

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly **worker**



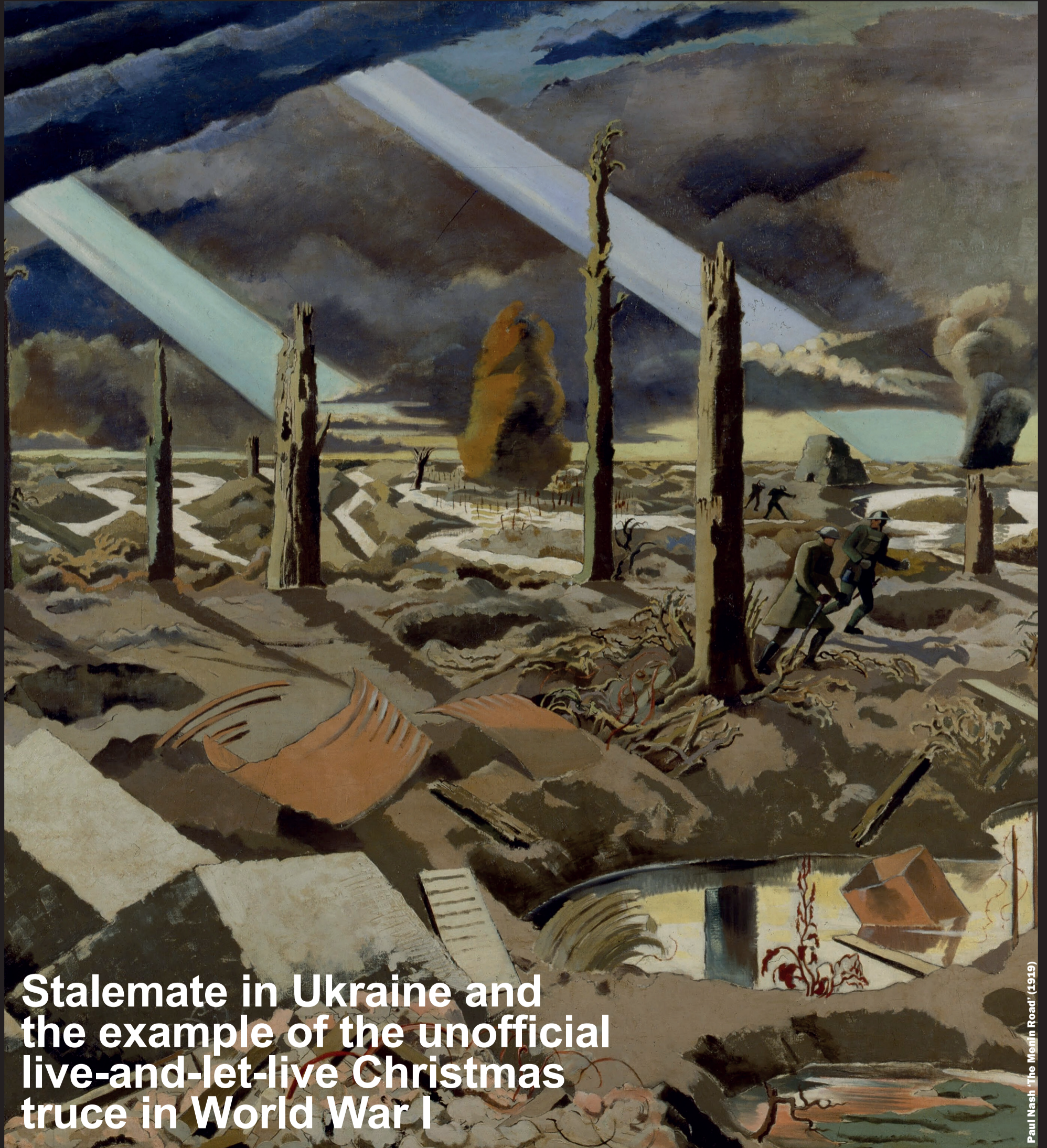
Far right identifies with Tolkien's Dark Lord Sauron and his army of Orcs. What about Gandalf?

- Letters and debate
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Towards a mass Communist Party

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Stalemate in Ukraine and the example of the unofficial live-and-let-live Christmas truce in World War I

Paul Nash 'The Menin Road' (1919)

LETTERS



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

Mega-denial

Daniel Lazare is in denial. He is in denial of the colonising essence of the Zionist project; he is in denial of the colonial nature of the conflict between the Israeli settler state and its colonised Palestinian subjects; he is in denial of the vast disparity of power between the nuclear-armed oppressor and its victims; indeed, he is in denial that the relation between Israelis and Palestinians is one of colonial-national oppression. None of these facts are hinted at, let alone mentioned, in his article, 'Far from pacified' (December 7).

His depiction of the conflict is symmetric: a clash between two religious/ethnic nationalisms. In support of this travesty he quotes a symmetric description of the conflict between Jews and Arabs from a statement published by a Trotskyist group in Palestine in ... May 1948 (and probably written a while earlier).

He follows this by the astounding claim: "Except for the size of the bombs and the number of deaths, the situation 75 years later is unchanged." He is in mega-denial of the vast changes in the "situation". In the spring of 1948 the disparity in power between the Zionist settlers and the Palestinians was not obvious: the Nakba was then beginning, and was yet to reach its catastrophic apogee; the Israeli state was yet to be established, let alone revealing its true expansionist, colonising and ethnic-cleansing inner drive.

What was then, in the spring of 1948, a failure of perception by that Trotskyist group becomes, when parroted 75 years later, an exercise in culpable deception.

Moshé Machover
London

Zionist power

The Zionist lobby is more powerful in the US than in Europe. That has been clear for many years, but the vote at the UN security council on December 8 made it clear to billions. Israel calls the shots regarding policy toward the Palestinian people in the United States. Israel matters more to the US than a billion Muslims. No wonder previous US allies, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, are joining with Russia and China in Brics.

The idea that Israel helps the US to 'control' west Asia is shown to be false by Friday night's conflict in the security council between the US and the United Arab Emirates. Even virulently pro-US regimes such as Argentina under Milei and the Philippines under Marcos voted for the UAE's motion demanding a Gaza ceasefire, because the sentiment in the global south is so strong and overwhelming in its condemnation of the Zionist genocide. And the UK flinched from exercising its veto by voting against, even though Sunak's government is itself supplying arms (and covertly even military personnel and intelligence data) to Israel for use against the Palestinian people.

It is clear that the US is prepared to sacrifice its 'soft power' influence in the global south because of its servile relationship with Zionism. This might seem strange, and indeed it is unusual and unique. There is a Marxist, materialist explanation for it though, in the economic and political clout of the disproportionately large section of the American ruling class that is of Jewish background and Zionist politics, and sees Israel as their 'state' - either in tandem with

or taking priority over the 'national interest', as conceived in bourgeois terms, of the United States itself. And there is the veritable cult of Zionism among the imperialist ruling classes in North America and Europe that sees Zionist-influenced neoliberal ideologues, such as Milton Friedman, as having saved the capitalist system itself in the severe crisis of the 1970s.

The philo-Semitic, racist remark by Robert Wood, deputy US ambassador to the UN, in his speech to the security council to justify the US veto - that Hamas's October 7 breakout of the Gaza Strip to take hostages for exchange was supposedly the greatest atrocity against "our people" since World War II - is a clear manifestation of this strange overlapping cult of nationhood among the western imperialist bourgeoisies. It also indicates the hegemony of Zionist racism today - the rate of death of children in Gaza during this Zionist blitz, in excess of 144 per day, actually exceeds the daily rate of murder of children in Auschwitz during the period 1941-45. Evidently, for the US, Palestinians are not 'our people' and Jews are far more important than Arabs.

This is the insidious form of racism that has been hegemonic in the imperialist world up to now, and has influenced all kinds of political trends from the far right to the Menshevik 'far left'. It is the basis for the heresy hunting against its opponents - false accusations of 'anti-Semitism' - that has convulsed politics from right to 'left' over the whole last period. It is now being exposed before the masses by this attempted Zionist holocaust of Palestinians, which is opening up a new era of mass struggles against this latest 'modern' form of racism.

Ian Donovan
Consistent Democrats

Political revival

Was the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1989-91 a victory or a defeat for the working class worldwide? Two purported facts support the argument that it was a defeat. Firstly, it did not lead to world revolution. Secondly, it led to a Marxist movement today that is "fast disappearing" and "on its arse", according to Lawrence Parker (Letters, November 30).

I contend that the first statement is true, but the second is false. I argue here that the truth of the first is consistent with the idea that the end of Stalinism was a victory. I propose that present conditions are causing the re-emergence of a healthy Marxist movement for the first time in 30 years. This could not have happened without the victorious end of Stalinism.

An ahistorical reading of Trotsky led to the fanciful idea that the collapse of the Soviet regime would lead automatically to a political revolution. Trotsky's optimism, in my opinion, was misinformed. He had no way of knowing how devastating the purges were in destroying the possibility of the survival of a revolutionary Marxist movement. If he was right in believing there was an underground Marxist opposition to the regime in 1933 capable of restoring the gains of the October, by 1937 this had been thoroughly exterminated. It seems likely that Stalinist agents such as Mark Zborowski fed him false information on the extent of support he still had in the former Soviet Union.

Trotsky was, of course, correct to argue that the regime was not a viable social formation. He predicted that it would either be overthrown by its working class or be reintegrated within the capitalist world. Again, not being a prophet, he had no way of

knowing that the regime's continued existence would prove to be so useful to the capitalist ruling class. The Stalinist model proved to be highly successful in controlling the consciousness and collective activity of workers during the cold war. It enabled the ruling class to reflate the economy through arms expenditure. In other words, Trotsky, along with most Marxists, had no idea that the Soviet Union would last as long as it did.

