914 Britain, who held in subjection India, Ireland and half of Africa, went to war for the sake of 'poor little Belgium' or that the US fought for three years in Korea out of concern for the rights of the Korean people. By the same token are we really being asked to believe that the Russian state which had deported the Chechens and the Crimean Tartars wholesale in the thirties and forties was motivated by international solidarity, rather than, for example, its desire to protect oil supply lines or to have a foothold on the Black Sea, when it came to 1999 or 2014?

No, the pattern of imperialist behaviour is long standing and consistent and therefore when it comes to assessing Russia's current interventions in the war in Syria there is absolutely no reason to imagine that it is motivated by anything other than imperialist calculation and self interest.

Assad's Syria

Memet Uludag

On 15 March 2018 the war in Syria entered its eighth year without a solution. The ongoing situation in Syria has caused deep divisions in public opinion, as well as divisions within the international left. Today, as the social and economic reasons of the 2011 uprising are fading away from most analyses and debates, it is still very important to understand the conditions within which the revolt began. To understand the triggers of the revolution and its popular demands we also need to understand the nature of the Assad regime, among other things.

In this article, I would like to briefly look at the recent history of Syria and try to explain the nature of the Assad regime in terms of its social and economic policies. The revolutionary uprising has long been crushed by domestic and foreign counter-revolutionary forces. There are multiple reasons for the emergence of these forces and the defeat of the revolution. I am not going to deal with these as part of this article.

Various sources estimate the death toll in Syria to be between 350,000 and 500,000.¹⁷ There are more than 11 million Syrian refugees of which 6 million internally and 5 million externally displaced. More than 13 million people in Syria are in continuous need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁸ These figures alone make us think why the Syrians, who paid such a heavy price in the end, had risen up against the Assad regime.

Once a protestor, now a refugee

At one of the public meetings in Dublin, organised by United Against Racism, a Syrian refugee speaker had said, *"We went out onto the streets to protest. We wanted change. People wanted change for a long time. It was men, women, and families on the streets. In the beginning it was peaceful. But very soon we were attacked by the regime forces. We hadn't expected such a harsh response. We ended up hiding from these attacks. People were arrested, shot and killed."*

In 2016-17, there were mass protests in Ireland. What had begun as a mobilisation against the introduction of water charges had soon turned into protests against the government and its policies. People wanted change. People wanted the government to go. Nobody

would ever expect to see the armed forces of the state on the streets, shooting and killing people. The initial heavy-handed police response in local areas eventually disappeared. It wasn't because the Irish Government didn't want to stop the protests or send out more police but because Ireland was not Syria, it was not ruled by a regime like that in Syria.

Arab Spring

In 2011 uprisings began in various Arab countries that became known as the 'Arab Spring'. Protests had toppled the dictatorial presidents of Tunisia's and Egypt. This gave hope to Syrian people who wanted change. The revolts in Tunisia had begun with Mohamed Bouazizi (29 March 1984–4 January 2011), a Tunisian street vendor setting himself on fire against police brutality. The catalyst in Syria was the arrest and torture of a group of young boys in Daraa for writing a graffiti that read *"It's your turn, Doctor Bashar al-Assad"*. Hundreds of protesters took to the streets in outrage at the boys' arrests. The protestors were gunned down in horrific scenes that would be relayed around the world and spark an uprising involving hundreds of thousands of people across Syria.

Torture as the Norm

As widely documented, the Syrian security forces are so well-known for their torture methods that the US, under George W. Bush, called upon them to help interrogate suspected al Qaeda members. The faith of the Daraa boys was indeed not going to be any different than those arrested and sent to Syria by the American government.

A detailed interview in 2017 with survivors of rape and torture in Assad's prisons exposed the gruesome nature of the state security forces.^{19 20 21}

Following the 2008/9 global financial crash, as with the international Occupy Movement, the uprisings of Arab Spring were an inspiration for the global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle. These revolts had emerged in countries that were under long standing powerful dictatorial regimes. Syria under the rule of Assad was no exception.

Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, following the death of his father Hafez al-Assad, who was the President of Syria from 1971 to 2000. Bashar is also the commander-in-chief of the Syrian Armed Forces

and the Regional Secretary of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party's in Syria.

A short political history of Syria

Syrian history, beginning with the independence from France in 1946 has been one of multiple military coups, social turmoil with different class interests emerging, power struggles between nationalists, communists and others that represented these interests, and ultimately the establishment of strong Ba'ath Party rule.

