

weekly worker



Investigating the origins of the Jewish religion: Cyrus the Great of Persia, sponsor of the Jerusalem temple cult

- Letters and debate
- Kevin Bean 1955-2024
- CPGB aggregate debate
- Brics: no alternative

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Towards a mass Communist Party

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**HOW CAN YOU
MARCH AGAINST
RASCISM WITH
RACISTS?**

LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

Crushing it

In his article ('Crushing it in the egg' October 24), Mike Macnair cites Daniel Guérin's 1936 *Fascisme et grand capital* as the likely source of the following Hitler quote, referenced by generations of 'militant anti-fascists' who use it to reinforce the idea that fascists must be smashed while their movement is still small: "Only one thing could have stopped our movement - if our adversaries had understood its principle and from the first day smashed with the utmost brutality the nucleus of our new movement."

This quote appears in this form on countless antifa websites, at the end of David Edgar's 1976 play *Destiny* about the National Front, and in plenty of other anti-fascist agitprop. It is variously claimed that Hitler wrote or spoke these words, though no exact source is ever provided.

After some research, I eventually found the original source: *Die Reden Hitlers am Reichsparteitag 1933*, a 1934 publication containing complete transcripts of all speeches given by Hitler at Nuremberg the previous year. It turned out that he had indeed used a variation of the notorious formulation. Behold my translation, and marvel at the Führer's social-Darwinist wisdom:

And so, in 1919 I established a programme and tendency that were a conscious slap in the face of the democratic-pacifist world ... [We knew] it might take five, 10 or 20 years, yet gradually an authoritarian state emerged within the democratic state, and a nucleus of fanatical devotion and ruthless determination formed in a wretched world that lacked fundamental convictions.

Only one danger could have jeopardised this development - if our adversaries had understood its principle, developed a clear understanding of these ideas, and not offered any resistance. Or, alternatively, if they had annihilated the nucleus of our new movement with the utmost brutality from the very first day.

Neither was done. The times were such that our adversaries no longer had the capacity to annihilate us, nor did they have the nerve. Arguably, they also lacked the understanding to respond appropriately. Instead, they began to tyrannise our fledgling movement by bourgeois means, and in doing so, they aided the process of natural selection in our favour. From that point on, it was only a question of time until the leadership of the nation would fall to our hardened human material ...

The more our adversaries believe they can obstruct our development by employing a degree of terror typical of their nature, the more they encourage it. As Nietzsche said, a blow which does not kill a strong man only makes him stronger, and his words have been confirmed a thousand times. Every blow strengthens our defiance, all persecution reinforces our single-minded determination, and any elements that do fall are merely good riddance to the movement.

It's interesting that the antifa variation omits the first part of Hitler's statement - specifically, the notion that the Nazi movement would

have remained marginal had it been ignored by its opponents. This was the 'tactic' consciously employed by Austrian Social Democracy in response to early fascist assemblies and disturbances in 1919. Clearly, it did not work.

For obvious reasons, 'physical force anti-fascists' are fond of Hitler's second point. However, the two must be read together and in context. Hitler's 'advice' reflects his conviction that battle inspires the fittest warriors to great deeds, that the weak naturally fall by the wayside, and that thugs inevitably emerge on top. It offers no profound strategic or historical insight.

We should base our tactics on a concrete assessment of the situation at hand. Naturally, this may involve physical force - and here I don't quite follow Jack Conrad's SWP-like talk of the "leftist futility of squadism" in point eight of his *Fifteen theses on fascism and fighting fascism*, which seems at odds with his support for self-defence in point 12. Any Communist Party should have its 'proletarian hundreds', and even today the leaders of communist groups should encourage their members to join red gyms and learn at least the basics of self-defence. It was 'squadism' that contained the fascist street violence of Blood and Honour in the late 1980s to early 90s.

But at times, entirely different tactics may be necessary - whether public debates with fascists, mass demonstrations against them, or targeted propaganda aimed at their followers. What we should avoid is promoting a dogma based on a doctored Hitler quote: still less should we elevate anti-fascism above all other concerns or turn it into an ideology in its own right. As the Austrian writer and poet, Erich Fried, said, "Someone who is nothing but a fascist is a fascist. But someone who is nothing but an anti-fascist is not even an anti-fascist".

Ultimately, fascism and similar movements will only be extinguished for good once the global system of competing predatory capitalist nation-states that serves as their breeding ground is abolished. Hitler's was not the only radical völkisch movement in Germany at the time. Even if anti-fascists had succeeded in smashing the nucleus of the NSDAP, they would have still faced a massive cesspit forming in the ruins of a failed revolution: the Deutschnationale and their veterans' organisation, the Stahlhelm; the Deutschvölkischer Schutz-und Trutzbund; the Thule Society; the German-Völkisch Freedom Party; the Freikorps; and many more. For all his self-assurance and considerable skill, the Führer had no idea how lucky he was to emerge as the main contender.

Maciej Zurowski
Italy

Not enough

We have followed with some interest the debate over the statement on the Ukraine war. The response of the British left to this conflict has been quite pathetic and there is indeed an urgent need to build a communist opposition to the insane course of the ruling class. We agree with the main political stance taken by the CPGB on the Ukraine war: turning the reactionary war into a civil war, opposition to Nato, and opposition to pacifism. We are interested in joint work to promote these basic positions among the left.

Although we thought the statement centred on political principles advocated by Carla Roberts was a better basis for

discussion than the statement by the PCC, we think both have fundamentally the same weakness. In both cases there is not enough clarity about the specific task of communists in Britain. Of course, it is essential to have a correct position on the conflict itself. But the key task for communists here is to build an opposition in the unions and Labour Party to the pro-Ukrainian course of the leadership.

This is where the left has really failed so far. Most cheered Ukraine hawks like Sharon Graham during the strike wave. And during the election very few were ready to campaign against Nato-loving left Labourites like John McDonnell. Opposing such figures in the labour movement is where the rubber hits the road on the Ukraine war.

Beyond the specific slogans raised by Lenin during World War I, his main aim was to effect a break with the social chauvinism of the Second International, including with centrists like Karl Kautsky. We believe we are faced with the very same task today regarding Ukraine, but also Palestine.

We propose holding either a joint forum or a public debate on the war in Ukraine, although we are quite open to any other suggestions to push this issue forward.

Spartacist League Britain
email

Too much

We welcome the effort of our comrades in the CPGB (PCC) to unite the existing left in Britain and internationally against the war drive and agree with the PCC statement's fundamental position against war ('Establishing a principled left' *Weekly Worker* October 3). However, we believe this is insufficient to establish any principled unity and will need considerable rewriting to make it a "statement with a view to cementing principled unity and furthering the struggle against war and capitalism".

The current statement is marred by too much noise about military specifics, which is more appropriate for a 'Notes on the war' column than a principled political statement. We believe it is more important to draw lines of demarcation and clarify political differences on the war in Ukraine, especially against the social-imperialist camp, which is something the statement doesn't sufficiently attempt. If we need to break away from the social-imperialists, we need to argue against their common arguments that the war is of "dual character", a "war of independence", a "struggle for Ukrainian self-determination" - similarly with the arguments of social-pacifists and open supporters of the Russian invasion.

We agree with the letter published on October 10 that the previous statement written with the board of the Communist Platform is much more coherent than this one. If social-imperialism is indeed a betrayal, political statements should clarify why they are wrong and what a principled anti-militarist position is. The statement's analysis is not wrong, but it doesn't engage with the actual arguments of campists supporting Ukraine or Russia, nor does it elaborate why "Ukraine is an American proxy" and its implications. For such a lengthy statement, it's a glaring deficiency.

If the purpose of a political statement is to sharpen the principled left's anti-war and anti-militarist position and distinguish it from unprincipled social-pacifists and open supporters of the Russian invasion, then it should be clear and

sharp and spend more time drawing political lines of demarcation. As it currently exists, the statement isn't effective in its intended purpose, and we cannot sign it.

We look forward to a better statement.

Editorial Board *Prometheus*
email

Defeat Palestine?

Is Donald Trump a fascist and is fascism a looming danger in the US and globally? Should Marxists be revolutionary defeatists in all wars today and was Lenin (alone?) wrong to take this line in World War I?

These questions have provoked ideological and political turmoil within the CPGB and on the left in general. Jack Conrad seeks to clarify us in his 'We need clear red lines' article (October 24) and Rob Sewell attempts the same in his 'Donald Trump's populism: what does it represent?' in *The Communist* (October 23). Both deny Trump is a fascist, despite Kamala Harris dubbing him as such, quoting John Kelly, Trump's former chief of staff, who said he was "someone who falls into the general definition of fascists". He has often spoken approvingly of Hitler. Trump supporters have made far better preparations than in 2021 to overturn the vote if Harris wins; his intentions to rule as a despot if he is declared the winner are clear.

Sewell goes to great lengths to prove that Trump's anti-establishment populism has been enhanced by the Democrats' use of the courts against him in an unjustified way, it seems. He says, "Trump is not a fascist, aiming to destroy the American trade union movement or establish a ruthless dictatorship". Really? A few paragraphs later he seems to contradict himself, "the situation in America has never been so polarised, you would have to go back to the Civil War of the 1860s for any real comparison. That fact that 45 percent of Republicans supported the storming of the Capitol in January 2021 is a reflection of this".

The *World Socialist Web Site*/ Socialist Equality Party frequently make the opposite point - that the Democrats and the courts have been back-peddling over the attempt to overturn the election by force in the storming of Capitol Hill and other matters like the blatant request by Trump to Georgia secretary of state Brad Raffensperger to "find me 11,780 votes"; he had lost by 11,779 votes. Surely the latter at least was an immediate arrestable offence meriting jail and banning from public office? The *WSWS* are right on this, and Sewell and Conrad are wrong: Trump is a fascist; and fascism and civil war is a looming threat in the US.

Revolutionary defeatism is in a muddle in the CPGB: there is Jack Conrad, Carla Roberts and the statement, 'Danger of World War III: the communist response', by Ian Spencer, Bob Paul, Andy Hannah, Paul Cooper, Carla Roberts, Anne McShane. Marxists are dual defeatists in wars between imperialist powers, we are defeatist in the imperialist country in wars between imperialism and a colonial or semi-colonial country and for the victory of the latter, regardless of the political character of the government of that oppressed nation.

The CPGB correctly does not recognise Russia as an imperialist power, so Marxists should not be dual defeatist here, but they are. And it seems the confusion extends to both the wars in Ukraine and Gaza/Lebanon, "In the current situation, communists in the belligerent

imperialist and proto-imperialist countries need to take a position of revolutionary defeatism: the main enemy is at home," says the above group. We are defeatists on the Palestinian/Hezbollah side? And Putin's invasion of Ukraine was a defensive move against US/Nato encirclement, which puts him in a popularity bracket of the high 80s at home.

And the source of the confusion is their reliance on that third campist Hal Draper's *Lenin and the myth of revolutionary defeatism*.

We have to thank Mike Macnair for clarifying this question, despite his nonsense about what modern imperialism and proto-imperialism are. Carla Roberts clarifies: "Macnair, like Conrad, quotes Hal Draper's seminal book *The myth of Lenin's 'revolutionary defeatism'* - but disagrees with Draper's assessment that 'the defeat slogan was simply wrong and always implies that you must positively wish for the victory of the other side'. Macnair explains: "What is missing in Draper's account is that Bolshevik anti-war agitation and organisation among the soldiers did not disappear after April. But the disappearance of the defeat slogan, and the mass defencism, were real. Mass defencism reflected the fact that, as the war had evolved, it had become mainly a war fought on Russian soil, which Russia was losing. The masses could see perfectly well that the liberty they had won in February would not survive German occupation."

The defeat of the global hegemonic power and all its proxies - the US and its finance houses and transnational corporations, who dominate the planet via the International Monetary Fund and World Bank - is *always* the most progressive outcome of all wars. Remember Vietnam?

Gerry Downing
Socialist Fight

Sly evasion

Your ongoing discussion over a statement on the danger of World War III does anything but set out "principled" positions; in fact on all sides it is nothing but sophistry and flannel, designed to cover up the key issue; should there be a call for the defeat of imperialism or not?

That emerges most clearly in the discussion about Ukraine, as set out in the "alternative statement" from Carla Roberts ('Different times, different slogans', October 24), but which in all key points reflects the same dishonest and devious points made on all sides.

It begins with misanalysis: there is not a "danger of" World War III; it is an inevitable product of capitalist crisis, we are in it already and it is *unstoppable* until the fight to overturn capitalism is carried through. But, that aside, your line bends the Leninist understanding of the inter-imperialist predatory nature of World War I and the call made by the Bolsheviks for defeat for each major power, warning against and hostile to the chauvinist and 'patriotic' stampeding of workers behind the ruling class. Defeat of each ruling class would thereby open up the possibility for revolutionary war against it - civil war in fact, embodied in the slogan, 'Turn your guns against the ruling class', as then happened in 1917.

Notionally you say you are for civil war, but do not really make clear how that is supposed to happen other than it should "be turned" into one led by workers - spontaneously? What then is the purpose of the revolutionary party?

You declare over Ukraine that all

sides in this war - Russia and Nato (standing behind the Kievites) are imperialist powers, and therefore you do not support any of them. You use that as a reason effectively to wash your hands of taking a position; revolutionary defeatism means "our fight is at home", you declare.

But that is just a sly evasion of the main question. Firstly, the Bolsheviks never said that the fight was only domestic; they very strongly called for defeat of tsarism, which in the circumstances was only possible at the hands of the German imperialists. For this they were vigorously attacked by all parties, including much of the Menshevik 'left' and the Trotskyists (headed obviously by Trotsky), based around the undialectical notion that the Bolsheviks were 'supporting the Germans' - an accusation most extremely expressed in the yellow press lies of them taking 'German gold'.

It was a nonsense; the revolutionaries' only interest was to see imperialism - 'their' tsarism - defeated. In that sense it did not matter that the Germans were imperialists, any more than it now matters whether the Russians in Ukraine are called imperialists: what counts for the working class in Britain is that some way or other its own side, Nato, is defeated.

The 'Our fight is at home' slogan just avoids the question, suggesting that the class struggle against the government here is disconnected from imperialism's rampaging in Ukraine, usefully avoiding the need to call too sharply for Nato, the Kiev stooge and British forces to come a cropper. Instead it implies that 'this is not our war'. But your position is not really even-handed anyway: instead you join the Stop the War pacifists to condemn Russia's "invasion", which is tantamount to siding with western imperialism, and its fingering of Moscow as the 'culprit'.

That undermines your point that the whole war is the result of a "clear provocation" by the west through its skulduggery and its culmination in the fascist Maidan coup of 2014, instigated and carried through with \$5 billion of subversion and lying propaganda for 'democracy'. If the war is Moscow's fault, then how can you convince workers that their interest is to see their 'own' side defeated, which is the Marxist understanding?

Just to further avoid the issue, you add in an additional point that somehow Britain is not directly involved anyway. Total garbage; obviously the UK is a major contributor to Nato (and in fact was a lead instigator of the anti-communist alliance during the post-war 'left' (ha!) Clement Attlee Labour government) as well as a constant agitator among other members for increased funding. Obviously Nato is heavily involved.

Furthermore Britain has been a significant 'military advisor' and trainer for the Ukraine reactionaries - not just from 2022, but since the Maidan (with Boris Johnson even hosting the outright Nazi Azov brigade in parliament to 'honour' them), as well as covertly supplying intelligence, equipment like 'sea drones', strategic guidance (albeit disastrously, as in the failed Kursk offensive) and almost certainly special forces boots on the ground.

But your characterisation of Russia and the west as competing imperialists is wrong anyway and misses the complexities and contradictions of real world developments. Certainly, Russia is not a non-imperialist power, as the confused "Kremlin supporters" you take snide pot shots at want to say (using their own mechanical, one-sided application of Marxist definitions to get round their

difficulties). But Russia is also in no way comparable to the enormous concentration of monopoly financial and military power in the west, which, a century after Lenin's *Imperialism* analysis, is at least an order of magnitude greater than anyone else and constantly intensifying even more.

Of course, Putin is not a communist, and does not serve the interests of the working class. His Greater Russian nationalism is appalling and his Orthodox church worship risible. But in present conditions Russia has been thrown against the great monopoly capitalist domination of Washington and its nasty sidekicks, prime among them Great Britain, which is desperate to find a way to survive in the rapidly intensifying cut-throat trade war conditions of the greatest world economic collapse in history, and ready to do anything to stay onside with the US.

Don Hoskins
EPSR

Mainstay Lih

I believe you would be interested in how people see the *Weekly Worker*. For the record please register my opinion.

The paper has inspired me to learn about the work of Karl Kautsky, which I knew nothing about. I am interested if or when you cover this topic. I have the complete intention not to be biased - that means I will look at all points of view (left, right, centre, Trotskyist, anarchist, etc), including and especially Kautsky's own words. And I will try to have a 'Leninesque' perspective, which is an uncompromising rejection of Kautsky's centrism and opportunism, but an objective view at the same time. (At a quick glance, I'm partial to Mike Taber's article about Kautsky in *Cosmonaut* in 2019.)

When it comes to Lars Lih, I'm not very charitable. I hope there's the same Leninesque attitude by the *Weekly Worker* of principled objectivity with no political obsequiousness, but unfortunately there is no such uncompromising rejection of Lih's positions: for example, how he turns Lenin into a Kautskyite caricature with little left that's distinctively 'Leninist'. Lenin has limited originality in Lih's scheme of things: Lenin is the receptacle and definition of Kautskyite 'Erfurtianism'. (I'm referring to a lot of Lih's writings that's post-*Lenin rediscovered*, published in June 2008) And extraordinarily, Lih is a *Weekly Worker* mainstay in a sense. I know this isn't new, but for me it's new, since I just 'drove up'. The *Weekly Worker* had joined the Lars Lih bandwagon, and for what political ends? That's yet to be determined.

When someone is a traitor to socialism it's hard to get past that reality. Both Kautsky and Lih can't be seen as very exemplary or relevant for modern times in my view, despite the important contributions they made before they both ended up as anti-Marxist mouthpieces in support of reformism, directly or indirectly.

This is where I draw the line. If we can't be principled in our politics, it's an empty world indeed. No-one probably wants to revisit the Kautsky/Lih/Eric Blanc controversy. But it was necessary for the *Weekly Worker* to dispense with everything in a better way - specifically to refrain from taking Lih under your ideological wing. Publishing him is worthy, but a clear disclaimer is required, so the *Weekly Worker* isn't his representative.

The new book by Doug Greene should shed light on the subject. Whether he's a Trotskyist or Stalinist or whatever is not my concern except

to be aware of his political positions. I can appreciate a good-faith and deep scholarly investigation, wherever it comes from; my enemy is sectarianism.

Your decisions and actions regarding Daniel Lazare were belated, but nevertheless appreciated and wise. I see you can be flexible when the political winds of truth beckon change.

I will look forward to supporting the *Weekly Worker*; I can tolerate a lot until I can't. The primary doctrine that guides me is Marxist materialism. At the same time, naturally, I come to my own conclusions.

GG
USA

Remember Tom

Like many I was saddened to hear of Tom May's passing, but also perhaps pleased to learn he lived to a good age.

I remember first meeting him some time in the early 1990s, I had been disillusioned by a spell in the Socialist Workers Party and had come across the *Weekly Worker* somewhere along the line. There was an attempt to put a cell together in the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire area.

He stood for the council in the Dallow Ward of Luton in, I think, 1995. I and some other local comrades took to the leafleting on seemingly endless streets of houses, and standing outside a polling station getting sunburnt, as handfuls of voters came and went. I remember going to his house in Luton, where over cheese sandwiches he handed me a shirt many times too large for the skinny kid I was, but perfect for keeping the sun off my burning arms.