World revolution in these circumstances was impossible. The Stalinist regime was based on a failed attempt to derive an economic surplus from the forced and semi-forced exploitation of workers. Workers' collective action was so rare as to be non-existent. The only form of resistance was individualised. The political police was so deeply embedded in the workplace and communities that it was able to atomise workers. It prevented them from forming any type of organisation that could advance their interests.

Elsewhere in the world, Stalinist political parties led workers into alliances with the bourgeoisie. They made sure that trade union consciousness replaced class consciousness, and that workers' struggles were subordinated to Soviet foreign policy. This made all forms of resistance subordinate to the survival of the regime. It drew workers into counterrevolutionary alliances with social democrats and nationalists. The residue of these alliances exists in various forms many of which - documented in this newspaper - continue to influence what passes for the left today.

The conditions for workers' defeat worldwide originate from the rise of Stalinism and the crazy anti-Marxist doctrine of 'socialism in one country' in 1924, not from the events of 1989-91. Stalinism could not have collapsed without workers' passive or active support. Workers continue to demonstrate they have the potential to create a rationally planned, democratic society worldwide through collective action and organisation. This potential was captured by the slogan, 'Another world is possible'. It represented a growing awareness of how every struggle in the present requires workers to unite and overthrow not only repressive regimes, but the capitalist interests they protect and enjoy.

Thirty years on, workers' potential for world revolution has yet to be realised. How do we explain this? What is "fast disappearing" is not the Marxist critique of political economy. On the contrary, the salience of this critique is ever more manifest today than it was. Then, few people recognised the power and relevance of this critique. What is "fast disappearing" is the association of Marxism with sterile Stalinist dogma. Now, most knowledgeable individuals accept that Stalinists and their allies repressed and distorted Marx's insights. This has made the recovery of a pristine Marxism a fresh and exciting task.

Does this mean that Marxism is "on its arse"? Any answer depends on what that phrase means. If it means that Marxists are doing nothing, then the answer is negative. The recent success of the 'Why Marx?' sessions sponsored by the Labour Left Alliance is evidence of a renewed activism around Marxist education. This provides a model which I guess can be copied by other Marxists in the USA, the Netherlands and elsewhere.

However, if it means that Stalinism has knocked Marxists off their feet and they are still to get off the floor, then maybe there is an element of truth in

the idea. If true, then the potential for world revolution will continue to be unrealised for the foreseeable future. If false, then Marxists are now in an excellent position to support workers in winning the fight for socialism/communism.

Paul B Smith
Ormskirk

Sect collapse

To be frank, comrade Lawrence Parker's letter fails to address anything of note in my letter the previous week (November 23). Instead, he attempts to suggest that the belief that Stalinism was an impediment to the world proletariat is guilt by association with "the Socialist Workers Party, which disgracefully connived in the bourgeois rhetoric of 'the end of communism'". He seeks to caricature my position as "Once we have dispensed with the burden of being lumped in with this monstrosity, we'll be able to soar unimpeded across the heavens". I don't know whether comrade Parker has noticed, but the proletariat wasn't exactly soaring anywhere prior to the collapse of the USSR either.

He then asserts that "Both the Labour left and supposedly 'non-Stalinist' organisations were negatively impacted by the collapse of 'official communism'." That there is an interdependence between Stalinism and the 'Labour left' is undeniable, as we see, for example, with Jeremy Corbyn's relationship with the *Morning Star*. What I do not accept is that the existence of Stalinism had a beneficial effect on the workers' movement worldwide or on 'non-Stalinist' organisations.

In fact, one of the striking things about many of the Trotskyist sects is just how Stalinoid they were and remain so. This includes their antipathy to democracy or any kind of independent Marxist thought, and has included, at times, violence or the threat of it. Stalinism continues to exert an influence, not least because some on the left, like

comrade Parker, fail to understand that Stalinism was no part of 'the left' - if being on the left is fighting for a worldwide society of freely associating producers and the ultimate realisation of what it is to be human.

Of course, individual members of, say, the Communist Party of Britain may have an honourable intention of defending working class interests. However, the continued attachment to authoritarianism and state control of the means of production means that their allegiance to communism is at best illusory and at worst absurd, from a Marxist point of view. I daresay there are some who were demoralised by the end of the USSR. That such people will be committed to worldwide proletarian revolution is highly unlikely.

Comrade Parker then tries to support his assertions with reference to some unpublished theses by comrade Mike Macnair - which, of course, I could not have read. Fortunately, comrade Macnair did me more courtesy by sending me his unpublished theses, as well as a well-crafted article from *Critique*. In my opinion, none of this work supports comrade Parker's assertions and is, by contrast with comrade Parker's letter, well argued and thoughtful.

Explaining the "reactionary politics of the last 30 years" is part of what a serious Marxist organisation should be doing and the reason why I am in the CPGB. Indeed, it is one of the most important parts of any party project. It is likely to be painstaking and to take some time. I suggest comrade Parker rejoins the party and contributes in a meaningful way, rather than satisfying himself with his blog and the Discord app.

Ian Spencer
County Durham

Factions

In his response to Mike Macnair, Andrew Northall offers no defence of his idea that a ban on factions is an integral part of democratic centralism. Instead, he puts forward

Fighting fund

Final 2023 issue

This, of course, is the final fighting fund column for 2023. For those who don't know, that's because this is the last *Weekly Worker* before our two-week winter break - and to give you something extra to read over the festive season we've added an extra four pages. We will, of course, be back with the next issue on January 4.

In the meantime, quite a few comrades are obviously very determined to make sure we end the year with a bang - they've been busy contributing to our December fund to make sure we reach that much needed target of £2,250. And this week, as a result, no less than £702 came our way - and that's before those regular three-figure standing orders land in our account, which usually happens in week three.

Anyway, special thanks go to comrade PB, who made a fantastic £140 bank transfer, and KB, who donated £100 by the same method. Brilliant stuff! Other SOs/transfers came from AC and JM (£50 each), BO (£35), NH (£30), GD and DV (£25), TT (£20) and comrades IS, SM, LG, PM and CC (£10 each).

Then there were those who clicked on our PayPal button - thank you, RL and US comrade PM for their usual, very generous £50 contributions, as well as AC, who chipped in with an extra £40 on top of his usual fiver, and German subscriber MH, who added £10 to his £7.20 monthly payment. Finally, there was comrade Hassan, who handed £15 in cash to one of our team.

So, as I say, all that came to £702, which takes our December running total up to £1,123 - almost exactly half of our target, with a few days under half the month gone! That's very good news - especially when you remember that comrade BK has promised to match any excess over and above the £2,250 we need!

So let's make sure we celebrate the new year by shooting past that target. I'll let you know in three weeks time! ●

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

the notion of a mass socialist party, to which the Communist Party should be able to affiliate.

Would this not create a *de facto* open faction, albeit on a formal basis?

Ansell Eade
Email

Word games

I generally don't bother reading Andrew 'Trotskyism is a disease' Northall, whose mind seems to be a veritable junkshop of bad ideas from 'official communism'. However, comrades on Discord brought my attention to this amusing passage from his latest letter (December 7).

Northall says: "I do apologise if ... I have failed to adequately distinguish between a socialist party (and socialist unity) and a Communist Party (and communist unity). *I do not have the luxury of multi-page articles and thousands of words to go into any great detail*" (my emphasis).

Is he taking the piss? Briefly and with the help of a glamorous AI assistant, I calculated the number of words in Northall's combined letters in 2023. It comes to around 17,000. For the uninitiated that equates to three double-page *Weekly Worker* spreads and one single-page article. So, when Northall complains that he doesn't have the luxury of thousands of words, we can see that this is precisely what he *does* have.

Northall's rather hilarious aside does give me the hope that lurking beneath that over-verbose 'breaking a few eggs' exterior is another pithier and more concise version of himself. But I won't hold out too much hope on that front.

Lawrence Parker
London

Argentina myth

Comrade Paul Demarty claims that "the US succeeded in offloading the cost of an investors' 'haircut' to the periphery" in the Argentine debt crisis of the late 1990s ('Don't cry for Milei, Argentina', November 30). This is so imprecise as to be inaccurate.

Firstly, it is simply not true that US investors insulated themselves from the financial impact of the debt "haircut". The vast majority of

overseas holders of Argentine debt took part in an exchange which cost them around 70% of bond face value. These were genuine losses, which caused a certain amount of turmoil on Wall Street, as well as disrupting the orthodox acceptance of dollar-denominated direct investment into emerging markets, both in the US and in the 'periphery'.

The International Monetary Fund was paid in full - and it is hard to see bond funds which were "haircut" as more culpable than the IMF in what followed in Argentina. Ultimately the behaviour of the IMF in the late 90s led to a reluctance by central banks in newly industrialised nations to facilitate its work, and left it almost without a purpose until the euro crisis a decade later. The 7% of private investors, or their vulture fund assignees, who didn't accept the bail-in ended up being paid in full, but that unexpected legal result in 2018 did not cause Argentinian hardship in the early 2000s.

Moving on to the wider economic impacts of the crisis, these are more properly seen as impacts of devaluation against the dollar, and not of debt default. While the effects in Argentina were profoundly negative, analogous devaluations did not play out in the same way in other countries, undermining the suggestion that debt default had inescapable macroeconomic consequences. Indonesia and Thailand suffered economic shocks, tempered by positive political change. The story was the opposite in Russia, where political change was clearly regressive, but the economy rebounded with a reduced dependence on foreign capital. And the more highly industrialised Asian economies, such as Taiwan and South Korea, enjoyed progressive political change, as well as a huge economic boost in the longer term, as they found themselves able to compete in higher-value export markets.