The period between 1946 and 1958 saw a number of economic and social reforms including reforms in labour laws and establishment of trade union membership and strike rights. But none of these were to be permanent gains under various ruling powers that followed. The revolt in 2011 was not the first uprising by Syrians. In 1951, following an uprising the year before the first congress of peasants was held in Aleppo.²² Peasants mobilised to bring about changes in their living conditions. Pressurised by the landlords to stop the land redistribution, the government eventually suppressed the peasant mobilisation. As a response to growing social unease, in 1958 a section of the army officers forced Syria into a union with Egypt, forming the United Arab Republic (UAR). Unopposed by the Communists, UAR was supported by the Ba'ath Party. This period, lasting until 1961, started a process of industrialisation, social welfare reforms, land distribution and nationalising of major industries. During the same period, independent workers' and peasants' organisations were increasingly targeted by the regime and strikes were banned. The unity between Egypt and Syria fell apart when the Syrians objected to their second-class status within the union. This was followed by a military coup by the Ba'athists in 1963. The new regime continued on with the industrialisation and nationalisation process with the state and bureaucracy increasingly taking control of industries and the wider economy. In an article published in *International Socialism*, Issue 135, Jonathan Maunder argues that, "*Syria's entry into the UAR and the 1963 coup can be seen as examples of what Tony Cliff called deflected permanent revolution, a deviation from the process of permanent revolution as outlined by the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky*".²³ Maunder, correctly concludes that, "*the results of this deflected permanent revolution were forms of state capital-*

ism, not socialism". Tony Cliff in his 1967 pamphlet "The struggle in the Middle East"²⁴ wrote, "*In Syria the Ba'ath regime has been more radical than Nasser's regime in the field of land reform. But neither Nasser nor the Ba'ath can ever become revolutionary or grow beyond their middle-class social basis. Their social base is the army officers, civil servants and teachers, sons of merchants and prosperous artisans, better-off peasants and small-scale landowners.*" Small in size and relatively unorganised the Syrian working class did not manage to establish itself as a leading force in society.

Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1971, after an intra-party coup in 1970 that removed Salah Jadid, a Ba'athist army officer. He ruled the country until his death in 2000. Under his rule and the 'Collective Movement' the regime wanted to sustain the nationalist-socialist line of the state and the Ba'ath party. This created not a true socialist nation but a Syria that was highly centralised, with the military and elite bureaucrats playing a key role at all levels, including the economy. Hafez al-Assad strengthened his power using deeply sectarian methods of creating an elite state bureaucracy and an army composed of high-ranking officers from the minority Muslim Alawi sect. Till the 1980's Syria saw strong growth in the economy with evermore increased numbers of workers and dropping relative poverty. At the beginning of the 1980's the economic growth declined sharply. Having enjoyed a decade of growth and total control (and suppression) of any opposition, the regime started attacking the gains of the previous period. Wages were cut; subsidies on basic goods were removed. In the early 1990's unemployment rose sharply to 16%²⁵ and according to some figures more than 70% of the population were living below the relative poverty line. In early 90's the regime started a process of opening up the country to private business which marked the beginning of 'market economy'. What was a form of state capitalism under the rule of an elite military-bureaucrat class had begun to turn towards capitalism.

Between 1980 and 2000, the regime of Hafez al-Assad committed numerous massacres against civilians and organised opposition forces. In 1982, following attacks in the previous two years, the regime had murdered more than 20,000 civilians. 1980 saw the massacre of inmates in Tadmur Prison, which Amnesty

International described as “a source of despair, torture and degrading treatment”²⁶

From father Assad to son Assad - The nature of the Assad regime

Bashar al-Assad inherited his father’s power in 2000 and continued to open up the country to capitalist economy by advancing a neoliberal model while maintaining his harsh dictatorial rule. During the previous decades the economy was falsely described as ‘socialist’ when really it was a state capitalist dictatorship. He replaced this with a so-called ‘social market economy’ while in fact everything had begun to be market driven and hardly anything about it was social. Bashar al-Assad had begun to put the might of his power to the use of private capital and started creating an environment of crony capitalism by handing over state industries and assets to his family members, close allies and to powerful elites within the regime. Even Chatham House, a ‘prestigious’ pro-capitalist research and policy institute says, “*The uprising against the Assad regime was sparked by the security services’ brutal response to a demonstration of dissent by schoolchildren in Deraa. However, economic grievances were an important element fuelling the disaffection, both in Deraa – where the appropriation of land for Makhloof’s duty-free enterprise had been a contentious issue – and elsewhere in Syria*”.²⁷