At the election count that night I remember being quite impressed that we had secured something like 50 votes! I also recall telling a Labour activist in the gents that Tony Blair would last a while, but Labour would move left in future - which in hindsight I shall claim to be a prediction of the Corbyn leadership!

Whilst shuttling between god knows where to somewhere or other, I received that day in return for my campaigning a short course in communist politics, his attempts to calculate what a minimum wage should be and the discovery that he and my grandfather had been colleagues at the Luton College.

Other memories are of getting lifts in one of the several Skodas he had, and his almost always insightful input at party seminars in London - pipe in hand and in his element. There was also occasional sparring with his son, James, who was of a similar age to myself and then a prominent member of the Class War anarchist group, who would assert that I was a "middle class student type" (but then his dad was the one who had a bidet!).

Tom was instrumental in convincing me to get a higher education. I still remember him saying something like "Your cleverer than most of the idiots in the universities", which still resonates in my mind.

I drifted away from politics in general for a number of years, but returned to attend Communist University one year, and was delighted to see that old Tom was still there repeating a point he had made consistently when I knew him before - the need for trained party cadre. Apart from the pipe being replaced with nicotine gum that day, he was still the same paternalistic teacher.

I wish his family well, and will make a donation in his name on payday.

John Masters
Bedfordshire

ACTION

End the genocide in Gaza

Saturday November 2, 12 noon: National demonstration. Assemble Whitehall (near Parliament Square), London SW1, for march to US embassy. End Gaza genocide, hands off Lebanon, don't attack Iran. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

Stop US nukes

Saturday November 2, 12 noon: National demonstration. Assemble outside main gate, RAF Lakenheath, Brandon IP27. Protest against the return of US nuclear weapons to this base. Organised by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: cnduk.org/lakenheath.

March for clean water

Sunday November 3, 11am: National demonstration. Assemble Albert Embankment, London SE1. Demand the government stops the poisoning of rivers. Reassert the right to clean water. Organised by River Action UK: marchforcleanwater.org.

Stand up for bus workers

Tuesday November 5, 11am: Demonstration. Assemble Ron Todd House, 33-37 Moreland Street, London EC1. March to rally outside TfL HQ, 197 Blackfriars Road, London SE1. Support proper rest breaks, access to clean toilet facilities and an end to unfair schedules. Organised by Unite: www.uniteunion.org/news-events/events.

What made us human?

Tuesday November 5, 6.30pm: Talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1, and online. This meeting: 'Wild service - and the human right to roam'. Speaker: Harry Jenkinson. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/1033538434881533.

Communist culture club

Thursday November 7, 7pm: Online discussion. Ken Syme on 'Soviet constructivism and town planning 1917-37' and Paul Cooper on 'Symbolism and imagery: why are USSR/Stalinist motifs suddenly trendy?'. Registration free. Organised by Why Marx?: www.facebook.com/whymarxism.

What was done: Lenin's miscalculation

Thursday November 7, 7.30pm: Public meeting, Wesley Memorial Church, New Inn Hall Street, Oxford OX1. Organised by Oxford Communist Corresponding Society: oxfordccs@aol.com.

Red fest

Friday November 8 to Sunday November 10: Political festival, Queen Margaret Union, 22 University Gardens, Glasgow G12. Over 20 sessions. Tickets £15 (£10). Organised by Socialist Workers Party: red.scot.

How to beat your landlord

Saturday November 9, 2pm: Free community training, St Wilfrid's Enterprise Centre, Royce Road, Manchester M15. Mould and damp? Disrepair? Deposit stolen? Facing eviction? Find out how to fight back. Organised by Acorn: www.acorntheunion.org.uk.

Socialism 2024

Saturday November 9 to Sunday November 10: Political festival, Logan Hall, Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1. Over 30 sessions. Tickets from £11.50 to £36. Organised by Socialist Party in England and Wales: www.socialistparty.org.uk/socialism.

Revolution festival

Friday November 15 to Sunday November 17: Political festival, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1. Over 30 sessions. Tickets from £15 to £40. Organised by Revolutionary Communist Party: revolutionfestival.co.uk.

Summit against racism and the far right

Saturday November 16, 11am to 5pm: Conference, Congress Centre, 28 Great Russell Street, London WC1. Discuss how to build a mass movement to stop the far right. Registration £11.55 (£6.13). Organised by Stand Up To Racism: standuptoracism.org.uk.

Stop arming Israel - boycott Barclays Bank

Saturday November 16: Nationwide day of action. Demand the British government stops arming Israel. Demand Barclays stops bankrolling Israel's attacks on Palestinians. Join your local action. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events/boycott-barclays-day-of-action-2.

March for global climate justice

Saturday November 16, 12 noon: Demonstration. Assemble Great Russell Street, London WC1. Demand the UK government ends reliance on fossil fuels and ends its complicity in Israel's genocide. Organised by Climate Justice Coalition: climatejustice.uk/cop29/march-for-global-climate-justice.

Stop the drive to war!

Sunday November 17, 12 noon to 5pm: Anti-war convention, The Atrium, 124 Cheshire Street, London E2. Campaigners, activists and trade unionists discuss the growing threat of war and how to strengthen the resistance. Tickets £15 (£10). Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events/anti-war-convention-stop-the-drive-to-war.

Engels as educator: making Marx accessible

Sunday, November 17, 7pm: Online lecture. Professor Marj Mayo examines Engels' contribution to political education, making Marx's writings accessible and relevant for wider audiences. Registration free. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/477.

CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

SWP

Racists against racism

Marching with Zionists in opposition to racism in general and marching against Zionism over Israeli state racism is a circle that cannot be squared. Beset by internal divisions, the central committee is under increasing pressure, reports Paul Demarty

In his leading essay in *Reading Capital*, Louis Althusser proposed a distinctive technique: the “symptomatic reading” - a practice of listening for, as it were, the silences between the propositions of a text, and drawing out what was implied in them. He proposed this not as his own idea, but that of Marx, taking as his example Marx’s account of how Aristotle could have come so close to understanding human labour, but could not in the end read it into the phenomena he studied; thus Marx had to appear in order to, as it were, fill in the gaps.

As an account of Marx’s method, this is (it is fair to say in retrospect) an invention out of wholecloth. But that is, in the end, because Marx places everything on the table, however much work that leaves us in discerning what exactly is there in front of us, and how well it all fits together. Not everyone does that, and among those who do not we find the Socialist Workers Party. One often has to listen out for telling silences to work out what is going on with them.

Seasoned SWP-watchers will detect the outlines of an internal dispute at the moment. We are in the short annual period in which SWP members are allowed to have opinions about things, and those opinions are gathered in three successive editions of the *Pre-Conference Bulletin*. Ordinary members are entitled to 3,000 words for their contributions; the central committee is entitled to apparently infinite logorrhoea. Both the members and the CC, however, point oddly to what they are *not* talking about.

Maximally

How so? The SWP is presently engaged in two main lines of activity. The first is Palestine solidarity, which needs no justification, and the organisation has rightly thrown itself energetically into the work. We have disagreements on its overall strategic perspectives, but that need not detain us here: in the face of the abject inhumanity inflicted, day after day, on the Palestinian people by Israel, it is enough for now that we march together to denounce it, and to denounce our rulers’ complicity in it.

The second is anti-racism, in the form of its Stand Up to Racism. This is the latest in a string of such fronts the SWP has run over the years, including most notably the Anti-Nazi League, which achieved some notoriety in the 1970s and 80s, when the enemy was the National Front, and then Unite Against Fascism in the 2000s, whose primary adversary was the British National Party. The tendency over time has been for the political basis to corrode, in the name of gathering a maximally broad “united front”. Thus, in the UAF days, the SWP became a cheerleader for bourgeois multiculturalism, albeit “multiculturalism from below”, whatever that means; and today, it cheerfully adopts the strange nostrums of the liberal anti-racism presently popular among bourgeois professionals.

How broad is too broad? That is the question before the SWP comrades in their first *Pre-Conference Bulletin*.¹ A long contribution from



SUtr: based on ‘broad as possible’

“CC” - the central committee - on “Fascism, the far right and building a movement against racism”, after congratulating the SWP and SUtr for channelling the anger around Israel’s genocidal onslaught on Gaza into broader anti-racist activity, nonetheless specifically cautions against excluding Zionists from the movement:

[We] also recognise that SUtr is right not to make anti-Zionism a ticket of entry into the movement.

Tommy Robinson and the fascist forces we are seeing in Europe won’t be beaten as a by-product of the anti-imperialist movement. What is required is an explicitly anti-fascist movement that draws in the broadest possible forces, on the unity of the sole question of anti-fascism, to mobilise the biggest numbers.

The characterisation of Tommy Robinson as a Zionist “footsoldier” or “poster boy” are not only wide of the mark [sic!], but fails to identify what is the key driver of Robinson, Le Pen, Meloni, the AfD and all the different forms of the far right. That is Islamophobia and anti-migrant racism, and SUtr is right to make opposition to these the only ticket of entry (pp55-56).

Similar concerns appear in the contributions from “Rob” from Dorset, “Talat” from Edinburgh, “Alex and James” from Glasgow and “Mike” from Walthamstow (security theatre and a strange aversion to the use of cadre names means that one only gets first names in PCBs). The contributions from Glasgow and Dorset both repeat the “ticket of entry” phrase, giving a very strong impression - if the sheer weight of numbers were not enough

- that there is a full-court press on this question coming from the leadership. So, for example, Alex and James mention that

these arguments [over the presence of Zionists] are not new to SUtr in Glasgow, and at the UN anti-racism day demonstration in March this year there had been significant difficulties with making the argument within the movement. However, in the face of the far right mobilising, the argument was more clear than ever to those in our periphery about the need to gain the broadest movement to ensure we outnumbered the far right. It also shows that if these issues are fought for by comrades in a political way, the majority can be won to the necessity of a “united front” that does not require anti-Zionism to be a ticket of entry (p86).

Glasgow

Indeed, they certainly are *not* new in Glasgow, and indeed were not new in March. As long ago as 2018, the participation of the Confederation of Friends of Israel Scotland (Cofis) in SUtr’s annual UN day of action activities in the city has been the source of controversy. This has been documented over the years by local activists from the Revolutionary Communist Group, who attempted to prevent Cofis from participating in the first place, and then organised a militant counter-demonstration that succeeded in preventing the small Cofis contingent from joining the main demonstration.²

Controversy continues to rage in the city. When an anti-fascist counter-demonstration was organised by SUtr on September 7 (this is the main topic in the contribution of Alex and James), there was again a split in the local movement, as

reported by anonymous members of Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century (RS21), a breakaway from the SWP. So, alongside the SUtr rally, there was an “autonomous” counter-demo organised by those “wary of their collaboration with police and Zionists”, including RS21, a Palestine bloc, and - later on - a group of Celtic ultras. According to RS21, things got tense at times:

At multiple points, SUtr stewards clashed with autonomous stewards, sided with cops to push them back, and at one point identified an anti-fascist to the police who had thrown something over the barrier. When confronted by witnesses about their collusion, SUtr stewards lied; an established pattern of behaviour... The reason the Palestine bloc was separate was due to SUtr’s insistence on working with Zionists amidst an ongoing genocide - which raises questions for how low we need to stoop for united front work when the fascists are so small. Principles don’t set us back.³

So long as the previous holding pattern in Israel’s occupation of Gaza - essentially walling the place off and periodically, as they say, ‘mowing the lawn’ with a bombing campaign - this was merely an irritant to the SWP tops, who could get on with the real work of, er, marking some meaningless UN awareness-raising exercise. Under present circumstances, that is a rather harder sell. Several of the individual contributions note that this has been a very divisive issue out in the provinces. It is hard to tell, but surely disquiet has spread into the core of the organisation too. At least one regular *Socialist Worker* contributor on the Palestine question - Sophie Squire - has gone mysteriously missing from the paper’s pages, when there has surely been plenty for her to write about.

On the face of it, the SWP is in a real pickle here. After all, it wants to stand up to *racism* (doesn’t it?). Zionism equals support for a settler-colonial project, and we think the SWP would agree with us in considering settler-colonialism inherently and irreducibly racist. The *present* behaviour of the state of Israel, quite obviously seeking to wipe out the Palestinian population in Gaza, is not only racist, but exactly the sort of doomsday scenario that anti-racism points to for its moral basis. If you cannot exclude from the anti-racist movement people currently supporting or running cover for *actual genocide*, in what sense is the movement actually anti-racist? SWP members and contacts are clearly asking these questions - and they are quite right to do so.

Fortifications

What are the answers? The SWP leadership primarily seeks to get around this by changing the terms of the discussion. The real point of SUtr is to fight fascism (as opposed to racism *per se*). In an interesting phrase, comrade Rob writes that the replacement of UAF by SUtr “was not a ‘dilution’ of the focus against fascism, but the widening of the fortifications against its rise” (p68). Once we have seen SUtr ‘correctly’ as *really* addressed to fascism,

there is no problem with unity with Zionists against the fascists, it seems.

This is an ingenious move, but one flatly belied by SUtr’s actual record of activity, anchored in these UN days of action and encompassing campaigns against individuals and groups (Nigel Farage and Ukip, for example) to whom the SWP does not apply the label “fascist”, however ludicrously expansive its definition is in SWP circles. It looks like an anti-racist campaign, and quacks like an anti-racist campaign.

In reality, SUtr’s object activity is neither fascism nor racism as such, but a rotating cast of devil-figures, who are each painted as a uniquely dangerous threat. (“We are closer to the 1930s than we have ever been,” the CC document begins (p44) - closer, even, than in the actual 1930s?) This infantile morality is well suited to rousing its drowsy membership, in a contemporary culture saturated with comic-book movies. The current ‘Big Bad’, as they used to call such supervillains on *Buffy the vampire slayer*, is Tommy Robinson. It is in the name of facing down such a character that SWP members are supposed to swallow their objections and unite with Zionists.

Robinson

But, as we argued last week,⁴ Robinson is *not* in fact a uniquely dangerous figure, but merely a somewhat prominent far-right celebrity figure more or less interchangeable with dozens, hundreds or even thousands of others. Even though he has been packed off to jail for 18 months for contempt of court, his fans will not be lost and utterly demobilised. Someone else will step into the breach, if he does not manage to keep his platform in jail. The threat of a new wave of senseless rioting, or some other pattern of racist violence, will remain, because it has far deeper roots than merely the maleficence of particular individuals. (The SWP acknowledges this in theory, but the actual *practice* of its anti-racist campaigning belies that acknowledgement.)

Though the SWP’s bureaucratic heavy-handedness and anti-intellectualism makes things worse than they need to be, it should be said that nobody committed to the project of building a broad anti-racist movement could actually solve it. After all, the Zionists present themselves as anti-racists, defenders of the Jews from the predations of anti-Semites, and many of them truly believe it. Theirs is not the only such case: merely the most egregious - think of black anti-Semitic organisations like the Nation of Islam. An anti-racist organisation capacious enough to include both is merely paralysed: the trouble with widening the fortifications, beyond a certain point, is that the line gets too thin to defend ●

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Notes

1. weeklyworker.co.uk/assets/www/pdf/swp-pcb-1-2024.pdf.
2. revolutionarycommunist.org/branches/scotland-branch/gsu-190318.
3. revsoc21.uk/2024/09/21/glasgow-against-fascism-01.
4. ‘Nine lives of Manifesto man’, *Weekly Worker* October 24: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1512/nine-lives-of-manifesto-man.

OBITUARY

At the very storm centre

Kevin Bean: February 14 1955 - October 12 2024

Kevin first took out a *Weekly Worker* sub in 2015 and rapidly gravitated towards our organisation. You can see why he was impressed and why he wanted to join.

In September 2016 Jeremy Corbyn was elected Labour leader. The American cousins were stunned; the British army, MI5 and civil service tops were stunned; the big financiers and captains of industry were stunned; the confessional sects such as the SWP, SPEW and SSP were stunned; above all Labour MPs, councillors and the party's national and regional machine were stunned. The 'morons' had allowed Corbyn to get onto the ballot and the rank and file - existing members and affiliated trade unionists, plus the massive influx of new full and associate members - did the rest.

But the CPGB and Labour Party Marxists were not stunned. We confidently expected Corbyn to win from the get-go. More than that, we were equipped with a fully worked out programme for transforming the Labour Party into what we call a 'united front of a special kind' - special because, like soviets, we were looking for a united front in permanence, a Labour Party that included not only trade unions as affiliates, but all working class political parties and organisations. Kevin got it.

There were huge hustings throughout the country. The media began to talk about Corbymania. Meanwhile Labour HQ did its best to exclude new members in a cynically named 'Bash the Trots' operation. Those who once stood for the Greens, Left Unity and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition were blocked or rooted out in what rapidly developed into a full-blown witch-hunt. It could never be enough though. The incoming tide was simply irresistible. Membership doubled between May and October 2015 and reached well over half a million shortly afterwards. Not surprisingly Corbyn romped home in the first round with 59% of the vote.

Liverpool was at the very storm centre. Constituency and branch meetings mushroomed in size. Whereas before there were a few dozen attending, suddenly there were hundreds. General Committees were swept aside, sitting councillors and MPs, including fake lefts, feared for their precious careers. Out went the old and in came the new. Kevin was elected secretary of Wavertree Constituency Labour Party and became one of the leading figures on the left in what is nowadays Britain's most leftwing city.

Kevin became a committed political activist in the early 1970s and remained a Labour Party member till his expulsion in 2020. He briefly joined the International Marxist Group - the British section of the so-called Fourth International - where he got something like a passable education in the ABCs. Kevin was also a militant trade unionist and keenly interested in Marxism and working class history.

Born to Irish Catholic parents in the Medway town of Chatham, he remained a life-long Gillingham FC fan. His family were socialists and republicans, but Kevin was in particular influenced by his mother: *The new politics of Sinn Féin* (2007) is dedicated to her. I am told that Kevin's request for a Catholic funeral mass comes as no surprise to family and friends of long standing. While never devout, his early life was shaped by the common rituals and universal claims of the church with all its contradictions. Like James Connolly,



Stan, Kevin ... and his Sir Keir at Labour's 2021 conference

Kevin identified with the congregation, while dissenting from the dogma. He remained deeply attached to Catholic art and architecture and the whole grand theatre. Visiting the Vatican in December 2023 and seeing Michelangelo's masterpiece, Kevin recalled the words of Goethe: "Without having seen the Sistine Chapel, one can form no appreciable idea of what one man is capable of achieving." This was his last trip abroad.

Kevin studied history at the University of Leicester and moved to Ellesmere Port on Merseyside, where he got his first job as a school teacher. By all accounts, he was highly regarded by fellow staff members and the kids alike. He told me how he eventually became disillusioned with the profession. Not the teachers, not the kids - no, it was the prescriptive syllabus and the whole tick-box approach imposed from on high.

Writing

He completed an MA at the Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool. His subsequent book, *The new departure* (1995), showed that the IRA's August 1994 ceasefire was both the product of a radical reappraisal and a continuation of Irish republican traditions. A theme developed in *The new politics of Sinn Féin*, which, moreover, examined the transformation of the republican movement into a partner in governing the Northern Ireland statelet. Kevin taught in the Institute, having a special interest in Irish republicanism, including dissident Irish republicanism. He was much admired and much appreciated by his students, as their many tributes testify. They talk of a great man, a great loss.