The claim that Argentina was punished or avenged for its debt defaults is a myth, resting on three shibboleths, which we should be keen to reject. Firstly the bourgeois moralistic notion that borrowers are violating a norm if they refuse

to honour unaffordable or usurious debt. This is the logic which led African National Congress-led South Africa to repay the foreign debt taken out to fund the apartheid era government's war against the black population. Secondly the inaccurate claim that bond markets will refuse to lend again to those who have defaulted in the past. Many market observers have used the example of Argentina, repeatedly finding renewed access to credit despite a string of defaults, to empirically discredit this type of warning. Lastly the attitude of the (often culturally hegemonic) upper middle classes that the lifestyle shock they suffer when devaluations hit at their consumption of imported goods is the only type of economic pain that matters.

This attack on devaluations, whether planned, unplanned, judicious or reckless, should not be privileged in Argentina any more than against governments untainted by corruption, short-termism and populism.

Jack William Grahl
email

Still committed

I was not suggesting in my previous letter (November 23) that Mike Macnair's article, 'Unity based on solid principles' (November 2), was defensive, I was making the more general point that having critiques of political/organisational culture is not the same as rejecting sharp and direct polemic.

The specific critique of was of political cultures (far from unique to the CPGB) in which individuals are brittle to questions or criticism, take it personally as an attack and therefore respond defensively. But that was not my main point. My point in direct reference to Mike was more simply that, if political clarity is the accepted standard we aim for in our own ways, why take the approach of arguing against something that someone has not said?

I gave one example of this (on the question of ideological polemic) primarily because it was the most stark: ie, it was easily highlighted with a direct quote (indicating I thought ideological polemic was fundamental rather than that we should move away from it). I didn't mean though to accept or avoid arguments on the remaining points. Given that Mike has raised these remaining points again (Upfront, sharp and personal', November 30), though, I will address them more substantially.

First, Mike identifies that I have argued that the failure of the CPGB to grow or recruit demonstrates the failure of the project and therefore the need for its reassessment, particularly in the light of other (activist-orientated) organisations that *have* grown. I didn't argue this. I haven't discussed the size of the CPGB or recruitment to the CPGB anywhere. I know this has been raised as an issue within the organisation itself, but that was not my argument. My concern was with the *project* of the CPGB and the approach to it - recruitment isn't how I would measure the success of this.

I think the measure of its success would clearly be in the effects it is able to have upon the left. Depending on the specific approach, this might look like organisations fusing together, breaking apart or reconstituting in new forms (if the approach at the time was directed towards organised intervention in larger formations or wider regroupment projects) or it might look more like the proliferation of the ideas of the CPGB - these being taken up and

fought for by others within their organisations (if the approach at the time was more discreetly focused on polemic through the *Weekly Worker* and targeted interventions within the left as a whole).

Membership here is only of specific relevance as a more secondary point then, in the sense that it provides the resources to further the project. It clearly relates directly to the basic ability to reproduce itself, sustain its tasks and develop cadres capable of taking over leadership of the organisation. I'm not sure that *is* the case for the CPGB now, I'm not sure there is that basic replicability - which is an issue in terms of the long-term viability of the organisation. But, no, it is not a measure *in itself* of the success of the project - because clearly the CPGB is not understood as a proto-party that grows itself into the party.

What I asked at Communist University was how the CPGB itself would measure the relative success/failure of its approach *in the current period*. There was no real answer on that (not to say that there isn't one). My question was really aimed at gaining some clarity on the approach of the organisation in this period: how it sees itself in the current context and what the way forward looks like. From what I can gather, based on these and other exchanges outside the *Weekly Worker*, in the current period the CPGB leadership identifies that we are in a situation of retreat on the left, and that to a degree the organisation needs to weather this storm, protect a Marxist perspective (even perhaps insulate it against deviations in the wider movement), batten down the hatches and wait for the situation 'out there' to develop.

If this is the case, then in this context there is no real *positive* strategy for this period, nor a vision of what a way *forward* for communist unity and the partyist project looks like in the present. This is what my question was driving at - to get some clarity on this. Maybe I am totally off the mark, but, if the assessment above is correct, should it not be stated clearly and out in the open when having these discussions around communist unity, to emphasise that this perspective is what underpins the approach in this period? This would allow those who might disagree to then articulate alternative assessments of this period and therefore alternative approaches for progressing forward with the project of communist unity. Perhaps this could be clarified through a fuller articulation of exactly what the CPGB leadership's approach of how to take this project forward is.

Mike suggests that I am arguing for the CPGB to be more like a coordinator of class struggle and am therefore advocating by implication a Bakuninist conception of the party. Firstly, a conception of the party is not directly the same as an idea of the tasks involved in fighting for a party, I was not discussing the conception of the party but the struggle *for* a party. Secondly, and more importantly, what I was arguing was *not* Bakuninist. My concern was about how we give ideological polemic traction - the implication being that such polemic is the motor driving the process of reconstituting the left into a party. And, fundamentally, how the *Weekly Worker* can avoid the real danger of becoming an organ detached from the left and the wider movement, polemicising into the void.

I was not advocating that the

CPGB embraces the approach of the far left in general: my argument was in terms of *being where the far left are*, being in the wider movement in a substantial way in order to advance these arguments around the party and communist unity. In this sense, clearly, to be in a broad front doesn't make you a broad-frontist - it is about what you are doing there, how you are doing it and why.

In the absence of some larger formation like the Socialist Alliance, what does it mean to be where the left are? Where are they? Maybe it *doesn't* look like being a part of the movement, but what does it look like in this period instead? Surely this is a reasonable and fairly important discussion to have in a period in which we don't really know the way forward and in which there *is* a conservative impulse to insulate away from the mess of the movement and the left.

Finally, on the related question of resources and the idea that being in the movement entails drawing resources away from the production of the *Weekly Worker*. As a statement in itself this seems to express a resigned and zero-sum perspective - and sidesteps the fact that the CPGB, plenty of times, *has* been able to put resources into other work: into campaigns like Hands Off the People of Iran, regroupment projects, etc, *as well as* producing the *Weekly Worker*. And these activities are clearly not mutually exclusive: when you are where a real part of the left is, this will both inform and enrich the paper's polemic, and give its arguments more purchase.

The point on resources is actually somewhat revealing, because it indicates something important about the organisational approach more generally: ie, the weakness in organising and structuring party work beyond the production of the *Weekly Worker*. In reality it is a small number of comrades who work (diligently) on producing it, but what is the substantial role of party work for those outside of this cell? From my own (anecdotal) experience plenty of good, skilled comrades have expressed frustration at *not* having party work to do, not being given a clear idea of what this is or a clear avenue to apply and develop their skills in order to contribute to the party in different ways.

I'm not raising these different points as some random scatter-gun attack on the various weaknesses of the organisation - these points are clearly all connected. And neither am I trying to highlight these problems without purpose. My questions and criticism have not been motivated by trying to get one over on or attack the CPGB. I remain committed to the project the CPGB outlines and I don't think it would be remotely positive for the organisation to disappear - that is *precisely* what has motivated me to engage.

Caitriona Rylance
Bolton

Gratuitous

In response to Citizen Downing's gratuitous insult (Letters, November 30), I seem to recall him making a big song and dance about being expelled from the Labour Party a few years ago and wanting to remain a member of this party - which exactly fits his description of "a pathetic reformist groveller to the capitalist establishment".

Not being a specialist in Trotskyite sectarianism, I don't know if he still wants to be a member.

Adam Buick
Socialist Party of Great Britain

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COVID

Class war by other means

Heather Hallett's enquiry gives no grounds for optimism that the next pandemic will be handled better, but its exposure of the failings of the system and its hired servants is a lesson to be learned, writes **Ian Spencer**

Most will be aware that Boris Johnson's government displayed a cynical disregard for public health and safety, while public accountability was regarded as just a bit of a nuisance. Throughout his career as a journalist and politician Johnson has been exposed as a liar. Yet the very high UK mortality rate from Covid 19 is portrayed by much of the mainstream media as the consequence of a government faced with an unforeseen circumstance in which they, as Johnson repeatedly said, "tried their best".

Instead, the management of Covid is best seen as a moment in the decline of capitalism - one in which the indifference to tens of thousands of deaths is now commonplace. Phrases like "Let the bodies pile high", or "Let it rip - they've had a good innings",¹ used by Johnson when facing the possibility of another lockdown, put death in its place, behind profits. Boris Johnson's term in government will serve as an allegory for the inability of the ruling class to mitigate a global catastrophe, while showing enough low cunning to realise an opportunity to transfer a vast amount of wealth to the very richest.

The Covid enquiry is chaired by Baroness Heather Hallett, a retired appeal court judge and crossbench peer. It is likely to take years before it publishes its final report, but the aim is to produce interim publications of its 'modules' sooner - although probably not before the next election.

One of the advantages of public enquiries is that they can compel witnesses to attend and to hand over documents. However, when Johnson was asked to explain why 5,000 WhatsApp messages were missing from his government-issued mobile phone, he suggested that it was "something to do with the app going down". Apparently, he had inadvertently deleted them, on the basis that he could not possibly have known that causing a mobile phone to revert to factory settings might cause that to happen. It seems that Rishi Sunak had the same problem - funny that.

Johnson began his testimony with an apology calculated to manage the headlines and included his assertion that "I understand the feelings of the victims and their families". Representatives of the bereaved families were wise to his attempt to manipulate the media and disrupted his apology by protesting, and were consequently ejected from the hearing.

The former prime minister has tried to portray himself as someone who got the main things right, such as vaccines and lockdown. But the inquiry has shown that Johnson was out of his depth, with little interest in the unfolding global catastrophe. For example, he missed five meetings of the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (Cobra), finally attending one at the beginning of March 2020. It was clear by December 2019 that Covid was a disease with a high mortality rate - the World Health Organisation declared it a public health emergency of international concern on January 30 2020.