Since the 2011 uprising in Syria, especially and most importantly within the international left and the global anti-war movement there have been deep divisions on the nature of the Assad regime. Some sections of the left and others have described his regime as, ‘anti-imperialist’ or ‘progressive’ or ‘pro-Palestinian’ or ‘pro-secularism’ etc. and dismissed the popular uprising against all ‘good things’ as a plot. The escalating war in the country, the emergence of counter-revolutionary Islamist forces and the intervention by global imperialists, especially the US, have given further excuse to Assad defenders to reject the social-political conditions which gave rise to the revolt in Syria. Furthermore, ‘defending the Assad regime’ has been put forward as an anti-imperialist duty for the left. According to Assad defenders, the only imperialist force in Syria is the US led bloc and all other forces, including the civilian protestors and counter-revolutionary forces alike are part of an imperialist attempt to topple the regime. Thus, they conclude that

the Russian and Iranian intervention in the war is a ‘legitimate’ and justified intervention in order to defend a ‘legitimate’ government.

In his article, titled *The Syrian Cause and Anti-Imperialism*²⁸ the Syrian revolutionary Yassin Al-Haj Saleh refers to a conversation: “*I was in Istanbul for about ten days when I met a Turkish communist who explained to me that what was going on in Syria was nothing but an imperialist conspiracy against a progressive, anti-imperialist regime*”. He then argues why we need to understand the political and social dimensions of the Syrian struggle and the nature of the Assad regime, to make sense of it all.

Secularism

The so called ‘secularism’ of Assad is in fact all about a deep ethnic and religious sectarian divide in the country. As Saleh explains, “*the Regime’s so-called secularism is almost completely an ideological façade that covers its essential sectarianism. Divide and rule is not only a colonial method, it has become the regime’s method for over two generations. By the way, the regime never used the word secularism in its discourse in the past. Bashar or Buthaina Shaban only used this word in interviews with western journalists. Like the War on Terror, this is only another cheap commodity to sell to Western powers and even those on the left looking for ways to avoid recognizing the fascist character of the Assad regime. Inside Syria, the regime rules through a process of sectarianization to entice Syrians to fear and mistrust each other based on their sect. The regime attempts to present itself as the only force capable of keeping these divisions, which it in fact foments, in check. This is a deliberate policy. Sectarianism is not a primordial characteristic of Syria, or any other nation for that matter. It was foisted upon the country in order to divide the population and maintain the regime.*”²⁹

Furthermore, the secularism in Syria is another form of class oppression where the regime using its military might dismissed any opposition by the poorer sections of the society as a backward-religious-terrorist attempt. Assad and his family have been portrayed as western style secularists while his Grand Mufti of Damascus has been blessing the killing of civilians in his prisons. Secularism is in fact nothing but protecting the class interests of the ‘westernised’ lifestyles of the upper

classes and the elites within the inner circles of the regime.

Anti-Imperialism of Assad

There are two major global imperialist forces in Syria: The US and Russia. The US maintains its anti-Assad position while Russia, with support from Iran is doing its best to keep the regime in power and secure its global interests. The intervention by the US does not make the Assad regime anti-imperialist. In fact, given the nature of the Russian state and its self-serving actions in Syria, the Assad regime is in alliance with an imperialist power, it's just not the US in this case.

Historically, the regime has presented itself as an enemy of Israel, a supporter of Palestinians and Hamas, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In fact, its history is full of contradictions and political manoeuvres that at all times served the interests of the regime and the ruling class in Syria. It used the Palestinian struggle against Israel as a bargaining chip and to create a position of strength in the region. The Palestinian issue also gave Syria a bargaining chip against the US. The Palestinian refugees in Syria have always been under suspicion and surveillance by the regime.

Hafez al-Assad supported the first US-led war in Iraq in 1991.

Saleh describes Assad regimes 'anti-imperialism' as *"the regime always played a double game. Inside the country, the regime blackmailed Syrians, claiming that we were all under threat from outsiders, the old colonial powers, Western imperialism, and the Israeli occupation. It nurtured a besieged castle mentality and paranoia in the population. This was always useful to incriminate dissidents as foreign agents and impose political and ideological uniformity on Syrians. At the same time the regime blackmailed the Western powers with its assertion that it was a bulwark against fundamentalism and terrorism in Syria and the region. It was always prepared to slander its own population in presence of western diplomats, journalists, and scholars. The Assadists knew well that this discourse was marketable to imperialist powers that were engaged in their so-called War on Terror; this same discourse had justified the murder of tens of thousands killed in the early 1980s and now hundreds of thousands in their ongoing counterrevolution. Beneath all this*

*rhetoric, the Assad dynasty's main aim is to stay in power forever and accumulate millions and billions of dollars that comes with ruling the country".*³⁰

The Syrian regime is neither socialist, nor progressive. It has turned from a form of bureaucratic and military controlled state-capitalism into a neoliberal state. The state is not secular where religion and state are fully divorced but one that uses religion, among others to create sectarian divisions. These divisions have historically helped strengthen the ruling class in Syria. The Assad regimes have had many U-turns and political manoeuvres to protect the interests of the Syrian ruling class and to position themselves accordingly. The regime is not a democracy but an authoritarian dictatorship. It has been successfully using 'anti-imperialism' to suppress all forms of opposition in the country. While it pretended to protect minorities, such as Christian groups, it has always been oppressive to other ethnic groups such as the Kurds.