Kevin passionately supported Irish reunification: he was a long-time supporter of the Irish in Britain Representation Group. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as someone studying dissident republicanism, he was subject to scurrilous attacks from the fringe of the fringe. Kevin responded in his usual calm and measured way, issuing a public statement to reassure

those who he interviewed in the course of his work that he had always carefully protected identities and activities.¹

His first *Weekly Worker* article came from his session on Ireland at Communist University in August 2016. Many more talks and articles followed - both under the name, Kevin Bean, but also James Harvey. He went on to cover everything from Ukraine to America, from Sri Lanka to strikes, from Brexit to the Durham miners' gala.

However, his main focus of work was Labour. He joined our LPM cell, where we followed developments and planned interventions. That included Labour Party conferences - both in Brighton and Liverpool. We produced thousands of *Labour Party Marxists* and a daily bulletin, *Red Pages*. The reception was enthusiastic, to say the least. Kevin was one of the key members of our team, which wrote, printed, distributed and intervened in and reported on numerous fringe events.

He worked in the Labour Left Alliance too. An organisation which began life as a typical broad-left lash-up. There was no individual membership as such. People simply signed a vacuous petition. The politics were staggeringly awful too. Its platform did not even include any mention of socialism. When a LLA conference did agree a resolution on "socialism", it was confined to the "United Kingdom". So a royal national socialism!

Naturally, we fought for our programme and, not unexpectedly, found ourselves in a minority. Not only at the LLA's two conferences, but in what functioned as the - ever diminishing - national leadership made up of delegates from affiliated organisations. We officially constituted ourselves as an opposition fraction. Stan Keable and Kevin Bean played the leading role.

After the LLA effectively died a death, along with much of the soggy left (eg, the Labour Representation Committee), we readily agreed that Kevin should participate in its new,

much more welcome, rebirth as an education platform - Kevin's very element. And he acquitted himself well. Videos of his many sessions, along with his books and articles are being collected together, including by his partner, Pauline, and will form the Kevin Bean Online Library.² A fitting memorial.

Witch-hunt

As everyone knows, it took the Parliamentary Labour Party, the party bureaucracy and the whole media and state apparatus a little while before they alighted upon the weapon that would eventually bring down Jeremy Corbyn. First, they tried the Czech agent stuff. That did not work. Then that he was a friend of Hamas. That did not work either. But the 'Anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism' big lie ... that worked a treat.

Desperate to deny accusations of racism, Corbyn and the Labour soft left became active witch-hunters in their own right - classic Stockholm syndrome behaviour. Corbyn's general secretary, Jenny Formby, boasted of "fast-tracking" suspensions and expulsions. And, as the witch-hunt tore through the Labour Party like a storm force five, John McDonnell, Diane Abbott and the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs kept their heads down. None of them defended Ken Livingstone, Chris Williamson, Pete Willsman or Marc Wadsworth.

We successfully argued for Kevin to be elected to the steering committee of Labour Against the Witchhunt alongside other comrades, such as Jackie Walker, Tony Greenstein, Stan Keable and Tina Werkmann. While it lasted, LAW did an outstanding job - conference fringes, pickets and solidarity meetings. To its everlasting credit LAW was declared a proscribed organisation by Labour's NEC in September 2021.

By the time the witch-hunt got round to Corbyn himself, the official Labour left had been completely routed. The charge laid against him? Anti-Semitism, of course. At last he had dared tell something approaching the truth: "accusations" of anti-

Semitism had been "dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents inside and outside the party, as well as by much of the media".³ CLP chairs and secretaries tempted to allow debates on, or resolutions protesting against, his subsequent suspension faced threats of suspension themselves. Most buckled.

Inevitably, in 2020, Kevin was purged along with three other CLP officers - Nina Houghton, Helen Dickson and Hazuan Hashin. Together they became known as the Wavertree four. To his amazement, certainly mine, amongst the prime movers here was a former leading member of Workers Power, a Trotskyist group which has now collapsed into social-imperialism over Ukraine.

Entirely unconcerned for himself, Kevin recognised that what had begun as a possible revolution with the election of Corbyn had rapidly turned into a counterrevolution - a counterrevolution capped with the election of Sir Keir. Labour as a site of struggle has effectively been closed, at least for now.

Naturally, he continued to play an active role on the Liverpool left. Until his retirement, Kevin was chair of the University and College Union branch at Liverpool University. He was well known for organising strike pickets, turning up to at 5am to sort out rotas and making sure everything was covered.

Kevin was also an active member of the Merseyside Pensioners Association. Elected as one of its four chairs in 2023, Kevin attended countless protests and actions - sometimes along with his cardboard cut-out Sir Keir. Kevin planned to write a history of Merseyside PA - but sadly had to abandon the project when he became too ill.

The comrade was elected to our Provisional Central Committee in October 2020. When I first suggested the possibility to Kevin, he was quite reluctant to begin with. A highly capable individual, he often hid his light under a bushel.

Kevin had a generous heart. My memory immediately takes me back to a Communist University session in Goldsmiths - I was speaking, Kevin was in the second or third row. During the debate a partisan of the *Economic and Philosophic Science Review* - origins, Gerry Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party - ferociously denounced the CPGB for not saying this and not saying that - well not loudly enough anyway. I was just itching to give a double-barrelled reply, but Kevin caught my eye. He seemed to be saying, 'The poor guy clearly has psychological issues - be gentle, be understanding'. Kevin's *unspoken* advice was followed. However, I have to admit, on many other occasions, I have followed his *spoken* advice too.

Kevin, you will be sorely missed ●
Jack Conrad

Kevin's funeral will be held at 10am on Thursday November 14 at St Anthony of Padua RC Church, Queens Drive, Liverpool L18. There will be a celebration of his life and work on January 24 2025 at the Casa Bar, 29 Hope Street, Liverpool L1

Notes

1. theirishrevolution.wordpress.com/2015/07/08/kevin-bean-on-the-esrc-irish-republican-dissident-project-setting-the-record-straight.
2. kevinbeanlibrary.com.
3. *The Independent* October 29 2020.

AGGREGATE

Debating our culture

Our present differences are minor - a scratch - but scratches have to be taken seriously. Failure to do so risks the danger of gangrene. Mike Macnair reports on the debates at the October 27 CPGB aggregate of members and visitors

Last weekend's aggregate meeting continued our discussion on proposed statements on the Ukraine war, triggered by the Provisional Central Committee's statement published on October 3, and the counter-proposal by comrade Carla Roberts and others published last week.¹ The meeting included the helpful participation of several guests.

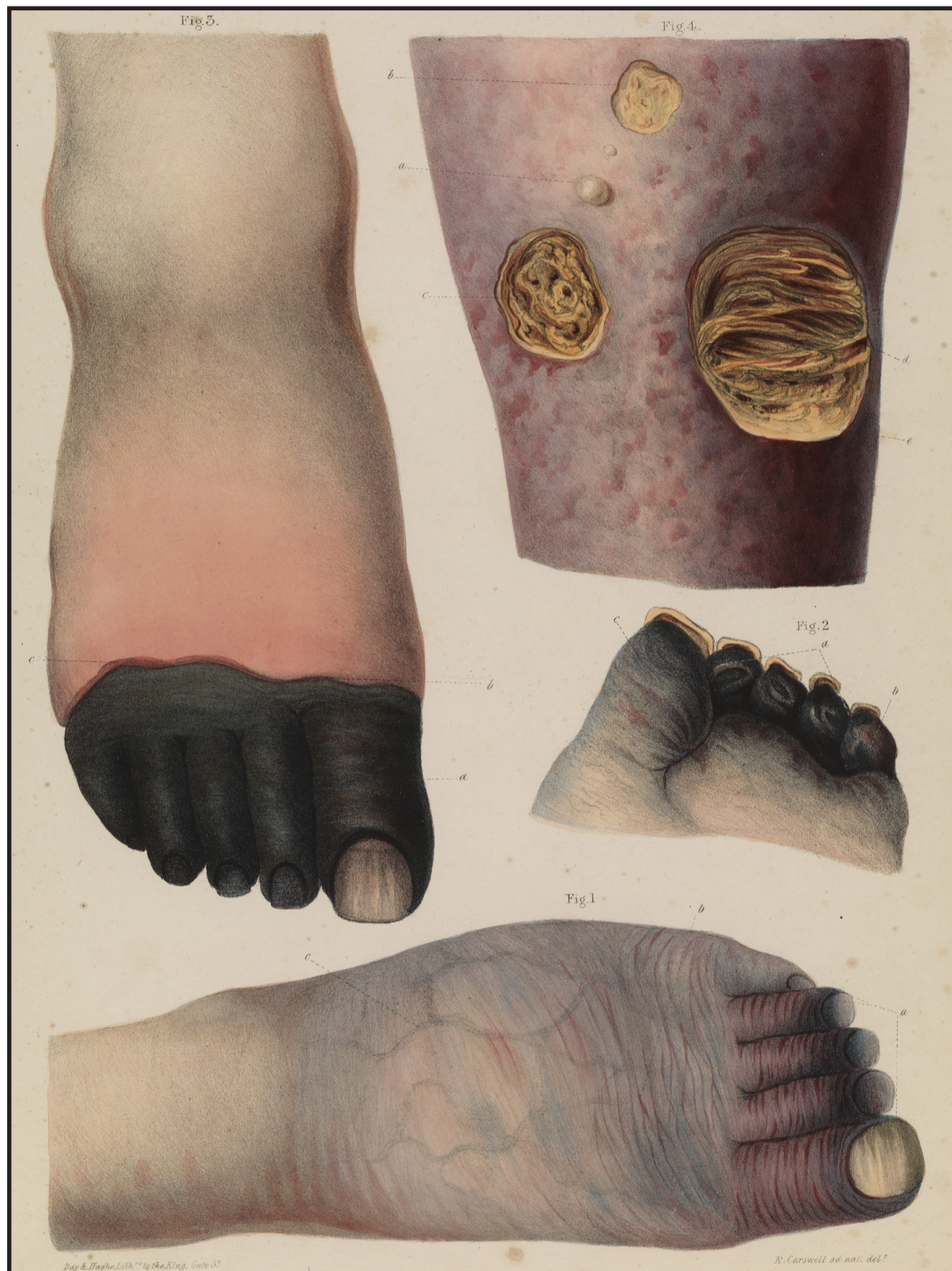
The questions involved are important ones, but tricky to disentangle. Beginning as a discussion about the form of the PCC's October 3 statement, the aggregate moved into questions about who we are attempting to engage with in the present period, and about the political culture of the CPGB.

Jack Conrad opened the discussion on behalf of the PCC with a long and elaborate introduction, defending the October 3 statement and criticising the counter-proposal. He began with an assessment of the political context, arguing that it is now likely that Donald Trump will be elected as US president on November 5, since the gerrymandered character of the electoral college means that a Democrat needs a decisive lead in order to win, and the polls are showing the candidates neck and neck. If so, this will throw the question of the Ukraine war up in the air. It is possible that Trump will force the Ukrainians to settle; equally possible that he will go for Zelensky's escalation 'victory plan'.

The PCC statement arose from the discussion at the last aggregate (September 15).² It appeared at that meeting that there was general agreement on the war situation: the stalemated fronts, and the political pressure for escalation, and hence the *immediate* threat of a slippage into World War III. And there was agreement on the principles involved: that we are opposed to both sides; that our primary responsibility in Britain is to oppose British and thus US/Nato warmaking; and that among the left we oppose primarily pro-Nato social-imperialism, which is a scab policy. But, secondly, we oppose social-pacifism, which promotes illusions in a peaceful capitalism; thirdly, illusions in the 'progressive' role of the Russian FSB regime; and, fourthly, the form of centrism that downplays the political importance of the war or avoids open argument about it, in order to cling to unity with, especially, the social-imperialists. Comrade Roberts at that aggregate suggested the production of a statement, and PCC comrades agreed to the idea.

The basis of the idea of a statement was the *immediate* threat of escalation. But the PCC was delayed in producing the statement, and wound up editing it at the absolute last minute for publication on October 3.

What we hoped for from the statement was some response from other groups on the left. What we actually got was a dispute in our own ranks on the basis that the statement was "not fit for purpose", because it was too long and contained too much content. Comrade Roberts in her original letter proposed the deletion of points 1-10 (which offer motivation for a statement *at this time*, in spite of the dominance of



Robert Carswell 'Mortification' (1830s): the four stages of gangrene

the headlines by the Middle East) and point 19 (which focuses on the hypocrisy of the social-imperialists in simultaneously demanding arms for Ukraine and opposing the cuts in social spending that are to pay for this policy).

Comrade Conrad went on to argue about the objections made by comrade Roberts to *absences* in the statement: that is, that the PCC was dropping our position on "revolutionary defeatism" and "the main enemy is at home", and had omitted the call for a workers' militia. On the last of those questions, the CPGB has persisted, against the opposition of other groups, on the demand for a popular militia. He argued that the conclusion of the statement, calling for "turning what is a war between reactionary capitalist powers into a civil war - a revolution - for democracy, socialism and communism", was in fact *the same as* the ideas of "revolutionary defeatism" and "the main enemy is at home", merely in different *phrases*. If it had

really been the case that we were abandoning the policy, this would have been a betrayal of principle. But he opposed the fetishism of words and phrases.

Comrade Roberts had given as an example our defence of the name, 'Communist Party of Great Britain', against the Eurocommunist liquidators and against the bureaucratic-sectarian *Morning Star* group. But if there was a real prospect of an actual party, we would be willing to sacrifice the name: as when in the early 2000s we argued for the Socialist Alliance, the strongest of the left coalitions to date, to transform itself into a party (any such project was defeated by the successive sabotage of the Socialist Party in England and Wales and of the Socialist Workers Party). The lengthy discussion in comrade Conrad's October 17 article³ of the shift in the Bolsheviks' position on the war after the February revolution was precisely addressed to the question of fetishism of words and phrases; it

was not intended to suggest that the CPGB was addressing the masses.

From the defence of the PCC statement, he moved on to criticise the alternative statement proposed by comrades Ian Spencer, Bob Paul, Andy Hannah, Paul Cooper, Carla Roberts, and Anne McShane.⁴ In the first place, the statement muddled the risk of world war. This came from the Ukraine war, and *not* from the Israeli aggression in the Middle East, since none of Israel's targets have the means to start a world war. Equally, we are *not* dual-defeatists between Israel and its targets. The fact that communists in the region would have to defend themselves against the local nationalists would not alter the fact that the main enemy is US-Israel, just as in China in the 1930s-40s communists had to defend themselves against the Guomindang, but the main enemy was Japan.

The alternative statement confuses the issue of *workers' defence guards* (workers' militia) with the demand for a *people's*

militia as an alternative to the standing army. It displays illusions in the policy of sabotage against the war, which Lenin criticised as helping the rulers to defeat the revolutionaries. It characterises Russia, China and Iran as aspirants to join the core imperialist powers: possible for China, but unlikely for Russia (which, apart from its military, is a mid-rank economy), and delusional for Iran. It is necessary to take seriously what we write and to be precise. In relation to trends on the left, the alternative statement misses out the form of *centrism* that uses diplomatic language and clings to unity with the social-imperialist wing, which the PCC statement had characterised as the worst kind of opportunism; a principled left needs, on the contrary, a clear opposition to this wing.

The closeness of the US presidential election, creating uncertainty, has made the initiative we sought to take less timely. We should not adopt the alternative proposal, he said, but instead continue the discussion.

Discussion

Comrade Roberts' counter-introduction was, as she said at the outset, much shorter. The purpose of the PCC statement was, she said, to cement principled unity on the left. It was not fit for this purpose. The supporters of the alternative proposal had set out to produce an alternative that would be more suitable. The issue of centrist conciliationism was present (implicitly) in the alternative proposal through the criticism of pro-Russianism, social-pacifism and social-patriotism.

The issues are not differences of principle, but differences about how to present our politics. If the PCC had produced a statement with the aim of unity, it should have focussed on principle, rather than including matters of analysis. The PCC *had* dropped the militia question, and had given inconsistent accounts of why - one being that others might disagree.

The supporters of the alternative proposal had laboured under the impression that the PCC statement was open to amendment, and not just from other groups, but also from within CPGB. The original proposed amendments were clearly of a minor tactical nature. Comrade Conrad's article in response to comrade Roberts' original letter showed that he had failed to read it in good faith, she argued, and was an attempt to 'nuke' minor tactical differences. She repeated that the statement was unfit for the purpose of seeking unity. The episode displayed a strange and bad feature of the culture of the organisation. We have to recognise that the group is small and old and needs to renew itself; this requires nurturing rather than squashing comrades' initiative.

Comrade Farzad Kamangar made a short point that what she had said in a cell meeting, which comrade Roberts referred to, was that *if the PCC had included* the militia question in the statement, comrades would have accused us of artificially making a separation from other groups, which oppose us on the issue.

Comrade Martin Greenfield, a guest, said that from the point of view of an outsider (he is in

Australia) the underlying issue seems to be frustration with the CPGB's political isolation. Comrade Conrad seemed to be exaggerating the significance of the differences. He agreed with the supporters of the alternative proposal that the PCC statement did not pin its target down clearly and needed to be shorter and sharper. But he had not signed the alternative proposal; the PCC does have the right to issue statements, and we should not be hung up on the particular form of words for expressing the policy of revolutionary defeatism. He reported that the Australian Revolutionary Communist Organisation's central committee had been divided about how to respond to the PCC statement. On the other hand, "alternative theses at 10 paces" was a cultural problem.

I argued that the fetishism of exact forms of words and long lists of slogans including everything was a part of the culture of the Robertsonite Spartacist League and its descendant organisations - hence comrade Alan Gibson of the Spart-origins Bolshevik Tendency and his intervention on Discord (which comrade Roberts had effectively tailed). The militia question would be diversionary, because orthodox Trotskyists, who oppose CPGB on the militia question, could still have a principled defeatist position on the war.

The question of culture is fundamental. There can be no unity of the left without acceptance that there will be within the unity polemics as sharp as those of the Second International or the early Comintern, and that these will be conducted in the open. The left culture of politeness, and of separating internal from public disagreement, denies the working class the right to choose between competing positions and inevitably leads to bureaucratic control of what can be said and to splits.

Comrade Ian Spencer argued that culture is important. The PCC statement was too long to be discussed by other groups. Comrade Conrad's two-page reply to Carla Roberts seemed to regard any suggestion as treason: the PCC was displaying a "bunker mentality". The

use of the slogan, "The main enemy is at home", had the advantage of clarity. Returning to comrade Greenfield's point, what was the purpose of the PCC statement, if it was not to seek unity? In his view the CPGB has excellent politics, but "an unfortunate way of conducting itself that doesn't invite people in". We have to improve on this, he said.

Comrade Andy Hannah said that the reason for the alternative proposal was that the original statement lacked focus. What was needed was not the detail, but the restatement of fundamental principles. He agreed with comrade Roberts that the alternative proposal did implicitly pose the question of centrism. On the question of party culture, he had the greatest respect for PCC comrades. But the authority of comrades comes with responsibility towards rank-and-file comrades. In Jack Conrad's obituary of Tom May he had remarked that Tom had corrected Jack as a young man gently; the PCC needed to be more Tom-like.

Comrade Tam D, a guest, thought that the debate was making a mountain out of a molehill. He did not see the point of the statement on the basis of the exchanges in the paper. What he now sees on the basis of the discussion is that the point is the British supply of weapons to Ukraine - hence the first 10 points of the PCC statement. But Britain is not at war; this remains a proxy war, not a direct war. Contrast the (1991) Gulf war, where Britain had troops on the ground. Comrade Conrad's response to comrade Roberts' letter was overkill; the effect comes across as a little cult fighting among ourselves, washing our dirty linen in public. The PCC's rush to publish the statement was unnecessary and we should pull back from sharp polemic.