Rishi Sunak, dubbed "Dr Death" by professor Dame Angela McLean in a WhatsApp message, introduced 'eat-out-to-help-out' - an £840 million subsidy to the hospitality industry - without consulting the government's chief



Swab testing came too late. So did everything else

medical advisor and in so doing increased the spread of the virus and the death rate, thus helping to ensure a further lockdown.²

Ignorance

Worldwide, Covid is estimated to have killed nearly seven million people, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in history.³ In Britain, the number of people killed by Covid is over 232,000.⁴ In the build-up to the first lockdown the government tried to portray itself in a favourable light with reference to its place in the 'league table' of death with other countries. But that did not last long, as the UK quickly became one of the deadliest places in Europe. Of comparable developed western countries, only Italy suffered worse.

The assertion by Johnson that the Covid pandemic was a "once in a 100-year event" was an admission of breath-taking ignorance. Sars was first identified in China in February 2003 and quickly spread to four different countries. Mers was identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012.⁵ In contrast with the UK, South Korea had learned the lessons of these infections and became a model of how to manage the crisis. Korea has features which make it broadly comparable with England. It has a population of nearly 52 million but with a greater population density. However, it had far fewer deaths (around 36,000) and a much lower fatality rate (0.1%, compared to England's 2.88%).⁶ Jeremy Hunt during his testimony before the inquiry admitted that the UK had failed to learn the lessons of Korea's handling of Covid - most government planning had assumed that the next deadly pandemic would be influenza. Despite this, lessons clearly had not been learned even from the government's own flu pandemic exercises.

Johnson's ignorance extended beyond the history of respiratory viral infections. He repeatedly voiced his doubts about the existence of long Covid, drawing a spurious parallel with 'gulf-war syndrome'. Even the most superficial study of chronic fatigue syndromes shows

a well-documented relationship between viral infections and chronic fatigue.⁷ But ignorance is something of a studied feature with Johnson. He told the Covid enquiry that he had "almost no memory" of reading any of the minutes of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies.

Among the most egregious decisions of the former health secretary, Matt Hancock, was discharging patients back to care homes, which ensured its spread to the most vulnerable in society. Hancock - described by Johnson's chief advisor, Dominic Cummings, as a "proven liar" - also made a point of not reading the minutes of SAGE meetings.⁸ Aamer Anwar, solicitor for the Scottish Covid Bereaved Group, described the decision as having "turned our care homes into killing grounds for the elderly, who were treated as toxic waste".⁹

Care home workers were among the worst affected. Many were infected, in a sector that usually only pays statutory sick pay. By contrast, the owners of care homes did rather well. During the first year of the pandemic profitability in care homes increased by 3%. In a two-year study into the financial impact of Covid on the UK care home sector, led by the Warwick Business School, it was found that a quarter of the 460 companies in the study paid out £120 million in dividends - an increase of £11.7 million (or 11%) on the previous year. A group of 25 companies, which had received £21.7 million in government grants, paid out a combined £30.6 million in dividends. Care homes reduced their staffing costs during the pandemic, with workers generally working longer hours with vacancies unfilled.¹⁰

Poorer outcomes

As with almost every disease, the poorer you are, the more likely it is you will suffer serious effects. Mortality rates from Covid were 2.6 times higher amongst the most deprived areas, compared to those least deprived. Low social economic status and poverty mean that among the poorest 20% of the population

many live in overcrowded conditions, making transmission of the infection more likely.

Manual workers are far less likely to be able to work from home, or be 'furloughed'. They continued working in areas of high exposure to the virus, such as the care and health sectors, retail and transport. Poor housing, with limited outdoor space, makes social distancing more difficult. Those with unstable work conditions, such as zero-hours contracts, were far more likely to see a serious shortfall in their income. This had an impact on nutritional status and mental health.

Similarly, stress is a known factor in weakening the immune system due to the actions of hormones, so you are more likely to catch the virus and less able to fight it when you do. There is also a significant class gradient in type-two diabetes, heart disease and hypertension - all significant factors for a worse outcome from the Covid infection. Outcomes are also worse if treatment is sought late, and there is a well understood 'inverse care law', where, the poorer you are, the less likely you are to seek or be given appropriate treatment.¹¹

At the height of the pandemic in the UK, between 2020 and 2022, the mortality rates for black and minority ethnic groups were significantly higher than for the white population. Significantly, those Bame groups that are generally the poorest, such as those of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, black Caribbean and black African origin, were the worst affected.

An investigation published in *The New York Times* found that half of the UK central government contracts made public went to companies run by friends and associates of politicians in the Conservative Party.¹² The extent of the alleged cronyism will perhaps surprise nobody, but the Good Law Project has shown that the UK government spent £3.8 billion on personal protective equipment alone - much of it purchased through the VIP lane for rapid procurement, which was set up by the Johnson administration to make up for the woeful pre-pandemic preparation.

The VIP route meant that bids were not subject to competitive tendering and less (if any) scrutiny. In some cases, this meant that some of the PPE was worthless.

In a deal brokered by Liz Truss, £145 million was wasted on unusable surgical masks. On average, PPE purchased by this route was 80% more expensive than standard NHS suppliers. This meant that the government overpaid around £925 million. An indication of how this came about is illustrated by the fact that a standard surgical gown normally costs the NHS £5.87. One provided by Meller Designs, a fashion company, cost £12.60. The company is owned by David Meller, an associate of Michael Gove, who has donated nearly £70 million to the Tories since 2009.¹³

Covid has also played a role in transferring wealth on a global scale to the richest.¹⁴ Oxfam, drawing on research from *Forbes*, has calculated that the world's billionaires have added \$5 trillion dollars to their wealth during the pandemic.¹⁵ Moreover, Covid adversely affected emerging economies far more than economically advanced ones.¹⁶ The scene is set for a greater exacerbation of global inequality.

Disease does not transform society: people do that. However, epidemics in general and pandemics in particular tell us something about the nature of the society and can accelerate a pre-existing tendency to decline. The arrival of malaria in Italy accelerated the decline of the Roman empire; the black death of the 14th century accelerated the decline of feudalism.

The 20th and 21st centuries have seen some of the most devastating pandemics in history. The so-called Spanish flu of 1918 killed 50 million worldwide, Aids has killed an estimated 35 million and Covid has claimed the place of the fifth most deadly pandemic in history. Large sections of the world's population have been impoverished and many people have little or no choice but to migrate, creating the conditions for future pandemics.

While nothing in the Covid enquiry gives grounds for optimism that the next pandemic will be handled better, its exposure of the failings of the system and its hired servants is a lesson well learned ●

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WELFARE

New kind of cruelty

Shaming and demonising the poor: James Linney takes apart the Tories' 'back to work plan', but nobody should expect anything positive from Sir Keir and Wes Streeting

Ahead of the November 22 autumn statement chancellor Jeremy Hunt and the secretary of state for work and pensions, Mel Stride, unveiled their 'back to work plan'. They claimed that the aim was to create:

... a package of employment-focused support that will help people stay healthy, get off benefits and move into work ... Getting more people into work, and ensuring work pays, remains a key priority for the government. It is important for growing the UK economy, managing inflation, controlling spending and improving living standards.

Despite these claims, on reading the plan, it is immediately clear that the attempts to "support" people back into work are at best superficial. Adding up to doing more of the same, it is the same patronising, dehumanising 'employment coaching' that has been failing people for decades. These will be familiar to anyone who has had to sign on - basic writing of your *curriculum vitae*, interview skills, etc - things which sound helpful enough in theory, until you have to do them. Then you realise that the reality is arbitrary, demoralising and seems aimed at getting people to lower their expectations so much that they are well primed to submit to the first (likely zero hours) job that comes along.

If these token and pathetic support measures are the meagre carrot, then we soon get to the enormous stick; revealing the actual reason for the plan: to demonise and punish anyone too sick to work. Hence we are told how the growing problem of work avoidance is the direct cause of the economy stalling and contributing to everyone else's hardship. As Hunt puts it, the plan was necessary to stop "anyone choosing to coast on the hard work of taxpayers".¹ Stride was equally emphatic, saying of the plan: "... our message is clear: if you are fit, if you refuse to work, if you are taking taxpayers for a ride - we will take your benefits away."

Now I know what you are thinking - all this talk of good-for-nothing work-dodgers sounds very familiar. Indeed, it is the same language used to demonise people on benefits - fashionable amongst New Labour and the coalition ministers in the late 1990s and 2000s. During this time, not a week went by without a story in the newspapers about how someone was having dozens of children so they could cash in their benefits and buy multiple homes, cars and luxury holidays!

Shaming and demonising the poor became so ubiquitous that it became a form of cheap entertainment - hence TV shows such as Channel 4's utterly contemptuous *Benefits Street*. The *Daily Mail* is, of course, on board with attempts to rehabilitate the 'benefits scrounger' myth - hence its recent headline: 'British taxpayers are paying for an army of shirkers unless we get tough on sickness benefit scroungers.'² Despite the *Mail's* hopes, people are now much less likely to buy into these lies. Recent experience of the pandemic and the rocketing costs of living have meant that many more people (working or not) have had experience of what it means to be unable to afford the basics - they know



Protest demanding equal lives

that anyone living on universal credit (£73 a week if you are under 25 years and single) is struggling to survive.

Let us look for evidence of this 'army of shirkers' by examining current statistics. Unemployment is actually at a fairly low level (currently 4.3%, or just over one million people) - true, it has climbed by 0.3% since the pandemic, but since the 1980s, unemployment rates have been about 10%.³

Official figures distinguish between those who are currently seeking and available to work and people categorised as "economically inactive", who have not been "seeking work within the last four weeks and/or are unable to start work within the next two weeks". Such "economically inactive" people may have disabilities or illness, which currently means they are unable to work, but actually the majority of this category are made up of students (26%), as well as people looking after their family (22%) or having taken early retirement. None of these people are actually "inactive" - clearly raising children, caring for family members and studying are all essential and valuable contributions to our society.