When one looks at the presidential election results of the past 45 years one has to wonder: How can any regime achieve such 'great' results?

2014 Bashar al-Assad 88.7%,
2007 Bashar al-Assad 99.82%,
2000 Bashar al-Assad 99.7%,
1999 Hafez al-Assad 100%,
1991 Hafez al-Assad 99.99%
1985 Hafez al-Assad 100%,
1978 Hafez al-Assad 99.9%,
1971 Hafez al-Assad 99.2%

There is only one answer to that: by constant oppression using a brutal state apparatus with total lack of freedom.

The Syrian people rose up for change. They ended up becoming refugees and their revolution was defeated for now. But that doesn't change the facts about the regime and the reasons why people went out to protest in 2011.

Syria: the debate on the left

John Molyneux and Memet Uludag

Debate on the left about Syria, in Ireland and internationally, has centred on whether or not it is possible to combine opposition to all US and Western intervention in Syria with opposition to Russian intervention and to the Assad regime's war on his own people.

On one hand there are some supporters of the Syrian people and even of the Syrian revolution who are so bitter against the Assad regime and its Russian backers and so desperate at the ongoing plight of the Syrian people that they end up calling for some kind of Western intervention. Sometimes this takes the form of outright calls for bombing but often it consists of vaguer calls for 'the international community' to 'do something', or to implement sanctions or to 'establish a no-fly zone'.

We understand that these calls are often well intentioned, motivated by a desire to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people, but we disagree completely with this approach.

We believe it loses sight of the fact that US imperialism, as argued above, is the main imperial force in the world and encourages the illusion that it undertakes 'humanitarian' interventions when it doesn't. If the US intervenes in Syria it will not be to help the Syrian people but to advance its own imperial interests and it won't make the situation better, it will make it even worse and could easily escalate into wider Middle Eastern War.

The concept of 'the international community' is also an illusion. It suggests that the various imperialist and capitalist powers whose domestic role is to administer and maintain the exploitation of their respective working classes somehow, when they get together, become benevolent humanitarians acting in the best interests of oppressed peoples. They do not. The 'international community' is a euphemism that all too often actually means US imperialism and its many allies.

The imposition of a 'no-fly zone' sounds like a 'peaceful' solution but is not thought through. A no-fly zone is meaningless unless it is enforced and it could only be enforced by the US military or its allies. It would simply serve as a stepping stone to war and invasion. Sanctions, in this case, would legitimise the idea of US and the Western powers as the world's police and hit the ordinary people of Syria. There is a fundamental difference between imperialist imposed sanctions on Syria and BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) on Zionist Israel which is a popular movement from below in solidarity

with, and called for by, the Palestinian people.

Thus, we should oppose all Western intervention in Syria, other than provision of humanitarian aid which should be massively expanded. If our governments and rulers really care about the Syrian people, there is something very simple they can do: welcome the refugees!

But if opposition to Western intervention is our first priority this should be accompanied by opposition to Russian intervention, to the appalling Assad regime and to the interventions by other regional powers – Iran, Turkey, Israel etc. The tyrannical Assad regime, as described above, deserves only to be overthrown but this is a task for the Syrian people themselves.

There are some, particularly from a Stalinist background or influenced by the same, who argue that any criticism of Russia or Assad 'objectively' supports either US imperialism or ISIS and other reactionary jihadist forces. We reject this for the following reasons:

- a) It is perfectly possible to criticise Russia and its imperialism without supporting the US. Socialists have been doing this for many decades and it has not prevented us from opposing and mobilising massively against the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Afghan War, the Iraq War and the bombing of Syria. Russia is not as big a power as the US, but it is no less imperialist, as its record shows.
- b) It is perfectly possible to condemn Assad's war on his own people without supporting any foreign intervention. Not to do so is to defend the indefensible. It is a matter of indisputable fact that by far the biggest killer of Syrian civilians has been the Assad regime.
- c) The idea that opposing Assad means supporting ISIS and other counter-revolutionary jihadists denies to the Syrian people the possibility of progressive and revolutionary action and consciousness. Indeed, it says to them you have no right to rebel against the tyrannical regime by whom you are oppressed. Intentionally or not it is a concession to Islamophobia. It was clear that attitudes of this sort influenced some leftist responses to the whole phenomenon of the Arab Spring, with the half-stated belief that a genuine popular democratic revolution could not be produced by Arabs/Muslims; it had to be orchestrated behind the scenes by either the Americans or the Islamists or both.
- d) We stand in solidarity with the Syrian people and with the Syrian Revolution of 2011 and with the Arab Spring as a whole. We believe that, sooner or later, the peoples of the Middle East will rise again.

Notes

- 1 The 'Marxist' exception to this was Karl Kautsky, the so-called Pope of Marxism and the ideological leader of the Second International who believed that imperialism, or 'ultra-imperialism' could be conducive to peace in a similar way to some advocates of globalisation argued it would make for a peaceful world. Lenin furiously rejected Kautsky's suggestion. See the discussion of this issue in John Molyneux, *Lenin for Today*, London 2017, pp 71-74.
- 2 Lenin, 'Appeal on the War' (1915). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/aug/x04.htm>
- 3 Lenin, Socialism and War, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/s+w/cho1.htm>
- 4 Lenin. Socialism and War <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/s+w/cho1.htm>
- 5 These are in 1990 International Geary- Khamis dollars, a standard measure which facilitates historical and international comparisons taken from Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, OECD 2003, p.85 and 51.
- 6 See John Rees, *Imperialism and Resistance*, London 2006, p.43.
- 7 As above, p.42.
- 8 In saying this it should not be forgotten that a very large part of international social democracy (from Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin in the 1945 British Labour Government to Harold Wilson and Tony Blair along with the German Social Democrats, the leadership of the Irish Labour Party etc.) actually supported US imperialism throughout the post-war period, from Korea to Vietnam to Iraq.
- 9 The authors of this article do not accept that the Soviet Union was either socialist or a workers state, degenerated or otherwise. Following Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia*, we regard it as bureaucratic state capitalist.
- 10 See the vivid description of this actually happening in Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War*, New York 1970, pp114-5.
- 11 See Chris Harman *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe 1945-83*, London, 1988 pp41-49.
- 12 As above p.45.
- 13 Tony Cliff, *Russia –A Marxist Analysis*, London 1955. p.190
- 14 Russian Federation 2001 Report Amnesty International Archived 14 November 2007 .
- 15 The conflict in the Ukraine was very complex and cannot be discussed here but this is a thorough and impressive analysis, Rob Ferguson, 'Ukraine: imperialism, war and the left', *International Socialism* 144. <http://isj.org.uk/ukraine-imperialism-war-and-the-left/>
- 16 In making this general argument I specifically do not want to give the impression that I accept in anyway the lie that the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 with its mass workers' councils and its heroic working class resistance to Soviet tanks was a 'fascist counter-revolution'. See Chris Harman, *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe 1945-83*, as above, especially pp139-143.
- 17 2016, UN envoy estimates 400,000 killed. The UN special envoy for Syria has estimated that 400,000 people have been killed throughout the past five years of civil war
- 18 Syria Emergency - UN Refugee Agency <http://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/syria-emergency.html>
- 19 Inside Assad's prisons: Horrors facing female inmates in Syrian jails revealed <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/assad-prisons-women-syria-female-inmate-treatment-conditions-exclusive-life-jails-a7899776.html>
- 20 Outsourcing Torture <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/02/14/outsourcing-torture>
- 21 The Young Men Who Started Syria's Revolution Speak About Daraa, *Where It All Began* <https://news.vice.com/article/the-young-men-who-started-syrias-revolution-speak-about-daraa-where-it-all-began>
- 22 *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946-1970*, Steven Heydemann
- 23 The Syrian crucible, *International Socialism* 135, Jonathan Maunder
- 24 The struggle in the Middle East, Tony Cliff, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1990/10/struggle.htm>
- 25 International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Data retrieved in November 2017
- 26 Syria: Torture, despair and dehumanisation in Tadmur Military Prison. Amnesty International 18 September 2001
- 27 Syria's Economy Picking up the Pieces, Research Paper, David Butter, Middle East and North Africa Programme | June 2015
- 28 *The Syrian Cause and Anti-Imperialism*, Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, <http://www.yassinhs.com/2017/05/05/the-syrian-cause-and-anti-imperialism/>
- 29 Revolution, counterrevolution, and imperialism in Syria, Interview with Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *International Socialist Review*
- 30 Ibid