Comrade Kamangar argued that if the original criticisms of the statement were merely tactical, they could have been raised more constructively; they did not come across as friendly, and the PCC was accused of *political* failures. She said that the differences did not seem to be merely tactical, but concerned "what sort of unity". Our older differences on the Labour

Left Alliance were inevitably in comrades' minds. We need to discuss the question of the basis of unity. PCC comrades share the concern about the CPGB's small size and age; but 'unity for the sake of unity', submerging political differences, would be merely ephemeral and no solution.

Second round

Comrade Conrad in a second intervention said that the purpose of the statement was to ring an alarm bell about the danger of, as Donald Trump had put it, "phasing into World War III". The principles and analysis involved were discussed at the September 15 aggregate. The statement aimed to get *engagement* from other groups; in this respect the negative response from *Prometheus*⁵ and the division on the Australian RCO CC were (small) steps forward. The imminence of the US presidential election has thrown the issues up in the air; our planned winter Communist University, which is to discuss the politics of war, will still be before the inauguration.

The *Prometheus* group has issued an invitation to write about the nature and purpose of a party. It would probably be better to devote the next aggregate to that issue (though we will have to submit something to *Prometheus* before then). This leads into the 'culture' issue. We *favour* washing our dirty linen in public. It is over this issue that we have had splits; back in 2012, over our criticism of the Anti-Capitalist Initiative as opportunist;⁶ last year, over freedom of speech and trans rights.⁷ The problem with the left is its *lack* of openness about political differences. We are not out to crush critics; sharpness of expression is not "crushing" people. If the PCC had abandoned the policy of revolutionary defeatism, comrade Roberts' letter and article should have been much sharper than they were.

Comrade Roberts in a second intervention said that comrade Conrad was failing to listen: she, and supporters of the alternative proposal, were *not* claiming that the PCC was abandoning the policy of revolutionary defeatism, but merely that it had dropped the *slogans*. She agreed with the principle of openness on differences, but there is a "middle ground" between hiding differences dishonestly, at one end, and crushing people, at the other end. In a statement that aimed to create principled unity, she argued, the use of standard slogans like "The main enemy is at home" would improve clarity. The material in the PCC statement on weapons systems was already out of date. Communists should present the ABCs in a more succinct form. The PCC was falling into a "bunker mentality". Age and small size means that we have to make plans to replace ourselves; that means working out how to educate people in a way that does not leave them demoralised.

Comrade Cat R, a guest, said that her discussions with comrades outside the CPGB had implications for how to approach the issue. She was not sure that it was clear what the point of the PCC statement was; she had been under the impression that the point was to create a principled pole in the anti-war movement, analogous to the role of Hands Off the People of Iran in the movement against the Iraq war. Was the aim to lead to unity of this sort, or was it to expose and drive wedges? There is a general problem of lack of trust on the left. In this context, the discussions of the approaches of the Bolsheviks in comrades Conrad's and Roberts'

articles and introductions pointed to the importance of tactical flexibility. By using the standard slogans, anti-war comrades in RS21 had succeeded in defeating RS21's initial pro-imperialist line, which reflected the human impulse to oppose aggression.

My own second intervention was addressed to these issues. The statement was not analogous to the Hopi appeal: there is no mass anti-war movement round Ukraine, and Stop the War Coalition's attempt to launch demos against the Ukraine war was a complete failure, with trivial numbers turning out - the attempt abandoned. Our object is, rather, concerned with the *party* question, and what we hoped for was not immediate unity, but rather to begin a *discussion* about the possible basis for unity, in which other groups might, so far as they disagreed, offer *political reasons* for their disagreement. In fact, most British groups are committed to the methods of diplomacy, 'politeness' and the separation of public and internal discussion. In this context comrade Roberts' argument that the PCC statement was "unfit for purpose" actually served other groups' unwillingness to engage with the *politics* in it. The background to this effect is partly that social media platforms, and email lists, have the seriously negative characteristic of promoting instant soundbite responses, which are inconsistent with serious political argument.

Comrade Hannah, more briefly, argued that comrade Kamangar was mistaken to suggest that there was any issue of uniting on a false basis. We are concerned with engaging with the existing left, as it is presently constituted, and for that purpose the alternative proposal was clearer than the PCC statement.

Responding to the discussion, comrade Conrad referred to the difference between minor and major differences. In *One step forward, two steps back* Lenin wrote of the surprising appearance of sharp differences in the *Iskra* group at the 1903 second congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, which initially appeared to be about trivial issues; Trotsky famously referred in 1940

to "From a scratch - to the danger of gangrene".⁸ Comrade Conrad insisted that the present differences are minor - a scratch - but scratches have to be taken seriously. We live in the world of bourgeois society, antagonistic to communism, and left groups can and do collapse into the gangrene of social-imperialism, like the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and Anticapitalist Resistance, or of popular-frontism and the hunt for respectability, like the SWP. Open and sharp political debate and factionalism is the only antiseptic remedy available.

The proponents of the alternative statement did not put the statement to the vote. Comrade Roberts proposed that the aggregate should commission a new statement after the US election result; we need to show that we are serious about unity, as well as insistent that it should be on a principled basis. Comrade Conrad agreed that a new statement would be needed after the US election result, and proposed that we should continue the discussion at the next aggregate meeting - shifting more onto the party question.

The discussion will continue ●

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Notes

1. 'Establishing a principled left' *Weekly Worker* October 3 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1509/establishing-a-principled-left); 'Danger of World War III: the communist response', October 24 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1512/danger-of-world-war-iii-the-communist-response).
2. As Ian Spencer reported in 'Political organisation is key' *Weekly Worker* September 19 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1507/political-organisation-is-key).
3. 'Wrong and right war politics' *Weekly Worker* October 17: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1511/wrong-and-right-war-politics.
4. 'Danger of World War III: the communist response' *Weekly Worker* October 24: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1512/danger-of-world-war-iii-the-communist-response.
5. In this week's letters column; received by the editor before the aggregate.
6. 'Broad fronts and liquidationism' *Weekly Worker* May 30 2012: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/916/broad-fronts-and-liquidationism (and several other articles from that period).
7. 'Upholding the free speech principle' *Weekly Worker* March 9 2023: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1433/upholding-the-free-speech-principle (and following correspondence on the Letters pages).
8. Lenin: www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep, *passim*; Trotsky: www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/ldom/dm/21-scratch1.htm (the title).

Fighting fund Success!

Comrades will be pleased to hear that, with one day still remaining for the *Weekly Worker's* October fighting fund, we've already gone shooting past our monthly £2,250 target. Believe it or not, we've received no less than £2,845 in the first 30 days!

Let's mention first two readers who made donations as a tribute to Tom May, a longstanding member of the *Weekly Worker* team, who died earlier this month. First up was comrade AR, who donated no less than £271 "in Tom's memory" via PayPal. Joining him was comrade GS, who came up with £25 citing the same reason.

Then there was JN from Finland. We accidentally cancelled his subscription a few months back, but he only let us know he hadn't been receiving the paper a couple of days ago. When he was offered a refund, he replied: "No, you can keep it as a donation for the fighting fund. I've been very busy and wouldn't have had time to read the paper anyway." Wow! That works out as £65 he's contributing as a result of our mistake!

Other PayPal donors were

DB (£50), PE (£7) and EG (£5). Then there were a couple of very generous three-figure donations from JC and AK, while other bank transfers/standing orders came our way from LM (£80), JT (£25), AB (£20), IS and JD (£10 each), and DD (£8). Finally comrade Hassan came up with his £10 note.

All that came to a fantastic £866, which helped us go shooting past that monthly target by no less than £595!

I can't say how welcome all that is, given our recent soaring costs, so thanks to each and every one of you. And there's still a day left, as I write, to increase the October total still further! But there's no rush - if you want to help get us off to a good start for November, that would do nicely, thank you!

Either way, please use the web link below to find out how you can contribute ●

Robbie Rix

Our bank account details are name: Weekly Worker sort code: 30-99-64 account number: 00744310 To make a donation or set up a regular payment visit weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate

Online Communist Forum



Sunday November 3 5pm
Mike Macnair and Roxy Hall discuss
Marxism and trans liberation

Use this link to join meeting:
communistparty.co.uk/ocf

Organised by CPGB: communistparty.co.uk and Labour Party Marxists: www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk For further information, email Stan Keable at Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk

A selection of previous Online Communist Forum talks can be viewed at: youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain

CLIMATE

Crunch time for real

Latest UN report shows that we are on course to massively overshoot climate targets. Reaching between 1.9°C and 3.8°C threatens catastrophic consequences for human civilisation, writes **Eddie Ford**



Burning, burning, burning

Making grim reading, last week the UN published its Emissions Gap report titled *Broken record*.¹ This is the 15th edition in a peer-reviewed series that brings together many of the world's top climate scientists to look at future trends in greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, they are not a bunch of 'climate hysterics' and, when it comes to certain things, we should trust experts - it would be absurd to do otherwise, unless you want to live in perpetual ignorance.

The report shows that a continuation of "current policies" would mean that global average temperatures, compared with preindustrial ones, would rise by 3.1°C sometime towards the end of this century. Now this is in the context of the 2015 Paris Accords, which talked about trying to limit global warming to below 1.5°C to avoid disaster. But, the new UN report says, because we are dealing with the future and therefore it is impossible to make exact predictions, there is a range of possibilities - between 1.9°C and 3.8°C. If countries put into action the promises they have already made in their carbon-cutting pledges (which takes a real stretch of the imagination!), then temperatures will rise by 2.6°C to 2.8°C. And stretching things even further to the point of almost magical thinking, if every country puts these plans into action and follows through on their existing net zero pledges, the Emissions Gap report says the rise could be contained to 1.9°C.

The UN's predictions about temperature rises have stayed essentially the same over the past three years since countries met in Glasgow for the Cop26 climate change conference, and are in line with a projection from the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report from 2021, which showed a rise of up to 3.6°C this century under a higher level of emissions. Overall, greenhouse gas emissions rose to a frightening record 57.1 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) in 2023, despite all the fine words and global pledges to cut emissions. The Gap report highlights a number of new factors that are helping to push up emissions, such as a boom in flying, which saw carbon from aviation rise 19.5% compared to 2022, as passenger travel returned close to

pre-pandemic levels. In that sense, Covid was great for the planet! Road transport emissions also rose, quite predictably, while rising temperatures have forced people to resort to more air conditioning. The natural desire in hot countries for cooler homes and offices has had a severely negative impact on climate change, though in a country like Britain we see the reverse phenomenon, with the failure to insulate homes properly leading to rising emissions.

Then we have the much-lauded transition to electricity for vehicles and heating, but it is a fraud, as the increasing number of electric vehicles has the inevitable effect of *driving up demand for power* - often met, of course, by fossil fuel sources. Then you have the actual batteries: the metals, the glass, silicone, roads, etc. So much for the poster boy of the 'green' alternative, which in reality is a great way for capitalists to get even richer and foul up the planet even more, like the despicable Trumpite Elon Musk.

Profit

Obviously, if all that extra electricity is generated by solar or wind power, then it could be a slightly different story - but that is not the case. If we are serious about tackling the climate crisis, we would be transitioning urgently *away* from the car economy, not making it bigger - which is totally perverse and destructive. Not to mention mass aviation, meat and dairy production, and all the rest of it. But capitalism is driven by the relentless pursuit of profit, an endless cycle that loses all sight of human need and therefore becomes production for the sake of production, accumulation for the sake of accumulation. Put another way: M-C-M'. In fact, if you set out to design an economic system that is deeply anti-ecological to its very core, you could not come up with anything better/worse than capitalism.

The UNEP report came out just a few weeks before political leaders gather in Azerbaijan for Cop29. By a dreadful irony, Baku has no emissions reduction target - the capital city has never responded to the annual global Carbon Disclosure Project survey, even though the CDP has been asking city authorities about their carbon targets since 2018. As for Azerbaijan itself, it is one of about 50 countries to lack a national net zero target, though we are told that

the government is "understood" to be working on a new climate plan before Cop starts - no hurry, guys, in your own time.

The report also looks at how much nations must promise to cut greenhouse gases and deliver, in the next round of Nationally Determined Contributions, due for submission in early 2025 ahead of Cop30 in Brazil. Cuts of 42% are needed by 2030 and 57% by 2035 to get on track for 1.5°C, but that bird has flown. According to the report, the estimated global investment needed for a net-zero emissions transition was \$900 million to \$2.1 trillion each year between 2021 and 2050 - but in theory this would offset the significant costs from climate change, air pollution, damage to nature, human health impacts, and so on. Of course, every year that countries fail to cut emissions would mean even sharper cuts were needed, as the report notes. But developing countries would need finance from the richer nations - a controversial topic at previous Cops and one that is top of the agenda for Baku - but whether anything is agreed will be a different matter.

Positive aspects of the report identified the ramp-up in the deployment of solar panels and wind energy, which could deliver 27% of the total reduction of emissions needed by 2030 and 38% in 2035 - a cheap, proven technology that is "not a gamble to invest in", to use the words of the head of UNEP, Inger Andersen. The complete opposite of nuclear power - an insane waste of money - or even carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology, though, perhaps, the latter may have its uses under certain circumstances. Stopping the destruction of forests could bring another 20% cut, it is estimated, and much of the rest could come from energy efficiency and the electrification, using renewable sources, of buildings, transport and industry, as well as cutting methane emissions from fossil fuel facilities - something that is quite doable with our current level of technology, regardless of what technological and scientific leaps we could make in the future. Andersen also makes the point, which seems entirely legitimate, that it is "misguided" to fixate *only* on whether the 1.5°C target was kept or not, because every fraction of a degree of global heating avoided

would save lives, damage and costs - "Don't over-focus on a magic number", as "keeping temperature as low as possible is where we need to be".

Trying to remain on the positive side of things, at least potentially, Oil Change International also published a report recently, showing that the richer countries could generate \$5 trillion a year from a combination of wealth taxes, corporate taxes and a crackdown on fossil fuels.² A wealth tax on billionaires could generate \$483 billion globally, while a financial transaction tax could raise \$327 billion. Taxes on sales of big technology, arms and luxury fashion would be another \$112 billion, and redistributing 20% of public military spending would be worth \$454 billion, if implemented around the world. Stopping subsidies to fossil fuels would free up \$270 billion of public money in the developed world, and about \$846 billion globally. Taxes on fossil fuel extraction would be worth \$160 billion in the developed world and \$618 billion globally. Of course, fossil fuel capitalists, to coin a phrase, would resist such measures to the death - they would have to be forced into line.

Possibilities

But whether a 1.9°C or 3.6°C rise, let alone an even higher increase, this would have catastrophic consequences for the world - meaning that it is "crunch time for real", as Andersen puts it.

There are innumerable possibilities. We could be talking about the Gulf Stream switching off, which would leave a country like Britain having a weather system more like Scandinavia - a logical, but paradoxical, effect of global warming is that some countries could become *colder*. On the other hand, we could see the desertification of areas of North America. You are definitely talking about substantial rises in global sea levels and the inundation of cities such as Dhaka, Jakarta, St Louis, Houston, Alexandria, Shanghai - the list is long and dangerous. A situation whereby in some parts of the world you just could not go outside to work, as temperatures would be so high. This is the sort of world that we are sleepwalking into, despite all the talk and near endless conferences, but with no real action. In fact, in acts of lunacy, more coal power stations are

being opened! Meanwhile, reaching the point of no return, increased global heating is supercharging monster hurricanes, bringing biblical floods, turning forests into tinder boxes and cities into saunas, threatening the total collapse of the Greenland ice shelves, melting ever more permafrost, causing the dieback of the Amazon rainforest, and so on and so forth.

Any idea that the market can come out with a solution to global warming is delusional. But, when it comes to the actual capitalist bureaucratic *state*, then that might not necessarily be the case, though more in a negative way than a positive one. The capitalist state could institute something along the lines that we saw in World War I or, crucially, World War II - the highest example being Britain in terms of mobilising people for the armed forces and instituting state control over production, managing the entire economy for the single purpose of fighting a war.

There could be the equivalent when it comes another form of war, fighting the impending climate catastrophe - a sort of 'climate socialism', in the same way as the German high command during World War I talked about *Kriegssozialismus* ('war socialism'). But it was not actual socialism, of course: rather the bourgeois state machine acting to save capitalism by suppressing the law of value as best it can. Yet, as proven so far by every study and report you can think of, there is no evidence of any moves whatsoever in that direction.

Rather than some variant of *Kriegssozialismus*, however, the most humane and efficient way to actually combat global warming would be through the power of the working class. This is not something that can happen automatically, of course. Mass communist consciousness is required, on a global scale. No-one can deny that, at the moment, a generalised nuclear exchange or a civilisation collapse brought about by climate change look far more likely. We have a duty to change that ... and change it we can ●

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Notes

1. [unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2024](https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2024).
2. oilchange.org/about.

KURDISTAN

First stumble on a slippery road

Esen Uslu discusses the possibility of a Turkish 'peace process' with the PKK and how to assess the suicide attack on the TIA factory in Ankara. With the US election and ongoing kaleidoscopic regional power struggles we should expect the unexpected

Parliamentary elections in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region were finally held on October 20. Maybe the fact that the poll had been repeatedly delayed - the original plan was for 2022 - increased voter turnout. It went from 59% in 2018 to 72%, a figure widely interpreted as a reflection of people wanting stability.

Bafel Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan failed dismally to achieve its much-hyped breakthrough: it only won 23 seats (the prediction was for 28-30) with 22% of the popular vote. However, Masoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party won 44% of the vote and got 39 seats - doing better than the predictions (30-35 seats).

Shaswar Abdulwahid's New Generation Movement came third winning 16% of the vote and 15 seats. Almost doubling its representation over the 2018 elections, NGM got a far better result than predicted. Its leadership declared immediately after the elections, as promised before, that it would not take part in any coalition government. Appearing as the representative of the newly emerging business class, popular with media-savvy educated young voters, it believes that standing aloof from traditional tribal politics will improve its political fortunes. NGM may, therefore, soon be eagerly courted by regional and global power players, including the USA.

Some lengthy negotiations and hard bargaining will be the order of the day before another, shaky, coalition government is formed. However, power struggles between Iran and Turkey have certainly increased pressure on the Kurdish parties. Turkish military operations have increased in size and scope, forcing what has been a power-sharing government since 1992, as well as the KPD's *peshmergas*, towards a policy of increased collaboration. Meanwhile, in January, the Iranians bombed the so-called Mossad 'spy HQ' in the regional capital of Erbil, this following attacks, in September 2022, on bases of Iranian Kurdish organisations located in Barzani's zone of Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran has thereby encouraged, as perhaps intended, the central government in Baghdad into asserting itself at the expense of the Kurds.

Oil exports

Kurdish oil exports through Turkey, bypassing the Iraqi central government, have now stopped. This after the case before the international arbitration court had obtained a favourable ruling. Since then, the Kurdish regional government has failed to set up a new profit-sharing mechanism with the central government. As a result, oil revenues have dried up.

The dire economic consequences have seen the regional government in Erbil being unable to pay the salaries of state employees and members of the *peshmerga*. It grudgingly sought support from the Iraqi government. The price it had to pay was the acceptance of mediation between the Shia parties and Iran in order to be able



Kurdish female PKK fighters

to sit at a bargaining table with the Iraqi government.

Turkey did everything it could to successfully prevent a PUK win in the elections. However it was unable to achieve its main aims, and now an outcome more beneficial to the Iraqi central government and Iran has emerged.