The 'economic inactivity' rate (21.1%) is just 0.9% higher than before the coronavirus pandemic, but it has remained fairly steady at between 21% and 24% over the past two decades. There has, however, been a significant increase in the number of people unable to work due to long-term sickness; the numbers having risen to 2.6 million in July 2023, compared to 1.97 million in 2019. This is no big surprise, when you consider what has been happening since 2019.

Pandemic

For anyone following the current Covid-19 inquiry, it should be blatantly obvious that the responsibility for protecting UK citizens from the worst pandemic in a century fell to a bunch of desperately self-serving, backstabbing clowns. The Tory leadership's shambolic attempts at interpreting epidemiology via their own tooth-and-claw capitalist filter, whilst trying to make a quick buck on the side, would be comical if it had not resulted in the unnecessary death and suffering of thousands of people. For anyone who cares to see, the inquiry has pulled the thin veil of pretence from the face of our government. Their concern, in their own words, was always for the pandemic not to interfere with the continued flow of profit and, if the bodies had to be piled high, then so be it.

The pandemic continues to

wreak havoc on the health of many - 1.9 million people still experience symptoms of post-Covid syndrome⁴ and for many those symptoms are actually disabling, such as severe fatigue and breathlessness. Of course, the psychological impact has been equally appalling and both the pandemic and the rising costs of living have been devastating catalysts for worsening mental health. Rates of people seeking help for their mental health have been rising steadily for a decade, but in 2022 mental health services in England received a record 4.6 million referrals (up 22% from 2019).⁵

For people whose poor mental health has forced them out of work, the current system for claiming benefits is guaranteed to exacerbate their problems. The application process has always been an onerous, overcomplicated experience, but since the Tories rolled out their 'reforms' in 2013, which switched people to universal credit, it has reached new levels of bureaucracy that would seem at home in one of Franz Kafka's nightmarish novels. Predictably universal credit has been used as a vehicle to deny as many people as possible their benefit payments and force the most vulnerable into destitution. This is evidenced by the increasing number of children officially in poverty - 4.2 million (or 29%), up from 3.6 million in 2011.⁶

Applicants for universal credit are subjected to a humiliating 'work capabilities assessment' where a privately contracted clinician attempts to determine whether a person is fit to work, based on a short (less than an hour) examination, reducing a person and their mental and physical conditions to a set of arbitrary score points. Not surprisingly, the outcomes are not a fair reflection of a person's ability to work and any appeal of the decision is even more stressful and lengthy, leaving people unable to pay their bills or being threatened with homelessness. A recent study examining the traumatic impact this process can have on applicants concluded:

Our findings add considerable detail to emerging evidence of the deleterious effects of universal credit on vulnerable claimants' health and wellbeing. Our evidence suggests that UC is undermining vulnerable claimants' mental health, increasing the risk of poverty, hardship, destitution and suicidality.⁷

The suffering of such people is being exacerbated by the failing national

health service. The Tories have been so successful in defunding the NHS and demoralising its workers that it is currently not able to meet the basic needs of many patients. As has been well documented, current waiting lists are at an all-time high and growing. 7.75 million people are now waiting longer than 18 months for treatment. People with illnesses such as severe back pain, osteoarthritis, depression and cardiovascular disease (the most common causes for having to sign on for benefits) are not getting the care and treatments they need and predictably are getting *more* disabled as a consequence.

Having established then that the Tories have manufactured a growing population of people too sick to work, unable to get the help they need from the NHS and made sicker by the already criminally unfair benefits system, let us see how their 'back to work plan' aims to make amends.

Forced

The body of the plan and clearly the real reason for its launch are the list of draconian sanctions to be imposed on people who are still having to claim benefits 12 months after signing on. People at this time, we are informed, will have to undertake forced work-placement trials, unpaid work experience or some other (unnamed) "intensive activity" to improve their employability prospects. We are left to guess what this might be, but the message is clear: you will perform work, possibly unpaid, of any sort, no matter how harmful to your health, and if you refuse your benefits will be immediately withdrawn. The plan goes on to set out new powers for the department for work and pensions to digitally track people, and this surveillance will enable

a work coach to track a claimant's attendance at DWP-organised job interviews or job fairs. This tool will provide work coaches with better evidence on a claimant's work-search activities and ensure that claimants, who do not attend mandatory appointments without a good reason are sanctioned.

These horrific measures are not even the worst of it; the plans go on to reveal that if people remain unable to work then additional benefits, such as free NHS medication prescriptions, dental care and legal aid, will be *withdrawn*. This attempt to paint people with chronic debilitating health conditions as work-shy benefit-scammers, whilst denying them their medications (which will lead directly to their worsening morbidity and possibly death) is a new kind of cruelty. The paper-thin arguments made by Tory ministers that these measures are aimed at incentivising and supporting people back to work are intuitively and blatantly false - and, of course, the ministers making these claims are well aware of their untruth. In 2019 the government funded its own research into the benefits system, which stated:

Of all the evidence we received, none was more compelling than that against the imposition of conditionality and sanctions on people with a disability or health condition. It does not work. Worse, it is harmful and counterproductive. We recommend that the government immediately

stop imposing conditionality and sanctions on anyone found to have limited capability for work, or who presents a valid doctor's note.⁸

We learn towards the end of the 'back to work plan' that the government has attempted to sardonically negate this recommendation by proposing to simply remove the power of general practitioners to provide sick notes to the DWP - thus cutting out of the process the health professional best placed to provide accurate, balanced information regarding the state of the health of a claimant.

Any sensible person will have already worked out that 'Back to Work' was never a genuine attempt to support people. This is the Tories just doing what comes naturally to them: namely, blame and punish the poor for their poverty. Rishi Sunak's intentions in green-lighting these benefit reforms now were less about gaining popular support than for his own short-term political benefit - providing breathing space by further indicating to the right wing of his party that he is on their side.

But it is easy to fall into the habit of pantomime politics - we know we should boo when the Tories take the stage. This feels less fun, however, when the working class has nothing to cheer. Sir Keir Starmer has been propagating the 'benefit scrounger' myth since his days as a QC, when as director of public prosecutions he championed up to 10 years in prison for benefit fraud (which accounts for just 0.7% of total DWP claims).⁹ And as Labour leader he has been equally vocal about getting tough on benefit fraud - clearly indicating to the establishment that he intends to continue Tory austerity.

Equally there will be little to cheer for in terms of reversing the NHS decline if he becomes prime minister, as seems likely. His shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting, has recently been boasting that he wants to "hold the door wide open" to the NHS for the private sector, if Labour wins the general election.¹⁰

We must be clear that demonising certain sections of the working class, painting them as lazy, criminal and to blame for their poverty - whether it be the unemployed or migrants - is not a tactic unique to the Tories. It is part of fundamental capitalist ideology, used to justify the dominance of one minority class over the majority ●

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UKRAINE



Notes on the war

With the failure of Zelensky's offensive there can be no doubt that there is a stalemate now. Perfect conditions for unofficial ceasefires and fraternisation, argues Jack Conrad

After nearly five months of desperate fighting, what has Volodymyr Zelensky's offensive delivered? Well, predictably, precious little.¹ Even Zelensky himself now admits it did not "achieve desired results".² Previously, he had, after all, torn a strip off Ukraine's commander-in-chief, general Valery Zalzhny, for saying that the war has reached a "stalemate".³ What with Gaza, an always fickle western media has largely lost interest and the danger, from Zelensky's point of view, is that the GOP will eventually move to cut off supplies of money and arms entirely. The Senate has already voted 48 to 45 to block Joe Biden's latest \$61 billion funding package amid a grandstanding squabble over the Mexican border and US immigration policy.⁴

True, Ukrainian missile, UAV and sea drone attacks forced most of Russia's Black Sea fleet to relocate away from Crimea to Novorossiysk. However, territorial gains have been minimal. There is the bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Dnipro river near the village of Krynsky. But Ukrainian troops are boxed in and suffer relentless artillery bombardment.

The poor sods complain of a "lack of drinking water" and being sent into the jaws of "hell".⁵ The odds are that the Krynsky bridgehead will be abandoned some time soon - holding it over the winter months would be a miracle.

Note, the Dnipro does not freeze in the winter to the point of allowing lorries to safely cross, as with Leningrad's 1941-43 Road of Life, but nor can boats normally operate due to shattering ice flows. Of course, the ultimate go-ahead to scuttle must come from Zelensky himself.

Meanwhile, on the main southern and eastern fronts, hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers have been dying daily, leading, understandably, to an increasing reluctance of young men to serve in the military. More and more of them are "fleeing conscription".⁶ Certainly, Ukraine cannot afford another such offensive: supplies of willing cannon fodder have all but been exhausted.

Incidentally, US and UK top brass were heavily involved in planning the failed offensive - the American hotheads wanting it to begin in April. They thought a single, determined southern thrust

Soldiers from both the British and the German sides left their trenches to exchange hugs, gifts and souvenirs. An artist's impression from *The Illustrated London News* of January 9 1915. Though the social-imperialists hate it, there is the tendency towards fraternisation in Ukraine too

towards Melitopol, fronted by Ukraine's newly acquired armour, would break through Russia's defences. In the best-case scenario, the Pentagon's wargamers envisaged the Ukrainian army reaching the Azov Sea, within "60-90 days".⁷ Russian-held territory would thereby be sliced in two. A pipe dream.

CIA director William J Burns was sceptical and put the chances of a Ukrainian breakthrough at only 50:50. But even he and the so-called US 'intelligence community' must be disappointed with the negligible results on the ground. As for Ukrainian military officials, they feared suffering "catastrophic losses" and that indeed is what happened (though actual casualty figures are a state secret).⁸ Attacking in three prongs, the first contact with the enemy shattered any illusions of a breakthrough: Ukrainian troops were overwhelmed by artillery fire, and losses of men, fighting vehicles and tanks were, yes, "catastrophic".⁹

But the Ukrainians had no choice in the matter. Promising a game-changing spring offensive, even if it only came in the summer,

helped persuade the US and its allies into stumping up extra high end arms deliveries: Leopard 2 battle tanks, long-range Storm Shadow missiles and F-16s. Then there is the finance needed to pay for the salaries of Ukraine's civil servants and politicians, keeping its banks afloat and its economy from tipping over into complete free fall.