Last year, during the provincial elections in Kirkuk, which is overwhelmingly a Kurdish city, but constitutionally outside the borders of the regional government, Turkey supported an ad hoc coalition of the KDP with Turkmen and Arab minority parties to pile pressure on the PUK. But PUK has maintained its support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) - which seeks autonomy within Turkey - and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Talabani has clearly opted to form closer relations with the Baghdad regime and the Shia parties - and through them the Tehran regime.

After the September 2017 botched attempt at independence was stopped by all the regional powers, Kurdish parties and *peshmergas* were forced to evacuate the disputed oil-rich area of Kirkuk. Military control went from the *peshmergas* to central government soldiers. However, in the first elections after the takeover, Talabani's PUK won the governorate, much to the chagrin of Turkey.

A sizeable minority in Kirkuk are Turkmen, but Turkey's longstanding policy of attempting to use them as proxies has visibly failed. Turkey had installed a Muslim Brotherhood supporter to head the Turkmen Front, which brings various Turkmen factions together in Iraq. During the 2014 Islamic State uprising Turkey blatantly supported the Sunnis, and it lost the support of the Shia Turkmen in the Kirkuk region. Increasingly Turkmen cleaved to an accommodation with both Baghdad and Tehran.

However, the Turkmen minority within the official borders of the regional government was quite small and very apolitical in respect to the elections - they do not vote in large numbers. Since the quota system - which was supposed to

increase their participation in the political process - has, in fact, been controlled by the KDP and PUK in their zones, only candidates close to them have been elected.

This apathy has not changed much with the recent changes in the quota system. Out of the five seats earmarked for the Turkmen minority, two went to candidates supported by Talabani's PUK, and three went to those with the support of Barzani's KDP.

New tack

While Iraqi Kurdistan was busy with elections, Syrian Kurdistan remained the main headache for Turkey. Thanks to Russian mediation, a kind of accommodation has been reached with the Assad regime. However, the primary condition for Damascus was the withdrawal of the Turkish occupation army in northern Syria and an end to its support of the Sunni Islamist regime in Idlib province.

The calamity of the Israel-Palestine war has pushed Turkey into an accommodation with Syria. However, while the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava) is still there, and large swathes of land are controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces in alliance with the US, Turkey cannot move.

The government's 'solution' to the impasse was to improve relations with the PKK and end its "terror war". In fact, for a long period the PKK has not engaged in any substantial guerrilla attacks within Turkey, but its stature in the Rojava region is growing stronger, not least thanks to its ability to withstand Turkey's aerial bombardment and long-distance artillery barrages.

The initial move came from a small party in the coalition government under president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - in fact, from Devlet Bahçeli, president of the MHP (Nationalist Action Party) of the infamous fascist Grey Wolves. When the Turkish parliament convened after the summer recess, Bahçeli went over to the seats occupied by the pro-Kurdish Peoples Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) and shook hands

with its MPs. Just a few weeks ago, the same man was calling for a ban on the DEM, demanding that its MPs were thrown out of parliament and that the payment of state funds to which they are entitled be stopped. Such a sudden change in political approach was surely only possible if there was an agreement with Erdoğan.

A hullabaloo was raised within the opposition ranks. Even some of Erdoğan's own MPs were caught unaware. The main opposition party, the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), stated that it believes the "normalisation" of relations between opposing politics would be beneficial for Turkish democracy.

Within a couple of days, Bahçeli raised the stakes. In his weekly speech to the MHP group in parliament, he said that if Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the PKK, is ready to shout unequivocally that he has abolished that "terrorist organisation", he should therefore be released from prison to address MPs.

This call was a cold-shock for many rightwing MPs, including influential faction leaders within Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). After all, Öcalan, has been kept incommunicado for more than four years, unable to speak to his lawyers or relatives. Now MHP's leader is calling his arch enemy, the leader of the Kurdish freedom movement to come to the sacred Turkish parliament and address its members! In return he would benefit from a change in the law which has been preventing his release, despite the fact that he has completed 25 years of a life sentence.

A couple of days later, Öcalan's nephew, who is a DEM MP, was allowed to visit him. He returned with Öcalan's message welcoming the move, and stating, "Provided that the circumstances are put in place, I have the theoretical and practical acumen to proceed towards peace."

Rank-and-file politicians who had been unable to cope with the change gradually came to their senses. However, Erdoğan has yet to commit himself. But the

CHP leader visited the former president of the DEM, Selahattin Demirtaş, in prison and came out with his tacit support to the new approach, stating that any political move should accept Öcalan as the respondent, and that the Kurdish movement would stand by him as a bloc.

That move was designed as a snub to Erdoğan, who was adamant on keeping Demirtaş in jail, while playing the Öcalan trump. Afterwards Özgür Özel, leader of CHP, entered talks with local Kurdish politicians, starting with a visit to Diyarbakır, the hotbed of Kurdish resistance. However, as he arrived, the Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) factory in Ankara was attacked by two PKK suicide bombers. Along with them, five people were killed, and 22 wounded.

Aeronautics

The TAI factory has been the focal point of the state's efforts to create an aeronautics industry - CASA 235 transport planes and F-16 fighter jets were assembled there. But the government's ineptitude to prevent such an attack in the capital city on such an important facility, and failure to obtain any intelligence beforehand (while boasting that it knew each and every 'terrorist' and their whereabouts), were hard to believe. Another glaring security failure was the leaking of CCTV footage from the TAI security cameras to the press, so that the attack was broadcast as a live TV show.

But the government attempted to prove that its 'war on terror' was working, and claimed the guerrillas had come from Syrian Kurdistan. It started a fresh wave of aerial bombing in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan the same night. Mazlum Kobane, the leader of the Syrian Democratic Forces, took part in a TV broadcast where he refused all allegations categorically stating that the SDF had resolved not to engage in any military activity on Turkish soil. He reiterated that its primary and only field of activity has been in Syria.

For a day or so the PKK was unsure what to say, but eventually it produced a statement saying that the action had been planned well in advance against a military target by an autonomous cell, and had nothing to do with the recent policy change of the government.

After the initial shock of the TAI attack, all parties seemed bent on continuing the peace process. The parliamentary opposition saw the prospect of a cynical approach to changing the constitution through policy change, so as to enable Erdoğan's life-long electability as president and a further strengthening of presidential rule. Before the dust of the US presidential elections has settled, such a move is not expected, but all parties, including the top brass of Turkey's security apparatus, seem to be preparing for sudden changes.

The path pursued by Turkey on its current slippery slope seems to have many pitfalls. In these circumstances, we will continue to 'expect the unexpected and suspect the unsuspected'! ●

BRICS**Brics+ summit plenary session in Kazan**

Recipe for fragmentation

Who can challenge the US-led global financial institutions? Definitely not the much hyped Brics bloc, writes **Michael Roberts**

Last week the International Monetary Fund-World Bank semi-annual meeting took place in Washington. At the same time, the Brics+ group met in Kazan, Russia. The coincidence of these two meetings sums up how the world economy is going in 2024.

After World War II, the IMF and the World Bank became the leading agencies for international cooperation and action on the world economy. They were institutions that sprang out of the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944, which laid down the future world economic order to be established at the end of the war. At the time, the then US president, Franklin Roosevelt, offered these prophetic words: "The point in history at which we stand is full of promise and of danger. The world will either move toward unity and widely shared prosperity or it will move apart into necessarily competing economic blocs."

Roosevelt was referring to the division between the US and its allies and the Soviet Union. That 'cold war' came to an end with the collapse of the latter in 1990, but now, 35 years later, Roosevelt's words have a new context: between the US and its allies and an emerging bloc of 'global south' nations.

The world economic order that was agreed at Bretton

Woods established the US as the hegemonic economic power in the world. In 1945, it was the largest manufacturing nation: it had the most important financial sector, the most potent military forces - and it dominated world trade and investment through the international use of the dollar.

John Maynard Keynes was heavily involved in the Bretton Woods deal. He commented that his "foresighted idea for a new institution to more equitably balance the interests of creditor and debtor countries was rejected". Keynes's biographer, Robert Skidelsky, summed up the outcome. "Naturally, the Americans got their way because of their economic power. Britain gave up its right to control the currencies of its former empire, whose economies now came under the control of the dollar, not sterling." In return, "the Brits got credit to survive - but with interest charged. Keynes told the British parliament that the deal was not "an assertion of American power, but a reasonable compromise between two great nations with the same goals; to restore a liberal world economy." The other nations were ignored, of course.

The US and its allies in Europe have dominated the IMF and the World Bank ever since, both in personnel and in policies. Despite

some very minor reforms to its voting and decision-making over the past 80 years, the IMF continues to be run by the G7, giving almost no voice to other countries. There are a total of 24 seats on the IMF board, with the UK, US, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Japan and China each having individual seats - and the US having the power to veto any big decisions.

IMF policy

As for economic policy, the IMF is perhaps most notorious for the imposition of 'structural adjustment programmes'. IMF loans were 'given' to countries in economic distress on the condition that they agreed to balance their deficits, squeeze public spending, open their markets and privatise key sectors of the economy. The single most widely recommended IMF policy is still to cut or freeze public sector wage bills.¹ And the IMF still refuses to call for progressive taxes on the income and wealth of the richest individuals and corporations. As of 2024, 54 countries are now in a debt crisis and many are spending more on servicing their debt than on financing education or health. I have previously highlighted some of the worst cases.²

The World Bank's criteria for loans and aid to the poorest nations also remain within the

mainstream economic view that public investment is made merely to encourage the private sector to take up the task of investment and development. The World Bank economists ignore the role of state investment and planning. Instead, it wants to create "markets globally contestable, reduce factor and product market regulations, let go of unproductive firms, strengthen competition, deepen capital markets".³

Kristalina Georgieva has just been endorsed for a second term as IMF chief. And she now talks of "inclusive" economic policies.⁴ Georgieva says she wants to increase "global collaboration and reduce economic inequality". The IMF claims it now cares about the negative consequences of fiscal austerity, often citing how social spending should be protected from cuts through conditions that stipulate spending floors. Yet, an Oxfam analysis of 17 recent IMF programmes found that for every \$1 the IMF encouraged these countries to spend on social protection, it told them to cut \$4 through austerity measures. The analysis concluded that social spending floors were "deeply inadequate, inconsistent, opaque, and ultimately failing".⁵

Until recently, the IMF reckoned faster growth depended on higher productivity, free flows of capital, globalisation of international

trade and 'liberalisation' of markets, including labour markets (meaning weakening labour rights and unions). Inequality did not come into it. This was the neoliberal formula for economic growth. But the experience of the great recession of 2008-09 and pandemic slump of 2020 seems to have delivered a sobering lesson to the IMF's economic hierarchy. Now the world economy is suffering from "anaemic growth".

So the IMF is worried. Georgieva said the reason that the major economies are experiencing slowing and low real GDP growth is soaring inequality of wealth and income: "We have an obligation to correct what has been most seriously wrong over the last 100 years - the persistence of high economic inequality. IMF research shows that lower income inequality can be associated with higher and more durable growth."⁶ Climate change, rising inequality and increased geopolitical 'fragmentation' also threaten the world economic order and the stability of the social fabric of capitalism. So something must be done.

During the long depression, globalisation has fragmented along geopolitical lines: around 3,000 trade-restricting measures were imposed in 2023 - nearly three times the number in 2019. Georgieva is worried:

What we fight for

■ Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question—ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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Geoeconomic fragmentation is deepening as countries shift trade and capital flows. Climate risks are increasing and already affecting economic performance, from agricultural productivity to the reliability of transportation and the availability and cost of insurance. These risks may hold back regions with the most demographic potential, such as sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

Meanwhile, higher interest rates and debt-servicing costs are straining government budgets - leaving less room for countries to provide essential services and invest in people and infrastructure.

So Georgieva wants a new approach for her new five-year term. The previous neoliberal model for growth and prosperity must be replaced with 'inclusive growth' that aims to reduce inequalities and not just boost real GDP. The key issues now should be "inclusion, sustainability, and global governance, with a welcome emphasis on eradicating poverty and hunger".

But can the IMF or the World Bank really change anything, even if Georgieva wants to, when the US and its allies control these institutions? IMF loan conditionalities have hardly altered. There is some debt relief maybe (ie, some restructuring of existing loans), but no cancellations of onerous debt. As for interest rates on these loans, the IMF actually imposes hidden extra penalty rates on very poor countries unable to meet their repayment obligations! After a growing outcry against these penalties, these rates have recently been reduced (not abolished), thus lowering costs for debtors by (only) \$1.2 billion annually.⁸

Christine Lagarde, head of the European Central Bank, was the previous IMF chief. She made an important 'keynote' speech last spring to the US Council of Foreign Relations in New York. Lagarde talked nostalgically of the post-1990s period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, supposedly heralding a new prosperous period of global dominance by the US and its 'alliance of the willing':

In the time after the cold war, the world benefited from a remarkably favourable geopolitical environment. Under the hegemonic leadership of the United States, rules-based international institutions flourished and global trade expanded. This led to a deepening of global value chains and, as China joined the world economy, a massive increase in the global labour supply.⁹

These were the days of the globalisation wave of rising trade and capital flows; the domination of Bretton Woods institutions like the IMF and the World Bank dictating the terms of credit; and, above all, the expectation that China would be brought under the imperialist bloc after it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001.

However, it did not work out as expected. The globalisation wave came to an abrupt end after the great recession and China did not play ball in opening up its economy to the west's multinationals.¹⁰ That forced the US to switch its policy on China from 'engagement' to 'containment' - and with increasing intensity in the last

few years.¹¹ And then came the renewed determination of the US and its European satellites to expand its control eastwards and so ensure that Russia fails in its attempt to exert control over its border countries and permanently weaken Russia as an opposition force to the imperialist bloc. This led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

New members

This brings us to the rise of the Brics bloc of countries. Brics is the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, the original members. Now in Kazan, there will be the first meeting of Brics-plus with its new members: Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, the UAE (and maybe Saudi Arabia).

There is much optimistic talk among the left that the emergence of the Brics grouping will change the balance of economic and political forces globally. It is true that the five Brics nations now have a combined gross domestic product larger than that of the G7 in purchasing power parity terms (a measure of what GDP can buy domestically in goods and services). And, if you add in the new members, that makes the gap even larger.

But there are caveats. First, within Brics, it is China that provides the bulk of the Brics GDP (accounting for 17.6% of global GDP), followed by India at a distant second (7%); while Russia (3.1%), Brazil (2.4%), and South Africa (0.6%) together make up just 6.1% of world GDP. So this is no equally shared economic power within Brics. And when we measure GDP per person, the Brics states are nowhere. Even using international dollars adjusted according to purchasing power parity (PPP), the United States' per-capita GDP amounts to \$80,035 - more than three times that of China (\$23,382).

The Brics+ group will remain a much smaller and weaker economic force than the G7 imperialist bloc. Moreover, the Brics states are very diverse in terms of population, GDP per head, geographically and trade composition. And the ruling elites in these countries are often at loggerheads (China v India; Brazil v Russia, Iran v Saudi Arabia). Unlike the G7, which has increasingly homogenous economic objectives under the firm hegemonic control of the US, the Brics group is disparate in wealth and income and without any unified economic objectives - except maybe to try and move away from the economic dominance of the US and, in particular, the US dollar.

However, even that objective is going to be difficult to achieve. As I have pointed out previously,¹² even though there has been a relative decline in US economic dominance globally and in the dollar, the latter remains the most important currency by far for trade, investment and national reserves. Approximately half of all global trade is invoiced in dollars and this share has hardly changed. The US dollar was involved in nearly 90% of global Forex (FX) currency transactions, making it the single most traded currency. Approximately half of all cross-border loans, international debt securities and trade invoices are denominated in US dollars, while roughly 40% of messages via the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (Swift) and 60% of global foreign exchange reserves are in dollars.

The Chinese yuan continues

to make gradual gains and the renminbi's share in global FX turnover has increased from less than 1% 20 years ago to more than 7% now. But the Chinese currency still only represents 3% of global FX reserves (up from 1% in 2017). And China does not appear to have changed the dollar share of its reserves in the last 10 years.

John Ross has made similar points in his excellent analysis of 'de-dollarisation':

In short, countries/companies/institutions engaging in de-dollarisation either suffer, or run the risk of suffering, significant costs and risks. In contrast, there are no equivalent immediate upside gains from abandoning the dollar. Therefore, the great majority of countries/companies/institutions will not de-dollarise unless forced to. The dollar, therefore, cannot be replaced as the international currency unit without an entire change in the global international situation, for which the objective international conditions do not yet exist.¹³

Moreover, multilateral institutions that could be an alternative to the existing IMF and World Bank (controlled by the imperialist economies) are still tiny and weak. For example, there is the BRICS' New Development Bank, set up in 2015 in Shanghai. The NDB is headed up by Brazil's former leftist president, Dilma Rousseff. There is much noise that the NDB can provide an opposite pole of credit to the imperialist institutions of the IMF and World Bank, but there is a long way to go in doing that. One ex-official of the South African Reserve Bank commented: "The idea that Brics initiatives, of which the most prominent thus far has been the NDB, will supplant western-dominated multilateral financial institutions is a pipe dream".¹⁴

And, as Patrick Bond put it recently,

The 'talk left, walk right' of Brics' role in global finance is seen not only in its vigorous financial support for the International Monetary Fund during the 2010s, but more recently in the decision by the Brics New Development Bank - supposedly an alternative to the World Bank - to declare a freeze on its Russian portfolio in early March, since otherwise it would not have retained its western credit rating of AA+.¹⁵

And Russia is a 20% equity holder in the NDB.

The Brics is a motley group of nations with governments that have no internationalist perspective (certainly not one based on working class internationalism!), led, as many are, by autocratic regimes, where working people have little or no say; or by governments still tied heavily to the interests of the imperialist bloc.

Fundamentals

Let us conclude by going back to Bretton Woods and Roosevelt's prophecy. Many modern Keynesians hold up the Bretton Woods agreement as one of the great successes of Keynesian policy in delivering the sort of global cooperation that the world economy needs in order to get out of its current depression. What is needed, you see, is for all the world's major economies

to get together to work out a new agreement on trade and currencies with rules to ensure that all countries work for the 'global good'.

Two Keynesians from the Democratic Party in the US recently reckoned that "a different kind of worldview has never been clearer. This is revealed by a look at any of the problems of our age, from climate to inequality to social exclusion ... Designing a new global economic framework requires a global-scale conversation".¹⁶

Indeed. But is it really possible in a world controlled by an imperialist bloc led by an increasingly protectionist and militarist regime (with Trump on the horizon) that it can be resisted by a loose amalgam of governments which are often exploiting and suppressing their own people? In such a situation, hopes for a new coordinated world order in global money, trade and finance is ruled out. A new and fair 'Bretton Woods' is not going to happen in the 21st century - on the contrary.

Back to Lagarde: "The single most important factor influencing international currency usage" is the "strength of fundamentals". In other words, on the one hand, the trend of weakening economies in the imperialist bloc facing very slow growth and slumps during the rest of this decade;¹⁷ and, on the other, continued expansion of China and even India. This means that the heavy military and financial dominance of the US and its allies stands on the chicken legs of relatively poor productivity, investment and profitability.

That is a recipe for global fragmentation and conflict ●

Michael Roberts blogs at thenextrecession.wordpress.com.

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Putin sees an
opportunity to
distract from
Ukraine

Restraint for the moment

Israel's latest attack on Iran stayed clear of nuclear and oil facilities. In turn Iran's response has been decidedly muted. One thing is certain, though, writes Yassamine Mather, if Donald Trump is elected on November 5, everything changes

Early on October 26, Israel launched its long-anticipated attack on Iran, following the massive Iranian ballistic missile strikes 25 days prior. The Iranian attack had been in response to Israel killing Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah, and an Iranian commander.