Without a 'big push' there existed a real risk of public opinion in the west becoming disenchanted. Why do we suffer from falling real wages, increased taxes, deteriorating public services and job losses for what appears to an unwinnable proxy war against Russia? Indeed there are already signs that wide swathes of the population are arriving at such conclusions and not only in Germany - the "sick man of Europe," which has, of course, taken the biggest economic hit, with Russian oil and gas being sanctioned.¹⁰

According to a recent Gallop poll, some 41% of Americans think the Biden administration is doing too much to help Ukraine - a rise from 24% in August 2022 and 29% in June 2023. Thirty-three percent

(down from 43% in June) say the US is doing the right amount, while 25% believe it is not doing enough.¹¹ So the shift in public opinion is palpable ... and this will matter in November 2024, with a Donald Trump versus Joe Biden contest seemingly on the cards.

Leave aside the grossly undemocratic nature of the presidential election system - ie, the state-based electoral college - Trump has a clear lead in most opinion surveys. He promises not to be a dictator: "Except for day one".¹² Perhaps the military will intervene before that to save the US from Trump by imposing their own dictatorship - who knows? But the slide towards some form of Bonapartism is unmistakable.

Either way, hard-right Republicans - not the DSA's Squad - are increasingly open about opposing Biden's pledge to "stand with Ukraine as long as it needs, as long as it requires". Trumpists care little about "a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing" (Iran and China are, strangely, another matter).

Siege warfare

With the onset of winter and fierce Russian counterattacks, especially in the east around Avdiivka, Zelensky has urgently ordered the "construction of an extensive network of fortifications" - a clear sign that Ukraine has once again been thrown onto the defensive.

Building a Maginot line is, of course, exactly what Russia did in the winter-spring of 2022-23 along the 600-mile front and then arching up all along the internationally recognised border between the two countries. Typically, there are anti-tank ditches, followed by earth berms, three rows of dragons teeth and razor wire. Besides the network of trenches and bunkers sheltering Russian troops there are tightly packed anti-personnel, anti-vehicle mines. Attackers also face deadly fire raining in from well-protected artillery and howitzer positions placed in the rear. No wonder Ukrainian attempts to make a breakthrough came to nought.

Though it brings no pleasure, especially given the horrendous carnage, commentators, myself included, who pointed to the similarities with World War I have been more than vindicated. A sober-minded assessment already found in the Pentagon papers leaked back in April, which likewise spoke of static fronts and a "stalemate".¹³ What we have in Ukraine therefore is World War I-type trench warfare, with the addition of drones and missiles. Tanks and manned fighter aircraft seem to have gone the way of the cavalry.

Successful surprise attacks are all but impossible. Instead we have siege warfare. In World War I the background to this is remarkably similar to Ukraine. Having been forced onto the defensive in 1915, the Germans responded by fortifying their front: lines of trenches, barbed wire, machine guns, concrete bunkers. To have any hope of breaching such awesome defences required the delivery, via rail and lorry, of huge quantities of artillery shells, prolonged bombardments and then hugely costly infantry assaults (artillery conquered and infantry held any territorial gains).

Trotsky, at the time, it should be noted, devoted several articles to trench warfare, including 'The trenches' (September 1915) and 'Fortresses or trenches?' (October 1915). Trotsky dismissed fortresses as anachronistic - artillery bombardment quickly reduced them to rubble. Hence, he declared,

"trenches" had triumphed and to such an extent that both militarists and pacifists worshipped them.¹⁴ Deluded pacifists imagined that state borders protected by trenches could finally abolish war.

Certainly, as a "temporary sanctuary" trenches served as "decisive boundaries, the smallest crossing of which by either side is paid for with numerous victims". But conditions in the trenches were terrible. Trotsky called them "disgusting dumps". Alike German, Austrian, Italian, French and British troops found themselves crouching in mud, water and filth. They thought not about the grand plans of monarchs, ministers and generals. Nor did they think about killing the enemy. No, their overriding concern was getting a crust to eat - that and survival. Trotsky quotes testimony from men at the front about how they would enter into a silent agreement not to fire upon each other.¹⁵

However, fortress warfare continued, albeit in a different form. German chief of staff Erich von Falkenhayn promulgated a military doctrine that allowed for no retreat. As with a fortress under siege, the "standard response" was that any breach of the defences had to be met with swift counterattacks, no matter what the cost.¹⁶ Given that German forces had behind them a thousand square miles of captured French territory, such a doctrine was militarily unnecessary, but ensured that the final outcome ultimately depended on who could produce the most armaments and who could sustain the greatest losses in human life.

US and UK top brass wargamers - above all their masters in Washington and Whitehall - are quite prepared to let hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians die for the sake of their imperial ambitions: reigning in France and Germany, degrading and dismembering the Russian Federation and strategically surrounding and strangling the People's Republic of China.

German turn

Given the vantage of hindsight, it is now crystal-clear that the decision by Russia's high command to withdraw from Kherson, Izyum, Lyman and the environs of Kharkiv in the autumn of 2022 was no rout, as claimed by a jubilant Zelensky, but, yes, a repositioning, a reset, to secure their forces behind the strongest, most advantageous lines of defence.

True, a hyperbolic storm of protest blasted out from Chechnya's warlord, Ramzan Kadyrov and Yevgeny Prigozhin of Wagner. Defence minister Sergei Shoigu and top military commanders were branded cowards, traitors and incompetents, who deserved to be stripped of medals and sent barefoot into battle. Given that Russia had banned any criticism of the conduct of the Ukraine war by making it illegal to "discredit the armed forces", such language was highly significant. The Wagner coup happened a few months later in June 2023 and shook the whole of Russia. Vladimir Putin was humiliated, but survived, and - surprise, surprise - has more than a chance of successfully winning a fifth presidential term in March 2024.

That aside, strategically, it is now perfectly clear that the Russian high command took a German turn in 2022-23. Instead of pursuing the quixotic aim of "de-Nazifying" Ukraine, which I take as a euphemism for decapitating the Kyiv regime, it would appear that Putin has been forced to settle,

at least for the moment, on keeping what Russia has got in Ukraine and pursuing a war of attrition. The final outcome will therefore depend on who can produce, or secure, the most artillery shells, drones, missiles and sustain the greatest losses ... and which side cracks first.

Note North Korea's recent move to supply Russia with equipment and munitions on a large scale. Goods trains have been running round the clock. Meanwhile, Putin has ordered the mobilisation of an extra 170,000 men and his government is reorganising the country's economy and putting it on a war footing (not a total war footing). Military spending has risen to nearly 6% of GDP - that after a 3.9% rise this year and a 2.7% rise in 2021.

Russia's biggest weapons producer, the state-owned Rostec, announced recently that production volumes "had increased between two and 10 times".¹⁷ Output of long-range missiles has gone from 40 to a "over 100 a month", reports Jack Watling, senior research fellow for land warfare at the RUSI. His paper is ominously entitled 'Ukraine must prepare for a hard winter'.¹⁸

There is, of course, the possibility of a frozen conflict. To this day, for example, the war on the Korean peninsula continues, but as a prolonged ceasefire - there is no peace treaty, no settlement. But that does not look like being on the cards any time soon, when it comes to Russia and Ukraine. Nor do peace negotiations.

True, the US paymaster told Zelensky to drop his intransigent position of 'no negotiations till the last Russian soldier leaves the last piece of pre-2014 Ukrainian soil'. While Zelensky instantly fell into line, this owed more to public relations than moves towards a peace deal. Indeed there is plenty of evidence showing that the US and UK governments worked hard to prevent a settlement in the first months of Russia's 'special military operation'. The latest is from David Arakhamia, parliamentary leader of Zelensky's Servant of the People party.

Having led the Ukrainian delegation in talks with Moscow, he tells how Russia's overriding aim was to push Kyiv into "neutrality" - meaning giving up on joining Nato. There were, he says, two main reasons why negotiations ultimately failed. Firstly, though surely not insurmountably, the "need to change the Ukrainian constitution" (amended in February 2019 to enshrine Nato aspirations); and, secondly, the fact that Boris Johnson came to Kyiv to inform Ukrainian officials that the "west wouldn't sign any agreement with Moscow", instead urging: "Let's just fight."¹⁹ Surely a clincher.

General Winter

Once again Russia's high command seems to be banking on General Winter to break the will of Ukraine's civilian population. That presumably explains the "second winter drone blitz on Ukraine's power grid."²⁰ Doubtless millions will shiver, suffer frostbite and many - in particular the elderly and infirm - will die from hypothermia, as temperatures plunge to -20°C and even lower. But this is unlikely to weaken the "morale of the civilian population" sufficiently to see the Ukrainian army "either disbanded or surrendering".²¹

No, ordinary Ukrainian-Ukrainians will not be clamouring for surrender. Instead they will store up food and water, wrap up warm, hunker down in air raid shelters,

burn logs, hope that enough diesel and thermal generators can be supplied ... and they will curse the name, 'Vladimir Putin'. If need be they will learn to live without electricity. Whatever happens, they will demand revenge.

After 2014 and the Maidan Square coup, ethnic Russians were denied rights and treated as enemies within. Intolerance, bigotry and murder squads ruled. Breakaway republics, doubtless backed by Moscow, were inevitable. Around 14,000, mainly Russian-Ukrainians, died in what amounted to a civil war in the Donbass. But, given direct inter-state conflict and a Russian war against civilians, Ukrainian nationalism must become still more toxic.