Israel's retaliation, although significant, stopped short of hitting nuclear or strategic facilities, targeting instead missile production sites and Iranian aerial defence systems across Ilam, Khuzestan and Tehran. Israel stated that it had struck around 20 targets - at least one was previously linked to Iran's nuclear programme. Buildings were damaged at another site about 30 kilometres east of Tehran, which, according to experts, is the development and production centre of Parchin weapons and a military base in Khajir. Fabian Hinz of the International Institute for Strategic Studies says: "Khajir is known as the region with the highest concentration of infrastructure related to ballistic missiles in Iran." Satellite images published a day after show evidence of possible damage to the airforce base in Isfahan. There are also reports that a storage unit at the Abadan oil refinery, located in the south-western province of Khuzestan, was hit.

However, we do not know the true impact of Israel's attack. The Islamic Republic is not giving out any information. Some of the satellite images presented by the US, at times confirmed by BBC, do not provide reliable information. Some of the damage may be the result of debris or misfired defensive systems.

Speculation

The *New York Times*, citing Israeli officials, reported that the Abadan oil refinery was subjected to air strikes. Iranian officials confirmed that Khuzestan province had been targeted by Israel, while the Abadan oil refinery is the largest in Iran and, according to its CEO, can refine 500,000 barrels per day.

Despite earlier speculation, no senior Iranian leaders or nuclear facilities were targeted. Indeed, the Iranian authorities are keen to downplay things, claiming limited damage, with air defences intercepting some strikes, and confirming that just two soldiers were killed. The media and news channels in Iran showed pictures of cities with normal traffic, oil installations operating as expected and calmly announced that after Israel's operations, the situation has returned to "normal".

Following the attack, Iran briefly suspended some flights, but quickly resumed normal air services. In a statement, the government condemned Israel, citing its right to self-defence under the UN charter and warning of potential retaliation. Iran's options include direct strikes on Israel, acting through proxies, which have been weakened, or targeting US interests in the region. All of these options



Israel F-16 used in October's strike

could lead to further escalation. The Israeli military emphasised that if Iran were to escalate the conflict further, it would be 'compelled' to respond.

According to prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel has dealt a heavy blow to Iran's defence and missile production capabilities. Meanwhile, Abbas Araghchi, Iran's foreign minister, said that "the Americans have provided an air corridor" to the Israeli airforce. There is evidence that Israel used Iraqi airspace on October 26. The Iraqi government has announced that it has filed a complaint to the UN, calling the action a "flagrant violation" of its sovereignty. Meanwhile, leaders of Iran-backed Shiite armed groups have responded with a notably restrained stance, mainly advocating intensified diplomatic measures.

Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, instructed his officials that Israel's attack should neither be magnified nor played down, and the military should consider how to respond. This was interpreted by some as a deliberate way of avoiding responsibility... or indefinitely putting on hold any response. This has intensified internal divisions, especially amid discussions over the country's future leadership.

The 'reformists' in the current government favour engaging with the west to reduce tensions, seeing this as an opportunity to avoid escalation,

while hardliners advocate a forceful response against Israel, despite the risk of further conflict. The core issue remains Iran's future foreign policy direction. Other criticisms have also surfaced, with some critics accusing Khamenei of shirking responsibility, contrasting his current approach with his past insistence on direct control over military matters.

Khamenei's advisor, Ali Akbar Velayati, has suggested openness in regard to cooperation with western countries, while conservative figures like judiciary chief Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei and parliament speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf called for a clear, strong response to Israel. The government in Tehran is well aware of its current popularity in Arab countries and any response will take into account the possibility of maintaining this support.

Contrary to claims by rightwing exiles that any "targeted" Israeli military attack will show the regime's weakness, lead to mass demonstrations and the collapse of the Islamic Republic, in reality very little has changed in terms of internal politics. A short video showing one of the soldiers who died visiting his mother, who appears to be a modern-dressed, secular woman, has gone viral, prompting support from unlikely quarters among young Iranians.

The international response was mixed. Saudi Arabia condemned

the attack as a violation of Iranian sovereignty, while the US supported Israel's 'right to self-defence'. France, the UK and others urged Iranian "restraint to prevent further escalation". (Amazing how after a year of genocide, everyone but the culprit, Israel, is asked to show "restraint".) The UAE, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Iraq expressed concern over the attack's potential to destabilise the region, with Iraq denouncing Israeli aggression. Hamas also condemned the Israeli attack, framing it as a violation of Iranian sovereignty.

Russia and China

The United States and its allies have consistently accused Iran of aligning with Russia regarding the Ukraine war. Both the US and the UK allege that Iran has supplied Moscow with ballistic missiles and hundreds of offensive drones. While Iran officially denies this, an Iranian MP has indicated that these weapons are being provided in exchange for food imports.

According to some reports, Iran's airforce has weakened after years of sanctions, and Russia appears to have recently delivered at least one light attack aircraft to Iran. In return for arms shipments, Russia is expected to veto any critical UN resolutions against Iran and to resist any military actions against the country.

For Russia, increased tensions in

the Middle East offer an opportunity to redirect the west's focus from Ukraine, potentially diverting resources to another front. However, the Kremlin is concerned about the possible impact of Israeli attacks on Iran's transportation infrastructure, which is crucial, given Russia's limited routes for oil exports given that it is under international sanctions. One of these routes, however, passes through Iran to India.

While Russia needs Iran more than Israel, it attempts to maintain relations with both. Israel has criticised Russia's actions in Ukraine and its alliance with Iran, but it has refrained from sending military aid to Ukraine, despite repeated requests. Russia may worry that a stronger alignment with Iran could prompt Israel to begin supplying arms to Ukraine. However, an escalation in the Middle East might limit Israel's capacity to do so.

The South Caucasus presents a complex geopolitical landscape, with competing interests between Russia and Iran. This region is increasingly significant for Russian trade and energy amid international sanctions. Azerbaijan, a neighbouring country to both Russia and Iran, plays a pivotal role, with its resources and strategic position, enhancing transportation links with both countries, while also maintaining close military ties with Israel, which has supplied it with advanced weaponry, including drones. Azerbaijan has allowed Israel to use its military facilities for intelligence activities against Iran, though Azerbaijan denies it.

Russia must carefully manage its relations with Azerbaijan, especially given the potential strain that any Israeli action against Iran could place on these ties. Russia, heavily reliant on China for technology and military components, often aligns with China's approach. While China has long supported Iran diplomatically and economically, it remains cautious, avoiding direct involvement to protect its broader regional interests, including significant investments in Israel.

Ironically a few days before the Israeli attack, Iran's president, Masoud Pezeshkian, who was attending the Brics Summit held in Kazan, Russia, met with the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, who pointed out that Iran is a country with important regional and international influence and a good friend and partner of China.

China's approach involves verbal support for Iran without deep engagement that could jeopardise its relationships with other regional players. Despite continuously rising Israeli-Iranian tensions, China is unlikely to take a stance that would risk its economic interests.

Overall, the situation presents a complex web of alliances and strategic interests, making it difficult to predict how Russia, Iran and China will try to further their broader goals and ambitions. One thing is for certain though, if Donald J Trump is elected on November 5, everything changes ●

SUPPLEMENT

A monotheism sponsored in Persia

Historical research, biblical studies and archaeology reveal a complex picture of royalist nationalism, opposition prophets and class struggles. Jack Conrad investigates the origins of Judaism

During the 8th century BCE two states rose to prominence in what is now Israel-Palestine. In the north, the Israeli kingdom became something of a regional power, while in the south there was the much weaker kingdom of Judea. We must discount the existence of the united kingdom of David and Solomon and their fabulous empire. A politically motivated invention.¹

However, when it comes to real, verifiable history, both the northern kingdom of Israel, based on the city of Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judea, based on Jerusalem, clearly owed their existence to the strategic power vacuum that existed in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, caused by what historians call the general crisis of the late Bronze Age.² The Hittite empire disappeared entirely, the Mycenaean city-states collapsed and Egypt was severely weakened.

Egypt slowly began to revive - crucially, though, there was the growth of the neo-Assyrian empire. It expanded east, south and west. At its furthest extent its realms stretched from the Persian gulf to the Mediterranean coast - the first world empire.³ Surviving reliefs, stelae and monumental statues boast of the terrorist methods its kings employed:

With battle and slaughter I assaulted and took the city. Three thousand warriors I slew in battle. Their possessions I carried away. Many of their soldiers I took alive; some of them I cut off hands and limbs; of others the noses, ears and arms; of many soldiers I put out the eyes. I devastated the city, dug it up, in fire I burned it; I annihilated it.⁴

Inevitably, given the power balance, the northern kingdom fell under Assyrian domination. In 738 BCE Tiglath-Pileser III reduced it to vassal status and demanded substantial tribute. A thousand talents of silver was paid over, reports 1 Kings xv,19. Pro- and anti-Assyrian factions formed and fought for influence in the Samarian court. Doubtless, though, there was political overlap and considerable fluidity, given changing internal and external factors.

When the anti-Assyrian faction momentarily gained the upper hand, Israel's monarch, Pekah (reigned 735-32 BCE), attempted to force the southern kingdom of Judea to join his rebellion - that would have involved recognition of northern leadership - something which the southern king, Ahaz, was less than willing to do. The anti-Assyrian coalition united Israel and Syria, but both had to sue for peace, when the king of kings once again entered the Levant with his mighty army. There was a heavy price to pay for the so-called Syro-Ephraimite⁵ war of 734 BCE in loss of territory and extra tribute.

Pekah is then murdered by the pro-Assyrian faction and replaced by Hoshea. He is favoured by the Assyrians. However, with the death of Tiglath-Pileser, the anti-Assyrian faction once again gains the upper hand and Hoshea, this time allied to Egypt, makes another attempt to gain independence. He was soundly beaten too by the new Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V: he besieged and took Samaria during his campaign of 727-25 BCE. A few years later, perhaps in 720 BCE, Israel made a last independence bid. It revolted against either Shalmaneser or his successor, Sargon II (the records are unclear). But once again there was failure. The Assyrians dismembered the kingdom. And to ensure that nothing of the like happened again there was a social decapitation.

The local elite - the great landowners, priests and the most wealthy - were deported. Assyrian records tell of 27,290 being marched off into exile. Thereon after, the northern kingdom ceases to exist except as an object of Judean expansionism. Later, of course, its common people became Christian and later again Muslim. Many of today's Palestinian Arabs are surely the descendants of these ancient Hebrews.

Down south

Events moved according to a similar, but delayed, rhythm in the southern kingdom. Archaeological evidence shows that between the late 8th and early 7th centuries BCE the population of Jerusalem multiplies many times over - from a thousand to perhaps



Charles Texier 'Cyrus the Great' (1852). In biblical accounts, Persia's king is depicted as an agent of the Jewish god

15,000. A rough estimate, of course; and with equal vagueness historians reckon a one-in-20 to one-in-10 ratio between urban and rural populations in the ancient world. So that would give a total population in Judea of around 200,000 at the time.

A new, 20-foot thick wall was built to surround Jerusalem's western hill and

incorporate the tightly packed houses that had sprung up around the city. Meanwhile, the bureaucratic, mercantile and religious elite amassed considerable fortunes and indulged their whims on conspicuous consumption. They provided themselves with numerous hangers-on, married handsome wives, lived in large town houses and were buried in

elaborate tombs. As for the Judean kings, they crowned the city heights with impressive temples and palaces for the first time.

Enhanced wealth for the elite derives in the main from the spread of market relations, intensified tax demands and a surge in international trade. Under Assyrian domination Judea becomes a branch line on the highly lucrative Arabian trade route. Both imports and exports mushroom. Caravan trains from the south bring in incense, spices and other exotic luxury goods. Within Judea commercial-scale olive oil production takes off. Extensive vineyards are planted and wine shifts from being a private and local, to a highly profitable, state-controlled industry. Sleepy villages are transformed into bustling towns with reassuringly expensive public buildings, thriving bazaars and all manner of artisanal workshops.

Although hugely benefiting from integration into the Assyrian economic space and still vassals, politically the kings of the newly prosperous Judea begin to entertain expansionist ambitions of their own. Royal eyes fix on the north. Israeli 'reunification' soon becomes the official slogan: one Davidic dynasty, one supreme god, one capital city. Twenty years after a miscalculated rebellion ended the northern kingdom, the southern king, Hezekiah (reigned c727-698 BCE), made his own declaration of independence.

The elderly Assyrian king, Sargon, died unexpectedly while fighting in the southern Caucasus. Hezekiah seized his moment. A royalist movement for national liberation is launched, which is combined, reinforced or wrapped up with a religious reformation. The second book of Kings reports that Hezekiah rebelled "against the king of Assyria" and goes on to praise him, because he "removed the high places, and broke down the pillars, and cut down the Asherah". Hezekiah is given additional plaudits, because he "broke in pieces the bronze serpent", called Nehushtan, "that Moses had made".⁶

Baruch Halpern argues that it would be mistaken to interpret this account as equating to a full-blown, Jerusalem-centred monotheism. That came later. Hezekiah is viewed as taking Judea in the *direction* of exclusive Yahwehism.⁷ Halpern believes that Hezekiah did not close state temples in provincial towns, though he suppressed rural shrines - traditionally located on hill and mountain tops and wooded glades - and locked his kingship into Yahweh worship. The archaeological record is inconclusive.⁸ Yet there can be no doubt that Hezekiah did preside over far-reaching changes.

Hence the related suggestion that refugee priests played a key role in shaping his Yahwehite nationalism. Those who fled from the destruction of the northern kingdom would have loathed the Assyrians with a passion. And, coming from a richer, better connected, more sophisticated culture, they could well have been regarded as an invaluable intellectual asset by Hezekiah, as he set about formulating his version of Israeli 'reunification'.

Others say that the Yahwehite priesthood in Jerusalem wanted to assert its domination over the increasingly prosperous, but still fiercely polytheistic countryside... and therefore stake a holy claim to be the sole beneficiary of religiously required tithes and offerings.

Not that the two arguments are mutually exclusive. Northern and southern priests could easily have fused into a single Yahwehite party. A 'Yahweh alone' movement⁹ is thought to have emerged prior to Hezekiah's reign, perhaps beginning in the north. Hezekiah, though, certainly appears as a key figure in the second book of Kings: "[T]here was none like him among the kings of Judea after him, nor amongst those who went before him."¹⁰

It is worth noting that it was under the combined circumstances of irredentist royalist nationalism, burgeoning commercial relations and expanded state control that for the first time written texts, rather than recited epics or ballads, became the *main form* of ideological authority. Literacy had doubtless spread from

SUPPLEMENT

the narrow confines of the elite to the much wider middle classes, yet it is clear that it was politics that sat in the driving seat here.

Selecting from the jungle of lists, annals, mysteries, hymns, regulations, popular legends and recent memories, and fashioning a coherent literature, required learning, a clear aim - that and artistry. But committing the result to parchment and papyrus fixed the message. That empowered the sponsor. Priests were expected to recite *scripture* to their congregations. Hence, whereas the term 'scribe', or 'writer', previously designated administrative and clerical functions, now "didactic connotations became predominant".¹¹ Scribes were valued because of their creativity; nonetheless there is every reason to believe that Hezekiah himself provided guidelines, close supervision and generous rewards.

Anyway, we can safely reckon that Hezekiah drew confidence about his coming military adventure not only through faith in Yahweh. Hezekiah agreed to include his little kingdom in an Egyptian-backed, anti-Assyrian alliance. So as a personality he would appear to have been a sober-minded realist who recognised the advantages of exploiting big-power rivalries. Hezekiah was therefore no crazed religious fanatic embarking on a suicide mission. I think we can safely say that.

Nevertheless, four years after Hezekiah's rebellion began, the newly installed Assyrian king, Sennacherib, son of Sargon, soundly defeated the Egyptians. He then proceeded to burn, slash and exterminate his way through the Judean countryside and sack town after town. Archaeology provides ample confirmation. Naturally, Jerusalem itself was put under siege, though its defences proved far too strong to allow easy capture, Hezekiah, sensibly, sued for peace. The terms imposed by Sennacherib amounted to amputation: massed deportations to Assyria; agriculturally rich and heavily populated western territories, the Shephelah hills, ceded to the Philistines; and significant additional tribute transfers. We can dismiss biblical claims that an angel miraculously slaughtered the Assyrian forces surrounding Jerusalem and thereby lifted the siege. A later invention, designed to enhance Hezekiah's image.

The attempt by the Judean monarch, the 'Yahweh alone' movement and the anti-Assyrian court faction to assert monopoly rights over an expanded peasant tax base - after all, that was what independence was really about - proved almost as disastrous for the south as it had been for the north.

In the countryside one might guess that the common people blamed Hezekiah for the havoc, trauma and death wrought by the Assyrians. He presumably met with unremitting hostility from sections of the elite too - not least the rural priesthood. Those committed to the traditional 70-strong heavenly host of the ancient Hebrews would in all likelihood have accused him of blasphemy. We can imagine them demanding an end to Hezekiah's reformation and a return to *all* the trusted gods and goddesses of old: Yam, Mot, Baal, Astarte, Dagon, Tirosh, Horon, Nahar, Resheph, Kotar Hosis, Anat, Shapshu, Yerak, etc.

Writing the book

Hezekiah must have mobilised all available resources to prepare Judea for the oncoming struggle against Assyria: new fortifications, building up enormous food reserves, deep tunnelling to secure Jerusalem's water supplies and, one presumes, a substantially expanded army too. Such a programme could only have been carried out by draining the treasury, imposing compulsory labour and squeezing extra surplus product from the immediate producers. Adding to their woes, those who survived amongst the peasantry would have been bled white in order to pay for the heavy tribute Sennacherib demanded in exchange for his victor's peace.

Though the *Bible* relates, in a convoluted account, how an aged Hezekiah eventually died of natural causes, replacing him with his 12-year-old son, Manasseh, amounted to a palace coup. Hezekiah's anti-Assyrian nationalism is yanked into reverse. Renewed cooperation with Assyria and religious counter-reformation marches in step. As detailed by a scandalised second book of Kings, the image of Yahweh's wife, Asherah, is reintroduced into the Jerusalem temple, altars dedicated to Baal are re-established,

along with worshipping the "host of heaven" on the high places.

Manasseh is condemned for practising soothsaying and augury, and dealing with wizards and mediums. In that exact same spirit the king is said to have "burnt his son as an offering" some time during his 55-year reign.¹² A sacrificial act which, of course, he might actually have performed. All in all, Manasseh is depicted as one of the most dreadfully wicked monarchs and is even blamed for the future destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (obviously another later interpellation).

Yet Manasseh would appear to have pursued a successful diplomatic policy by reinventing Judea as an ultra-loyal Assyrian vassal. For its part, Assyria had a real interest in a prosperous Judea, so that it could serve as a strong buffer state against the Egyptian arch-enemy. Manasseh's pro-Assyrian course certainly brought about an unmistakable economic revival. Judea once again integrated itself into the Arabian trade route, and commercial agricultural production was intensified and pushed east and south into once arid zones.

Manasseh was succeeded by his son, Amon, but he lasted less than two years. Amon was assassinated. Perhaps another palace coup, but this time carried out by the anti-Assyrian faction. The second book of Kings blames Amon's servants and they are duly put to death by the "people of the land." Manasseh's eight-year-old son is elevated to the throne. Josiah (reigned 639-609 BCE) goes on, however, to be a king in the mould of his grandfather, Hezekiah, not his father or great grandfather.