Let us take a seemingly innocuous example. Earlier this year Zelensky "signed two laws" that "strictly reinforce his country's national identity, banning Russian place names and making knowledge of Ukrainian language and history a requirement for citizenship".²²

This saw Leo Tolstoy Street in Kyiv become Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi Street. Everyone knows who Leo Tolstoy was, of course. But what of Pavlo Skoropadskyi? A reactionary tsarist general, he briefly seized power in Ukraine in 1918 with the help of the German army. Skoropadskyi brutally restored the landlords to their estates and assisted the German army with requisitioning. He also whipped up terrible anti-Jewish pogroms, whole villages were massacred.

Nor should we forget Stepan Bandera - the fascist and Nazi collaborator who independently oversaw mass slaughter, in particular of Poles (well over 100,000 died). True, Bandera temporarily fell out with the Nazis, but it is surely significant that the Kyiv government has voluntarily chosen to elevate Bandera into a national hero: there are statues, bridges, squares, postage stamps and an annual holiday in his honour. Zelensky himself has praised Bandera as one of Ukraine's "indisputable heroes".²³

Such ideological trappings - and this is their true significance - prepare the ground for stripping Russian-Ukrainians of citizenship and ethnic cleansing. Zelensky has spoken of wanting his country to become a "big Israel" after the last orc has been driven out. Posting on his own official website, he states that his vision for Ukraine's post-conflict future includes having armed forces everywhere: in "all institutions, supermarkets, cinemas, there will be people with weapons".²⁴ One only need look at the West Bank and Gaza to see what he has in mind.

There are those, such as Kyiv's mayor, Vitali Klitschko, who accuse Zelensky of having "authoritarian tendencies".²⁵ This has nothing to do with the suppression of opposition parties, restrictions on the Russian language and "removing Moscow priests from Ukrainian land" (ie, banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church). No, it is about who gets their hands on the spoils, when it comes to selling favours, black market trades and skimming percentages. Much attention has been paid to Zelensky's 'war on corruption', including the arrest of his former sponsor, the oligarch, Ihor Kolomoisky, over a \$150 million fraud. However, Seymour Hersh quotes "analysts from the CIA", who estimate that Zelensky's ministers, generals and his entourage of cronies embezzled some \$400 million in 2022 alone from overcharged diesel payments.²⁶ Ukraine is - no surprise

UKRAINE

- ranked by western sources as the second most corrupt country in Europe (after Russia).

Tacit truce

Strategists - professional and armchair - argued this time last year that winter will see "fighting at reduced tempo".²⁷ Both sides were assumed to be set on using the winter months to rest, rotate, retrain and re-equip troops. But, as we pointed out, it is the rainy season, the *rasputitsa*, which prevents fighting. Everything, especially lorries, gets bogged down in the deep, gooey, thick mud. Front lines find themselves running out of fuel, ammunition and food. A severe winter, on the other hand, allows manoeuvre. Tanks, howitzers and soldiers can move swiftly over solidly frozen ground.

Everyone now expects the fighting to continue ... at something like the present tempo over the winter months. Despite that, it is doubtful that anything decisive will happen. Certainly, if Putin is depending on anything in 2024, it will be Rostec churning out munitions on an ever increasing scale - that and America's presidential election.

Meanwhile, trench warfare, because of its static nature, allows for - and encourages - fraternisation. Ordinary soldiers, especially those in non-elite units, dread the prospect of being ordered over the top. The chances of death are exceedingly high. Meanwhile, they endlessly wait and wait and do their best to reduce the discomfort, suffering, boredom and dangers. There is an obvious interest in not being sacrificed in useless military operations. Rank-and-file soldiers and their NCOs frequently take a common stand against the non-combatant officer class safely located in command posts. Men in the trenches bond, form a close-knit community. Staff officers are with very few exceptions held in utter contempt: out of touch, arrogant, corrupt and determined to save their children from the meat grinder.

Away from the most active fronts, with their fanatical stormtroopers, human waves and mass casualties, there is 'live and let live'.²⁸ If you do not shoot us when we are bucketing out our waterlogged trenches, we will not shoot you when you are bucketing out your waterlogged trenches. The same goes with the retrieval of the dead and the badly wounded from no-man's land. A tacit, always illicit, truce is observed. The antithesis of the official 'kill or be killed'.

Veterans instruct newcomers in the arts of peace as well as of war.

Morally, there grows a recognition of mutual plight. The poor buggers on the other side endure the same cold, the same mud, the same infestations of rats, mice and lice as we do. They get to know their neighbours in the nearby trenches not only through the drones buzzing overhead, the shells whizzing in and the night raids. They hear the agonised screams, the curses, the familiar songs and the messages shouted in a closely related language. They also smell what the other side is cooking. Fellow feeling, empathy, can easily develop, as was the case with Christmas 1914 in World War I.

These were, though, argues Tony Ashworth, "neither the first nor the last instances of 'live and let live'".²⁹ Perhaps things began with coinciding mealtimes, perhaps it was night sentries not firing upon each other. Whatever the exact case, on Christmas Day 1914 German troops began setting up Christmas trees above their parapets, lighting candles and singing carols. The Tommies joined in. A few brave souls ventured out of their trenches. They were met not with a hail of bullets. Instead, other brave souls joined them. Smiles, handshakes and hugs followed. Soon thousands were exchanging little gifts. On the British side packets of *good* cigarettes, on the German side *good* chocolate. Football matches are reported to have been played: with an improbable 3:2 average score in "favour of the Germans".³⁰ And such events were far from isolated. They happened here and there, dotted across at least half of the British-controlled western front. Some 100,000 men were involved. Naturally, the internationalist left - not least Lenin and the Bolsheviks - celebrated all such acts of fraternisation.

There can be no argument that one of the key preconditions to this and other spontaneous examples of fraternisation lies in the mass anti-war propaganda and agitation conducted by the parties of the Socialist (Second) International. Nevertheless, it is also worth pointing out that, while most British *frontline* troops came from a working class (ie, Labourite) background, that was not the case with German forces. Most came from rural areas and therefore peasant stock. They were not natural social democrats. However, the trenches themselves, the commonality imposed by life on the frontline, the technology of

industrial warfare - proletarianised them.

The dangers of fraternisation were already all too apparent to the officer class. On December 5 1914, general Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, commander of one of the two corps which made up the British Expeditionary Force, issued these orders:

It is during this period that the greatest danger to the morale of troops exists. Experience of this and of every other war proves undoubtedly that troops in trenches in close proximity to the enemy slide very easily, if permitted to do so, into a 'live and let live' theory of life. Understandings - amounting almost to an unofficial armistice - grow up between our troops and the enemy, with a view to making life easier, until the sole object of war becomes obscured and officers and men sink into a military lethargy, from which it is difficult to arouse them when the moment for great sacrifices again arises. The attitude of our troops can be readily understood and to a certain extent commands sympathy. So long as they know that no general advance is intended, they fail to see any object in understanding small enterprises of no permanent utility, certain to result in some loss of life, and likely to provoke reprisals.

Such an attitude is, however, most dangerous, for it discourages initiative in commanders and destroys the offensive spirit in all ranks. The corps commander therefore directs divisional commanders to impress on subordinate commanders the absolute necessity of encouraging offensive spirit, while on the defensive, by every means in their power. Friendly intercourse with the enemy, unofficial armistices (eg, 'We won't fire if you don't', etc), however tempting and amusing they may be, are absolutely prohibited.³¹

But such orders were, of course, powerless to stop fraternisation. In subsequent years sentries were posted with instructions to shoot anyone tempted to repeat the Christmas truce.

A similar story could be told about French and German, Italian and Austrian, and Russian and German troops. High commands on both sides issued instructions forbidding the slightest manifestation of fraternisation. Those who disobeyed were to be treated as traitors. Nonetheless, life in the trenches creates a tendency towards fraternisation, even if it is at the level of 'live and let live'.

The same is true with the Ukraine war. Anything smacking of fraternisation horrifies Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin alike. Not surprisingly, therefore, the authorities on both sides have imposed harsh media censorship and restricted access to the frontline. Ukraine has created three colour zones: red is completely out of bounds and yellow is accessible to accredited journalists, only if they are accompanied by press officers from the defence ministry; green zones are open to every journalist who has received special military accreditation, "which can be a long-winded process".³²

The claim is that such measures are imposed to counter disinformation. Total and absolute nonsense. No, it is obvious that both sides fear honest, objective, truthful reporting: the appalling conditions in the trenches, the squandering of human life in pointless military

operations, the *hostile* feelings of rank-and-file soldiers towards their politicians and generals, and their *fellow* feeling for the grunts on the other side.