How does the biblical account go? Amazingly, the high priest of the Jerusalem temple and Josiah's secretary discover a previously unknown "book of the law". It provides - *quelle surprise* - the new king with the very pretext he needs for another bid at imposing root-and-branch religious change.

Having fortuitously stumbled upon Yahweh's legal code, Josiah immediately proceeds, as surely intended, to decisive action. As told by the second book of Kings, the statues of Baal and Asherah are once again removed from the Jerusalem temple ... and burnt. Their, and all other, "idolatrous" priests, are "deposed". Josiah issues further orders. The temple brothels which housed the "male cult prostitutes" are closed. His reformation tsunamis out from Jerusalem. Holy sites on the high places, the topshets, where children are sacrificed in honour of this, that or the other member of the heavenly host, are destroyed. And, taking advantage of a well ordered Assyrian withdrawal from the Levant and the absence of an Egyptian presence in the highlands, Josiah extends his Taliban-like campaign into Samaria (the old kingdom of Israel). The great cult site of Bethel is trashed. Its altar is broken into tiny pieces. Josiah carries out the same programme of purification throughout the north, killing priests as he goes, before returning triumphantly to Jerusalem.¹³

Understandably, most biblical scholars consider that Josiah himself sponsored the writing of the ancient law codes found by his secretary and the Jerusalem high priest. Obviously the ten commandments - and similar legal instructions - purportedly given to Moses on mount Sinai by Yahweh ... are, of course, now found in Deuteronomy. While doubtless there were later redactions, its "main outlines" begin "for the first time" during Josiah's reign.¹⁴ In other words, Deuteronomy was a 7th century BCE invention.¹⁵

Likewise, doing Josiah's bidding, it was in all probability the scribes of the 'Yahweh alone' movement who completed the *first* versions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Existing religious literature inherited from the reign of Hezekiah, as well as suitable poems, hymns, prophecies and popular legends, was collected, woven together, elaborated and theologically interpreted. Hence the theory that each of these books should be treated as a series of original blocks, which are then overlaid by subsequent authors and redactors.

Once again, the whole exercise of literary creation was carried out in order to further political aims. Exodus, Joshua, Samuel, Deuteronomy, Kings, etc being prequels to Josiah's reformation and Anschluss with the north. His bold plan for territorial expansion would have been considerably aided by manufacturing a unified religion and a unified

history. Maybe the hope was that he and his troops would be greeted as liberators.

Anyway, thanks to Josiah's scribes, the peoples of the south and north are cleverly united through 12 ancient tribes, which are in their turn given a common ancestor in the form of the patriarch, Jacob (renamed Israel by an angel), along with a superbly crafted story going back to the first man and woman (indeed to creation and the beginning of time itself). Deuteronomistic history provides them with a never-to-be-forgotten common enemy too. Significantly, Egypt, not Assyria.

Revealingly, when it comes to the so-called exodus from Egypt and the so-called conquest of Canaan, the *Bible* unflinchingly reflects the political, strategic and geographic realities of the 7th century BCE. Not the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age: ie, the 15th to 10th centuries BCE. The exodus, of course, provides the narrational springboard for Joshua's Assyrian-like conquest. In an obvious attempt to forge a common, nationalist pride, the Judean-Israelites are portrayed as mighty warriors. Their forefathers stormed cities, humiliated mighty kings and ruthlessly exterminated enemies. It was they, not the late Bronze Age general crisis - ie, urban abandonment, the sea people and peasant revolution - who were responsible for the still highly visible ruins that littered the Palestinian countryside.

In status terms the southern, Judean, kingdom is presented as the *elder* brother to the wayward northern, Israeli, kingdom. After the glory days of David and Solomon the Deuteronomistic history has the north irresponsibly splitting away. The two kingdoms are ruled by a string of good and bad rulers, who in terms of a "cultic interpretation of history" explain why the north fell to the Assyrians and the south survived.¹⁶ Bad kings being defined, of course, by their participation in unacceptable religious practices.

As it turned out, Josiah's national liberation gamble went the same way as that of his grandfather. He too was defeated and killed - not, however, by the now visibly declining Assyrians, but the reassertive Egyptians under pharaoh Necho II. A miscalculating Josiah had aligned Judea with faraway Babylon and thereby inadvertently made his kingdom the front line in the Egyptian-Babylonian war of 609 BCE. In the desperately fought battle of Megiddo the Egyptian army overcame the Judeans en route to taking on the Babylonians (there was an Assyrian-Egyptian anti-Babylonian alliance).

There follows a brief, three-month, interregnum under Josiah's son, Jehoahaz - who reversed his father's reformation. But, returning from his unsuccessful Babylonian campaign, the Egyptian pharaoh deposed Jehoahaz and replaced him with his elder brother, Jehoiachin. He became Egypt's stooge in Jerusalem. Another terrible reversal for Judean royalist nationalism ... but, exceptionally, on this occasion, the losers got to tell their side of the story to future generations and countless millions. The Hebrew canon provides the foundational text for both Christianity and Islam.

Opposition voices

Not that the *Old Testament* consists of uncontested or seamless Judean royalist propaganda. The prophets, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah, are clearly voices of opposition. They are generally thought to have got their calling during the late monarchical period, Amos and Hosea being active in the north. Isaiah and Micah in the south. Apart from the notable exception of Amos - he was a sheep-herder - they came from the better-off classes, and were therefore educated and free from crushing relations of dependence. However, they detached themselves from their specific origins. Albeit mediated through the prism of religious fervour, they clearly championed the interests of the peasantry as against the landowning elite. By including the complaints, protests and demands of the rural poor within their "says the lord god" indictments, the so-called 'minor prophets', provided eloquent testimony as to their plight.

Violation of traditional inheritance codes, alienable property, onerous rates of interest and confiscatory loan guarantees are deemed akin to outright robbery. By such sinful means the rich join field after field to their already extensive estates till they are the sole owners of the land. Meanwhile, those who have fallen into debt are sold off into slavery for silver, or even a pair of sandals, if they fail to pay up on time.

The prophets seethe with righteous indignation against a legal system which enforces the separation of the peasant mass from the means of production. Courts are dominated by the upper classes and, if need be, can easily be persuaded through intimidation or bribery - a crime against god's laws, the prophets defiantly reminded people. Because of their arrogant rejection of traditional egalitarianism, callous treatment of the poor, idleness, licentiousness and luxurious way of life, the elite are soon to suffer terrible retribution from Yahweh. And, though they will flee to mountain tops and hide in the depths of the sea, there can be no escape for them.

Because of ideological blinkers mainstream biblical scholars think of oppositional prophets within a reformist frame. True, in the texts we have available to us, there is no explicit demand for peasant revolution. Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, etc are therefore said to have directed their message to those above. The elite is admittedly called upon to repent and re-establish social justice. But this ignores the likely context: Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, etc were preachers and I think it is safe to say that they delivered their wonderfully vitriolic homilies not in temples, palaces and mansions, but market squares, village assemblies and crossroad meeting places. Here, in a popular environment, their damning condemnations and terrible warnings cannot seriously be interpreted as designed to produce a contrite elite. No, their simple, fluent, lacerating words would surely have focused anger *amongst those below*. At a village level resistance would have been internalised and, when the opportunity arose, released in mass protest actions.

Conceivably, when it came to the national stage, the message conveyed by the opposition prophets would have been taken as inspired advice to wait upon Yahweh's divine vengeance. Clearly the opposition prophets did not ignore or neglect high politics. Well versed and well connected, they formulated penetrating critiques of the foreign policy pursued by Judean monarchs.

Put trust in Yahweh: ie, common interests. Not fickle foreign powers and catastrophic military adventures. Condemnations of the disastrous war policy pursued by the ruling classes, warnings of pending national disaster - sanctioned by Yahweh - are combined with appeals for a rediscovery of old egalitarian ideals. Hosea ii,18 urges a new covenant between Yahweh and those who would abolish war and introduce righteousness/egalitarianism. Hosea iii,4 even predicts the abolition of corrupt kings and princes before a return to the imagined ideal of David. Surely a rallying call for the revolutionary reformation of the state.

Not surprisingly then, the "provocative message" of the oppositional prophets is rejected *outright* by official society.¹⁷ Blaming national woes on the religious transgressions of the monarch, the landowning classes and the state priesthood drained their Yahwehism of theological legitimacy. Yet, though the prophets were clearly despised by the elite, doubtless suffered state-sponsored persecution and never achieved their stated goals, self-selecting groups of disciples took up, passed on, supplemented, refined and finally systemised their teachings in written form. Hence an oppositional religious literature arose alongside the newly created official religious literature.

The sayings of the oppositional prophets must have proved widely popular and obviously resonated with tremendous interpretive possibilities. Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, etc therefore *had* to be incorporated into the official religious literature of the *Nevi'im* (the second part of the *Tanakh* - ie, the Old Testament). The result is the much commented upon textual fractures: official versus unofficial, egalitarian versus monarchical, peasant versus landlord, international manoeuvring versus national solidarity.

Tragically, in terms of Judean elite pretensions, not only did Josiah miserably fail, but in 586 BCE the Babylonians - having rid themselves of the hated Assyrians - once again established themselves as the masters of Mesopotamia ... and from there the whole of the Middle East. They defeat the Egyptian army based on the west bank of the Euphrates and advance into northern Syria and demand immediate Judean surrender. Emboldened by

Egyptian promises of aid, the Judeans prove defiant. In purely military terms a blunder. Nebuchadnezzar II launches a standard punishment expedition. He easily asserts his will through overwhelming martial force. Mimicking the Assyrians, the Babylonians maintain the Davidic dynasty, but cart off into exile the “mighty of the land”.¹⁸ Something like 7,000 individuals were reportedly involved. They included king Jehoiachin and his family.

Despite this draining defeat, there followed yet another Judean independence declaration. Oded Lipschitz paints the situation in Jerusalem as bitterly divided between “religious-nationalist” fanatics around the new king, Zedekiah (reigned 596-586 BCE), and “realists”, who calculated that rebellion against Babylon and reliance on the Egyptians was inviting yet another disaster.¹⁹ Interestingly, amongst those who wanted to accept Babylonian rule - albeit as a form of divine punishment - was the prophet, Jeremiah (as recorded in the biblical book named after him).

Another Babylonian punishment expedition inevitably followed. However, this time round, Nebuchadnezzar opted for an entirely different solution to the ‘Judean problem’. This was part of a wider strategic reorientation. He decides to depose the Davidic dynasty, blot out Jerusalem and its royal temple, and transform Judea into a mere Babylonian province. Jerusalem is put under siege and eventually its defences are breached. A fleeing Zedekiah is captured and his sons are killed before his eyes, after which the king is blinded. A month or two after the city was seized the laborious work of razing its walls, gates, palaces, big houses, the royal temple - everything - began. Meanwhile, in or around 587 BCE, there was another deportation of the elite (including the blind king and his royal household). Maybe 8,000 were involved (plus perhaps a couple of thousand smiths and other craftsmen). The book of Jeremiah tells how the Babylonians only “left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing”.²⁰ However, some of these people have vineyards and fields allocated to them (one presumes to simultaneously buy gratitude and expand the imperial tax base). Needless to say, they, the rural and urban poor, constituted a clear, overwhelming, majority of the population.

The Babylonians proceed to appoint Gedaliah, from a renowned family of priests and royal courtiers, as their “governor” in Judea. So they did not deport the entire Judean elite. Gedaliah would have been counted as one of the ‘realists’ before the Babylonian conquest. His administrative-religious centre is obviously not going to be Jerusalem. Mizpah, some four miles north-east of the ruined Jerusalem, is chosen as the new capital by the Babylonians. From here their tribute demands are allocated, collected and dispatched. As an aside, Gedaliah is assassinated. Part of a failed uprising, this triggers another, third, though little mentioned, wave of Judean exile: rebels sought sanctuary in Egypt.

Judea in Judea and Judea in exile proceed to go their own separate ways. In Judea notions of an exclusive Yahwehism based on Jerusalem, its royal temple and its royal line are clearly no longer tenable. Other cultic centres arise once again. Amongst the remaining elite there were those who probably fashioned their own version of Yahwehism. And, from what we can gather, ordinary folk - the people of the land - happily returned to, or simply continued, with their old ways. Reliant on the soil, the seasons and the vagaries of the weather, these Hebrews sacrificed to the heavenly host and maintained their family shrines. Lacking state power, the elite could do precious little to stop them.

By the rivers

Nowadays, the clear balance of scholarly opinion is that the destruction of Jerusalem, social decapitation and the subsequent diaspora in Babylonia had a “critically important” impact on Yahwehism.²¹ Jill Anne Middlemas emphatically confirms that the “importance ascribed to this period cannot be overestimated”.²² Throughout most of the 20th century that was not the case. Exile was de-emphasised. Academics tended to downplay the changes wrought by the deportation to Babylonia.

However, in his *Studies in the book of*

Lamentations (1954) Norman Gottwald anticipated “a changed attitude to the exile that would emerge more fully at a later time”.²³ Whether it was exposure to Babylon, and its ancient, wealthy and sophisticated culture, or the subsequent role played by the successor Persian state that exerted the biggest influence on Yahwehism, remains a bone of contention. The great biblical scholars, Julius Wellhausen and Eduard Meyer, engaged in a long and acrimonious polemic over the issue - Wellhausen favouring the Babylonians,²⁴ Meyer the Persians (and therefore Zoroastrianism).²⁵ And that debate continues today ... not least because we have so little material evidence available to us about the Judeans during this relatively brief period of time.

What we can say, and with some assuredness, is that removing a whole swathe of the elite from Judea and relocating them in the heartlands of the Babylonian empire (mostly in the lush, southern region of Mesopotamia) did not bring about either a jolting henotheism or a jolting monotheism.²⁶ Nor did the Persian takeover. The elevation of one god above others was as much in evidence in pre-exile Judea as in Babylonia.

Nonetheless, the whole deracinating experience obviously produces far-reaching change. The exiled elite were doubtless traumatised. They had seen Jerusalem overrun by a vengeful army; days of killing, rape and pillage would have followed. After surviving those horrors, they, including what remained of the royal household, were picked out, because of their elevated social standing, and marched off to live in a faraway foreign land. Trauma must have been mixed with grudging admiration. They would have been awed by the magnificent buildings, canals, elevated gardens and other architectural wonders. Babylonian literature and learning was no less impressive. There was bound to be a degree of cultural assimilation. Though they never entirely dropped Hebrew, the exiles adopted the Aramaic language, along with its square-scripted alphabet. There were obvious religious borrowings too. The garden of Eden, the flood, Noah’s ark and the Tower of Babel all have their origins in Mesopotamia. As for Babylonian names of the month, they entirely replaced those used back in Palestine.

If it were to survive Yahwehism had to change - I think that much is obvious. The “identity movement”, interestingly summarised by Victor Matthews and James Moyer, was clearly in the vanguard of those who “refashioned” ideas, customs and institutions.²⁷ That, we can safely conjecture, involved a split, a party conflict, within the elite - one that would have been based on rival responses to the novel “social realities” created by Babylonian exile and oppression.²⁸ The more flexible priests of the “identity movement” strove to “creatively” adapt to the new conditions, as opposed to those traditional leaders who wanted to doggedly resist in the name of outdated concepts, such as the Davidic kingdom. Not surprisingly, the priests of the “identity movement” win out and come to serve as the leaders of the community; they demand ritual purity, a ban on outside marriage, male circumcision and strict religious observance from all members. The Sabbath becomes of central importance. All such practices mark out the Judeans and bind them together (some exiles would doubtless have broken ranks and become Mesopotamian).

With the Jerusalem temple in ruins and impossibly distant, the Judaeo-Babylonians invented the synagogue (Greek for ‘place’). These prayer houses substituted for the temple cult in many respects. There were hymns, religious readings and sermons; however, the Sabbath and feast days were observed without the previously proscribed blood sacrifices. It should be pointed out, not least to highlight the uncertainty, that some academic authorities dispute the claim that Babylonia was the birthplace of the synagogue. Ptolemaic Egypt has been suggested; but frankly, given that we are dealing with a kind of Judean dark age, it is still impossible to come to anything like a hard and fast conclusion till more evidence, one way or another, is brought forward.

That aside, in Babylonia, being what Bob Becking calls a “religion under stress”, Yahwehism underwent a “multidimensional” process of “transition”.²⁹ Despite humiliation at the hands of Egyptians and Assyrians, the Judean elite could still content themselves

with the self-view of being, at least potentially, on a par with other nations. Their underlying assumption was that the power of each state formation reflected the power of its patron god. With Babylonian conquest - and deterritorialisation, demilitarisation and demonarchisation - that way of thinking about the world became untenable. As the Babylonians were so evidently powerful, so too must be their god; by the same logic, if Judea could so easily be overthrown, it followed that their god was not as powerful as had been claimed.

New religious concepts come to the rescue. A new generation of prophets break the theological link joining “heavenly power and earthly kingdoms”. Though Babylon was powerful, this did not mean that the god of the Judeans was weak. Yahweh became the universal god. Correspondingly, the gods of Mesopotamia were dismissed as mere idols made from stone or wood. As a result, Assyria, Egypt and then Babylon had not succeeded in war because of the might of their gods. Instead, in the mind at least, Yahweh now decides the fate of all nations. In short, the rise and fall of empires reflected a divine plan: “One god stood behind all these world-shaking events.”³⁰ Hence, the rise of the Assyrians, Egyptians and finally the Babylonians testified not to innate virtue or innate blessedness, nor the power of divine patrons. It was Yahweh who presided over all events. Defeat and exile were due not to the weakness of Yahweh: it was his anger over the backslidings and abominable practices of the chosen people. Yahweh wanted to teach a lesson and purify them. Accordingly, the notion arose that a new king would help redeem Israel. A god-chosen messiah. To begin with, he was doubtless Davidic or at least Judean. But, over time, hope and meaning shifted. As can be seen in the book of Isaiah, he could even be a foreigner. Hence Cyrus, the Persian king, is said to have served as Yahweh’s anointed.³¹

Suffering servants

Life for the exiles in Babylonia is widely credited as being relatively cushy. Hence, in a popular history we read of an “absence of racism”, along with the claim that exile could not have been “universally abhorred”, because so many stayed on, even though Cyrus offered to “repatriate” them in 539 BCE.³² Such liberal ideological biases appear throughout mainstream biblical scholarship. Eg, Babylonian policy was not “overly oppressive” and there was no “overt pressure” on exiles to assimilate and lose their identities.³³ The same scholars are at pains to stress that the Jews were not slaves and were not forced to endure “inhuman conditions” - in terms of strict Babylonian jurisprudence undoubtedly true. The Jewish exiles were not slaves (I shall from here on start to refer to the Judean exiles as Jews).

The standard point of comparison when it comes to life for the exiles in Babylonia is, of course, classical Greece and Rome; or perhaps the antebellum United States south when it comes to American academics. A misleading compass. In these social formations the institution of slavery was sometimes joined with commodity production in agriculture (and mining) and thus assumed particularly extreme, unremitting, vicious and murderous forms. Slaves were robbed of all humanity and treated as mere objects of exploitation. Hence they were commonly worked to death in accordance with nothing more than a cold, profit-and-loss calculation.

We know that a portion of Babylonian prisoners of war were directly incorporated into the branded, tattooed and tagged class of slave labourers. However, a majority of war captives were apparently “able to return home” after the completion of a period of labour duties.³⁴ That said, those condemned to slavery could be lashed or mutilated merely on a whim. But relationships between slaveowner and slave were in general still personal. Necessarily, that involved acts of generosity, flattery, loyalty, mutual respect and even friendship (though it needs to be stressed that the underlying relationship was always grossly unequal). Exploitation - and this is the point I am getting at - was therefore limited, compared with the mines and latifundium of classical Greece and Rome (but especially the US southern plantations). Slaves in Babylonia could marry non-slaves, own property and buy their freedom. Babylonian legal

codes afforded them definite rights and by implication recognised their innate humanity (not that that stopped slaves making escape bids).

Besides the lowest of the low, there were domestic and royal slaves. As in classical Greece and Rome (but not the US south - which practised a racialised slavery), a few amongst them rose to positions of high influence and became in our terms billionaires. Privileged slaves themselves owned slaves. However, slavery was not ubiquitous. According to the relevant volume in the Cambridge ancient history series, the majority of the *dependent* population in Babylonia were semi-free labourers, named *ikkaru* in legal texts.³⁵ True, these poor wretches could not leave the land without the owners’ permission, but they lived with their families and could neither be bought nor sold. Most agricultural production on big estates, it would seem, was carried out by them. And here, we can reasonably say, lay the *main* source of surplus product, and therefore the *main* social relationship which reproduced the royal, religious and land-owning ruling classes.

While temples owned “increasing contingents” of slaves - who were regularly augmented by kings handing over new batches of war captives - Babylonia cannot be categorised as a slave mode of production.³⁶ The role of slaves in artisanal and agricultural production was marginal, when compared with free or semi-free labour.³⁷ Eg, though temples had slaves who were “trained as craftsmen”, we have abundant records available to us showing that they had to regularly pay for the services of jewellers, brewers, bakers, tanners, smiths, carpenters, weavers, launderers and potters. Temples also had to employ free labour during harvest times. And in cases of a failure to supply food and drink, and low or unpunctual payment of wages, these workers would strike or simply pack their bags and head off. It was “impossible to replace them by temple slaves”.³⁸

Not merchants

Another misconception. Projecting back from the Radhanites and the caste position of Jews in early medieval Europe, north Africa and the Middle East, the Jewish exiles in Babylonia are widely credited as being proto-capitalists. Hence the constantly reproduced account of the non-priestly Jewish exiles turning to mercantile trade for a livelihood and thereby becoming seriously rich. Here, on this subject at least, Marxist writers such as Karl Kautsky and Abram Leon simply gave a leftwing spin to the standard scholarly paradigm of their time.

Not that such arguments lacked foundation. In 1893 a long-buried room stacked full of hundreds of cuneiform clay tablets was discovered in Nippur (about 100 miles south of Baghdad). They were the business archives of a firm called Marasu. By 1898 they had already been partially translated and analysed. These documents appear to show that Jews in the area were involved in commerce - they worked as tenant farmers, rent collectors and minor officials - and therefore, so ran the conclusion, they were relatively well off. From here, given prior assumptions, it was only a small step for European scholars to categorise some, at least, as merchant adventurers. However, apart from such slippery logic, there is a chronological problem too. The Marasu archives date from the time of the Persian king, Artaxerxes I (reigned 464-424 BCE). Whether they reflect life of the Jewish exiles in the Babylonian period is highly problematic, to say the least.

Anyway, as noted above, the Babylonian mode of production did not rest on slavery. But, quoting the holy name of Marduk, its kings did command *corvée* labour ... and on a very extensive scale. Families, villages, districts, whole communities, including exiled communities, were expected to supply labour quotas for temple construction, canal digging, road building, irrigation and other such state projects. A particular form of tribute. Then, as now, all such labour - especially when it comes to the grunt work of pulling, carrying, lifting and digging - is physically draining and dangerous. Exhaustion, injury and death would have been commonplace. Hence there is no reason to dismiss agonised cries emanating from exilic prophets about ‘suffering servants’.

Naturally, we need to take into account the social snobbery of the elite. They would

SUPPLEMENT

have been unused to manual labour of any kind. Nor would they have respected such work. In fact they would have regarded anything resembling the daily drudge of the lower classes as being utterly degrading. But, along with other exile communities forcibly transported into Babylonia - Persians, Carians, Phrygians, Tyrians, Arabs, Indians, etc - the Jews were subject to repeated labour demands by their imperial masters.³⁹ And they were given no choice, of course. Community leaders had to deliver their set human quota as commanded.

So prior to the Persian period, in Babylonian exile, Jews constituted a distinct, oppressed population. Yet, despite that, they were largely self-governing and self-taxing - typical of all such quickly gained sprawling empires of the epoch. Religion, community and tribute thereby combined to form a single metabolism. Though it was always structured around the threat of violence, such multiculturalism perfectly dovetailed with official Babylonian ideology and the policy of minimising state expenditure on administration.

Nonetheless, whereas the northern elite disappeared into Mesopotamian society, their southern counterparts retained a definite separateness and cohesion. Perhaps it was just a matter of time. Maybe if they had stayed in Babylonia longer than 50 years the Judeans would have become fully assimilated. But most likely not. Before the triumph of intolerant, universal monotheistic religions, pre-capitalist societies were characterised by a generally unproblematic, combined, but separate development. Toleration was the norm. Depending on its size, each religious/ethnic minority has its own land allocation or city quarter, district or street. Such peoples maintain a traditional language, sometimes over many hundreds of years, when it comes to religious and other such internal affairs; meanwhile in day-to-day matters the dominant language is adopted. Bilingualism and trilingualism are common.

Persian agents

Showing its extraordinary fragility, the neo-Babylonian empire collapsed, like the proverbial house of cards, before an unexpected Achaemenid Persian invasion. And, having taken Babylon in 539 BCE, virtually without a fight, their king, Cyrus, allowed (or, much more likely, organised) a return by a section of the Jewish population in Mesopotamia. They went back to Judea not as a free people - a cosy story - but as colonial agents with a prime mission to extract tribute.

The Persians had no interest in restoring the old kingdom of Judea and its Davidic monarchy. Undoubtedly this was the hope of those who belonged to the royalist-nationalist party (and it is possible that for a short initial period the Davidic heir to the throne might have served as the Persian governor in Judea⁴⁰). That said, after a considerable gap, maybe 18 years, the Persian king, Darius, did give his active backing for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple - of course, not over the ruins of Solomon's mythical marvel. High priests were to substitute for kings. Many scholars see in this decision an integral part of an overarching plan by Darius to manage his newly acquired empire (he usurped power in 522 BCE, overthrowing the populist monarch, Bardiya/Gaumata).

Joel Weinberg, a Latvian (Israeli) biblical scholar, developed an influential 'citizen-temple-community' thesis. Political power, he suggested, was concentrated in major temples under the Persians, and through priests and temple officials the religious community was controlled, exploited and reconciled to foreign rule. Weinberg provided a two-fold taxonomy when it comes to distinguishing temple political-economies. The first owns, or controls, large tracts of land and thereby extracts surplus through rent. The second lacks significant landholdings. Instead, these temples rely on obligatory tithes and other such offerings coming from the religious community. Clearly the post-exile Jerusalem temple falls squarely into the second category.⁴¹

The elite returnees would oversee the extraction of surplus product from the local population in Judea and perhaps draw on religious donations required from the Jewish diaspora (inhabiting towns and cities in Mesopotamia and perhaps the Nile too) - that before handing a maximised portion of it over to Darius as tribute. Put another way, the

rebuilt city of Jerusalem and its temple would function as a conduit for tribute.

To help securely root what was a subordinate social order in Judea (the Persian sub-province of Yehud) the returnees once again refashioned the religious tradition. Davidic kingship was downgraded in favour of asserting the kingship of Yahweh. Scholars are generally agreed that that included adding to the *Torah*, hence the Jewish versions of the flood and the Tower of Babel, and introducing the books of Ezra, Ruth, Nahum, Ecclesiastes, Jonah, Lamentations, proverbs 1-9 and various psalms.⁴² Transparently, however, the main innovation in this new material was the purity laws developed in Mesopotamia. In tandem, accepted traditions were reversed ... and, of course, claimed as ancient.

The evolution of Yahwehism was clearly bound up with military weakness, religious xenophobia and extracting tribute. Being Persian vassals, the returnees had no proper army: only a religious police force. Therefore they had to rely to an extraordinary degree on the authority of Yahweh and the religio-ethnic exclusiveness of the kind laid down in Deuteronomy. A weapon of class warfare. Theologically their self-defined community had been saved, chastised and purified by the humiliating experience of exile and had thereby regained the blessing of Yahweh. The common people, those who had stayed behind in Palestine, remained defiled and had to be treated as foreigners.

Those who remained in Judea would have, surely, made an exact opposite charge: one that perhaps finds expression in Ezra xxxiii,23-29 and other texts responding to the 597 BCE deportation. The exiles had been banished by Yahweh because of their dreadful sins and those who were allowed to stay were always true followers of Yahweh. I think we can soundly reason along those lines, even though we only have the filtered account of the returnees available to us.

Suffice to say, the concerns of the returnees were as much socio-economic as theological. The peasants not only worshipped their own family gods, along with Yahweh and the host of heaven: they still held the land given over to them by the Babylonians. And gaining possession of the lion's share of the surplus they produced had to be justified by Yahweh's chosen ones; both to those they were robbing and to themselves. Not surprisingly, the local people of all classes confronted the returnees as a resentful, resisting mass.

Breaking from the royalist nationalism of the past, excusing collaboration with conquerors and dismissing most of the native population in Judea as foreigners had to involve a high degree of falsification. Here the returnee scribes and priests had a great advantage. As noted above, they had dropped the ancient Hebrew alphabet - a variant of which is still being used by the Samaritans in their liturgy - in favour of a version of the Aramaic square alphabet, in which Hebrew is written today. Opportunities for dissembling opened up by the transliteration from one alphabet to another must have been considerable.

Not that the returnees constituted a monolithic bloc. Morton Smith describes two main parties that coalesced amongst them.⁴³ Using historical shorthand, we can describe the majority party as Levites and the minority as Zadokites. Whereas the Levites were dedicated adherents of the 'Yahweh alone' movement and therefore emphasised the practice of religious purity, the Zadokites emphasised their rights as the hereditary priests of the Jerusalem cult. That was, as will already have been gathered, no mere theological quibble. The Zadokites wanted to establish themselves over Judea as an exclusive theocracy - a term, incidentally, first used by Flavius Josephus in his *Contra Apionem*.⁴⁴

No evidence existed proving that the Zadokites had an uninterrupted lineage going back to Zadok - that is, the man supposedly appointed by Solomon to be high priest of his new Jerusalem temple (let alone to Aaron, the brother of Moses). That is why impossibly ancient and impossibly uncontaminated genealogies had to be invented. Despite that, the Zadokite bid to establish themselves as theocrats relied first and foremost not on genes: rather in carrying out the wishes of Darius and showing themselves at every opportunity to be loyal servants of the Persian empire.

Understandably, the spokespersons of the Levite party raised strong objections to the plans for the Jerusalem temple. Hugely costly and, once built, it would, they rightly feared, give its priests enormous authority and wealth. The arrival of the prophet, Ezra, from Babylonia, along with the second wave of returnees, settled matters, however. He seems to have been accompanied by Persian military detachments. Ezra and his ally, the new governor, Nehemiah, are depicted in the *Bible* as proceeding to impose the programme of the Zadokite priesthood in its most extreme, most inhuman form. Returnees who had married "foreign women", or "people of the land", were told to immediately divorce them and "put away their children". Those who refused to obey Ezra's foul instructions were to be barred from the community and faced severe punishment: "for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment".⁴⁵ I would interpret such demands as a kind of apartheid terror - designed to stigmatise, divide and cower not the mass of the population, but the Levite party.

Protected and, we might suppose, encouraged by the Persians, Ezra lifted the Zadokite priesthood into power and forcibly concentrated religious authority into an easily controlled singularity. Other existing cults were suppressed. Apart from the Jerusalem temple (completed in 515 BCE), all rival places of sacrifice, along with their fetishes and festivals, were branded abominations and destroyed. That would have included alternative versions of Yahwehism. By tradition Levite priests had a role in the Jerusalem temple, but in the main presided over local cultic shrines. So, once again, another attack on the Levite party.

Nevertheless, while Zadokite ideology had a lasting impact on the biblical canon, their exclusive power proved short-lived. The Levites seem to have aligned themselves with the common people - perhaps achieved by cynically championing the egalitarianism and fiery denunciations of the rich contained in the teachings of Amos, Hosea and other oppositional prophets. This unstable coalition would appear to have forced upon the Zadokites a conciliatory policy, including when it came, in the words of Morton Smith, to "the great document of this compromise": ie, the *Torah*. Through what would have conceivably been a carefully negotiated historic compromise, the Levites regained a role, albeit a subsidiary one, in the Jerusalem cult and, no less importantly, the citizen-temple community was considerably expanded. Weinberg reckons that this - what equates to a great reform act - was agreed in the second half of the Persian period (around 400 BCE).

The masses were thereby reconciled with and quickly internalised the refashioned religion. Though this is a subject which I need to study further, there is overwhelming evidence that the popular classes became militant Jews. Strictures demanding religious purity, developed by the elite exiled in Mesopotamia, were turned against the rich and powerful.

For the Zadokite priesthood there was what might well have been seen as a generous compensation package. Those willingly paying tithes, making pilgrimages and sacrificing at the Jerusalem temple greatly expanded. That promised riches for the Zadokites who monopolised the altar and decided on matters of law. However, the temple cult also employed thousands of Levites as lesser officials: accountants, guides, musicians, doormen, librarians, guards, porters, maintenance workers, cleaners, etc. The Jerusalem temple can be imagined as a combination of church, bank, library, high court, abattoir and storehouse.⁴⁶ As such it provided a tolerable living for a still wider circle of others: suppliers of sacrificial animals, incense sellers, hostel owners, peddlers, pickpockets, pimps, prostitutes, etc.

Hence the Jewish religion familiar to us from both testaments of the *Bible* comes into view at last ●

This article is an edited extract from Jack Conrad's *Fantastic reality: Marxism and the politics of religion*. The book can be purchased or downloaded from: communistparty.co.uk/resources/library/jack-conrad

Notes

1. I Finkelstein and NA Silberman *David and Solomon: in search of the Bible's sacred kings and the roots of the western tradition* New York NY 2006.
2. See, for example, JA Tainter *The collapse of complex societies* Cambridge 1988.
3. See BS Düring *The imperialisation of Assyria: an archaeological approach* Cambridge 2020.
4. Quoted in H Webster *A history of the ancient world* London 1955, p57.
5. Ephraimite after the so-called main Israeli tribe.
6. 2 Kings xviii, 4.
7. B Halpern *The first historians: the Hebrew Bible and history* Pennsylvania PA 1996, p226.
8. I Finkelstein and NA Silberman *The Bible unearthed* New York NY 2002, p250n.
9. A term coined by Morton Smith in his book *Palestinian parties and politics that shaped the Old Testament* New York NY 1971.
10. 2 Kings xviii,5.
11. M Weinfeld *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school* Oxford 1971, p162.
12. 2 Kings xxi,3-7.
13. 2 Kings xxiii,4-20.
14. I Finkelstein and NA Silberman *The Bible unearthed: in search of the Bible's sacred kings and the roots of the western tradition* New York NY 2002, p280.
15. Though it ought to be pointed out that there is a school of biblical scholarship around Rudolf Smend, which argues that an exilic *Bible* was composed in Babylon. Then again, there are those who stress that the creation of Deuteronomistic history began before Joshua's reign. See M Weinfeld *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school* Oxford 1992.
16. B Halpern *The first historians: the Hebrew Bible and history* Pennsylvania PA 1996, p220ff.
17. R Albertz *A history of Israelite religion in the Old Testament period* Vol 1, London 1994, p164.
18. II Kings xxiv,12-16.
19. O Lipschitz *The fall and rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian rule* Winona Lake MI 2005, p71.
20. Jeremiah xxxix,9.
21. DL Smith-Christopher, 'Reassessing the historical and sociological impact of the Babylonian exile (579/587-539 BCE)' in JM Scott (ed) *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian conceptions* Leiden 1997, p7.
22. JA Middlemas *The troubles of templeless Judah* Oxford 2005, p2.
23. DL Smith-Christopher, 'Reassessing the historical and sociological impact of the Babylonian exile (579/587-539 BCE)' in JM Scott (ed) *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian conceptions* Leiden 1997, p8.
24. Religiously Babylon had long ago abandoned geo-specific deities and was in all likelihood moving towards some kind of monotheism. Merodach, the sun god, came to be regarded not merely as the supreme deity. One inscription refers to the 13 main gods as nothing but forms in which Merodach manifests himself to humanity. Nebuchadnezzar addresses Merodach in prayer as "thou who art from everlasting, thou who art lord of all that exists".
25. Some time about 700 BCE it is said that a prophet called Zoroaster developed a religion that closely approaches full monotheism. Ormazd is the heavenly divinity that is the maker and upholder of the universe. As the god of light and order, he is also the god of truth and purity. Against him and his attendant spirits stand the forces of darkness and sin, headed by the wicked Ahriam. These two rivals engage in a ceaseless struggle for domination. Humanity, by doing right and avoiding wrong, by loving truth and hating falsehood, can help god triumph over evil. In the end of days Ormazd will overcome Ahriam and will reign over a new and righteous world. Those who served him will be rewarded with a life of eternal blessedness; those who sided with Ahriam will be punished with endless misery. Zoroastrians can still be found scattered here and there in the Middle East. In India they are called the Parsees - descendants of those who fled from Persia with the onset of Islamic rule.
26. Kautsky was clearly mistaken when he says that the monotheism of the Jews, the Judeans, was the result not of a slowly evolving philosophical sophistication, but rather sudden contact with, and adoption of, a "higher urban culture" (K Kautsky *Foundations of Christianity* New York NY 1972, p202).
27. VH Matthews and JC Moyer *The Old Testament: text and context* Peabody MA 1977, pp213-14.
28. D Christopher-Smith *The religion of the landless* Bloomington IN 1989, p10.
29. B Becking, M Christina and A Korpel (eds) *The crisis of Israelite religion* Leiden 1999, p7.
30. See biblicinterp.arizona.edu/articles/MSmith_BiblicalMonotheism.
31. Isaiah xxxiv,28; xxxv,1.
32. J McIntosh *Ancient Mesopotamia: new perspectives* Santa Barbara LA 2005, p157.
33. H Donner 'The separate states of Israel and Judah' in JM Miller and JH Hayed (eds) *Israel and Judean history* Philadelphia PA 1986, pp421,423.
34. J Boardman (ed) *The Assyrian and Babylonian empires and other states of the Near East* Vol 3, part 2, Cambridge 2003, p269.
35. *Ibid* p266.
36. *Ibid* p269.
37. See MA Dandamaev, A Marvin, A Powell and DB Weisberg *Slavery in Babylonia* DeKalb IL 1984.
38. J Boardman (ed) *The Assyrian and Babylonian empires and other states of the Near East* Vol 3, part 2, Cambridge 2003, p272.
39. See DL Smith-Christopher, 'Reassessing the historical and sociological impact of the Babylonian exile (579/587-539 BCE)' in JM Scott (ed) *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian conceptions* Leiden 1997, p23f.
40. See R Albertz, 'The thwarted restoration' in R Albertz and B Becking (eds) *Yahwehism after exile* Assen 2003.
41. See the translation of his key articles by DL Smith-Christopher in *The citizen-temple community* Sheffield 1992.
42. See PR Bedford *Temple restoration in early Achaemenid Judah* Leiden 2001, pp8-9.
43. M Smith *Palestinian parties and politics that shapes the Old Testament* New York NY 1971.
44. www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780192802903.001.0001/acref-9780192802903-e-6774.
45. Ezra vii,26.
46. See ME Stevens *Temple, tithes and taxes* Peabody MA 2006, p24.