That is not something the social-imperialists want to hear. Instead of celebrating fraternisation, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, Anticapitalist Resistance, RS21, Labour Representation Committee and their like deny the self-evident fact that the US is fighting a proxy war, urge Ukraine's *oligarkhiya* regime on to complete victory, oppose any talk of ceasefires and complain that the short-sighted west does not "provide enough weaponry".³³ For these traitors to socialism - and, whatever their centrist apologists say, that is what they are - the draft dodgers and above all the unofficial, tacit ceasefires on the frontline come as bad news. For them it is 'Kill or be killed' ●

Notes

1. "Will the expected Ukrainian offensive result in a sensational breakthrough? Unlikely, even with Leopard, Challenger and Abrams tanks. Even if Ukraine was to be supplied with a thousand top-grade western battle tanks, even if it got a whole airforce of F-16s, everything points to a long, bitter, grinding war of attrition" (J Conrad, 'Notes on the war' *Weekly Worker* May 25 2023: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1444/notes-on-the-war).
2. kyivindependent.com/zelenky-war-has-entered-new-phase.
3. *The Economist* November 1 2023.
4. *Newsweek* December 5 2023.
5. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67565508.
6. www.dw.com/en/ukraine-to-shake-up-recruitment-as-troops-prove-scarce/a-67348780.
7. *The Washington Post* December 4 2023.
8. *Ibid*.
9. By August US sources estimate the total number of Ukrainian casualties at 200,000, including 70,000 deaths (*New York Times* August 18 2023).
10. With good reason Katja Hoyer calls Germany the "sick man of Europe" (*The Daily Telegraph* December 4 2023).
11. news.gallup.com/poll/513680/american-views-ukraine-war-charts.aspx.
12. *The Washington Post* December 6 2023.
13. edition.cnn.com/2023/04/11/politics/pentagon-documents-ukraine-war-assessment/index.html.
14. Mistranslated by Isaac Deutscher as "French" in *The prophet armed: Trotsky: 1879-1921* Oxford 1979, p228n - see ID Thatcher *Leon Trotsky and World War One: August 1914-March 1917* Glasgow 1993, p34n.
15. ID Thatcher *Leon Trotsky and World War One: August 1914-March 1917* Glasgow 1993, p27-28.
16. A Jones *The art of war in the western world* London 1988, p456.
17. *The Guardian* October 27 2023.
18. www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-must-prepare-hard-winter.
19. B Marctic, 'Did the west deliberately prolong the Ukraine war?' *Responsible Statecraft* December 4 2023.
20. *Forbes* December 8 2023.
21. The contention of Giulio Douhet, the Italian general and pioneer of air-power theory, in his groundbreaking 1921 study - see G Douhet *The command of the air* Tuscaloosa AL 1942, p126. Though his book was the bible of warmongers, such as Walther Wever, William 'Billy' Mitchell and Sir Hugh 'Boom' Trenchard, World War II proved him wrong. Civilians cannot be bombed into submission.
22. *New York Times* April 22 2023.
23. www.xn--lecanardpublicain-jwb.net/spip.php?article1006.
24. www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/5/zelenky-says-wants-ukraine-to-become-a-big-israel.
25. *The Times* December 4 2023.
26. seymourhersh.substack.com/p/trading-with-the-enemy.
27. *The Sunday Telegraph* December 4 2022.
28. The term can also be rendered as 'rest and let rest' or 'let sleeping dogs lie'. During World War I such tacit truces developed into a widespread, unofficial, culture of minimising death, violence and suffering - see T Ashworth *Trench warfare 1914-1918: the live and let system* London 2000, p18.
29. T Ashworth *Trench warfare 1914-1918: the live and let system* London 2000, p24.
30. arnulfo.wordpress.com/2019/08/24/christmas-truce.
31. Quoted in A Richards *The true story of the Christmas truce: British and German accounts of the First World War* Barnsley 2001.
32. www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-journalists-media-restrictions-self-censorship.
33. *Solidarity* January 11 2023.

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SATURNALIA

A world turned upside-down

Festivals of wild disorder symbolically assert human solidarity. Mike Macnair explores the history, ancient and modern, of a constantly reproduced Golden Age

Christmas festivities are not uncommonly linked to the Roman Saturnalia.¹ In favour of the link are midwinter, feasting, the display of greenery and the giving out of presents. There are, however, significant differences - and these differences are politically as well as historically interesting.

The first is the date. Saturnalia originally was one day, December 17, but was gradually extended to run from December 17 to December 21.² The background to December 25 as the date of Christmas is that the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is unknown. At some point - pretty certainly after the Roman empire adopted Christianity under emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) - December 25 was adopted. This date was previously the *Dies natalis Solis Invicti* ('birthday of the unconquered sun'). This in turn was an 'official' date that had been adopted by the emperor, Aurelian, in 274, as part of his promotion of 'Sol Invictus' ('Unconquered Sun') as chief god and patron of the empire.³

The background to this, in turn, is that slave-owner urbanism as a mode of production was accompanied by highly particularistic local polytheism, and limited 'syncretism' of local gods with the famous Greek pantheon of Olympus and its Roman equivalents. The (partial) unification of the Roman empire (which before around 300 worked as a tribute-extracting overlay on local government by cities) entailed a degree of religious unification; and this role was at first performed by the deification at Rome of recently deceased emperors, and in the provinces of the actual reigning emperors.⁴

The 3rd century, however, saw a succession of disasters - and, if the emperor was himself god, he might be considered as directly responsible for earthquakes and pandemics, as well as for barbarian invasions and economic chaos. So it was better to make the emperor a vice-regent for a 'head god'. This was the role of Sol Invictus, and afterwards of the Christian god. December 25 thus illustrates the character of post-Constantine Christianity as a *state* religion, imposed from the top down - first in the late Roman empire and its Byzantine inheritor, then by medieval kings.

Golden Age

Equally not part of *modern* Christmas is the aspect of Saturnalia that was 'world turned upside-down': slaves were at this time allowed a degree of free speech to cheek their owners, owners and slaves ate together, and in some versions, the owners would serve the slaves.⁵ I stress *modern* Christmas, because this aspect was present in medieval and early modern Christmas and new year festivities, but disappeared in England in the Restoration.⁶

The background is that at some fairly early date the Roman god, Saturn, was identified with the Greek god, Kronos. And Kronos was identified as presiding over a pre-agricultural 'Golden Age', in which the earth was so fruitful that no-one needed to work, as early as the poet Hesiod's *Works and days* (probably written some time between 750 and 650 BCE) - obviously implying equally no need for slavery. Authors of the time of Augustus added that the Golden Age lacked also private property (clearest in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*).⁷ A festival for Saturn identified as Kronos would



John Reinhard Weguelin 'The Roman Saturnalia' (1884)

thus naturally involve both feasting and the temporary lifting of social hierarchy. This may already have been true of the classical Athenian *Kronia* festival of Kronos (which was, however, a summer harvest festival rather than a midwinter one).⁸

The image of the 'Golden Age' can hardly be an actual social recollection of pre-class hunter-gatherer society thousands of years before the iron age regimes in which it appears. Rather, like the recurrent reappearance of forms of utopian communism between antiquity and the present, it reflects the fact that - contrary to the claims of ideologues of class rule from antiquity to today - radical inequality between humans is *not natural* to our species. In consequence it repeatedly throws up counter-myths imagining alternatives, as well as occasional efforts to enact them.

Festivals of disorder and the inversion of social hierarchy are not limited to the Saturnalia, although they have been given the tag, 'Saturnalian'.⁹ The Kalends of January (New Year's Day) were distinctly separate from the original Saturnalia, but Ronald Hutton argues in *Stations of the sun* that they were (partially) absorbed into the medieval '12 days of Christmas'. The celebrations, denounced by late antique and early medieval bishops, involved cross-dressing, dressing as animals, and other forms of 'misrule'.¹⁰ Alessandro Testa argues in his recent *Rituality and social (dis)order* that this year-end festival of inversion, and perhaps also the Romans' February 15 Lupercalia or March 14/15 Mamerlialia, fed into the classic medieval and early modern European Carnival, held immediately before the beginning of Lent (a date that varies with the date of Easter). Testa suggests that here we are concerned with a different dating of the beginning of the year to March rather than January.¹¹

Hutton makes the point, as I observed above, that the 'social

inversion' aspect of Christmas and New Year disappeared in England in the Restoration. He explains this by the recent experience of the English upper classes of the world *actually* turned upside-down in the Civil War, Commonwealth and Protectorate of 1642-60: not just Levellers and Diggers and early Quakers (who were much more threatening to the upper classes than modern Quakers), but all sorts of other sectaries and jumped-up types. But the phenomenon of the disappearance of festivals of social inversion, along with the rise of capitalism, actually seems much more widespread than the English case.¹²

Carnival

With Carnival, we arrive at a point that has been given direct historical and modern political significance. Mikhail Bakhtin's 1940 doctoral dissertation on the 16th century French writer, François Rabelais, was finally published in Russian in 1965, and translated into English as *Rabelais and his world* in 1968. It has given the students of literature and a part of the left the idea of the 'carnavalesque' as the natural expression of the popular culture of the lower orders and as a form of actual resistance to the hierarchical social order.

There is a vast range of writing on this theme, which I am not going to reference here. There is, however, a significant political antecedent to Bakhtin's and similar arguments. Lenin in the conclusion to *Two tactics of social-democracy in the democratic revolution* (1905) argues:

Revolutions are the festivals of the oppressed and the exploited. At no other time are the masses of the people in a position to come forward so actively as creators of a new social order as at a time of revolution. At such times the people are capable of performing miracles, if judged by the narrow, philistine scale of gradual progress. But the

leaders of the revolutionary parties must also make their aims more comprehensive and bold at such a time, so that their slogans shall always be in advance of the revolutionary initiative of the masses, serve as a beacon, reveal to them our democratic and socialist ideal in all its magnitude and splendour, and show them the shortest and most direct route to complete, absolute and decisive victory.¹³

And, indeed, Bolshevism sought to use Russian carnival culture as one among its various means of reaching the masses.¹⁴

Should the workers' movement and the left adopt Saturnalia and Carnival, and pursue a 'carnavalesque' policy as the road to resistance and ultimate revolution? Yes and no.

The 'yes' consists in Carnival as an expression of mass *creativity* - Lenin's point about the people as creators, capable of performing miracles. *Really* mass movements, like the 1984-85 miners' strike or the first year of the anti-Iraq war campaign, naturally throw up 'carnavalesque' activities and productions of one sort or another. These may be vulgar and uncomfortable for the cultivated middle classes, and inconsistent with ideas of the beauty of uniformity.¹⁵ By these characteristics they display all the more clearly that the creativity of the lower orders is coming into play.

Further, Saturnalia, Carnival and similar festivities are symbolic assertions of human *solidarity*. In this respect, it makes no difference how far the festivity was limited and controlled by the upper classes (as was certainly the case with Saturnalia, and to a considerable extent with Carnival; though this is, of course, debated¹⁶). Ehrenreich makes the interesting, though no doubt contestable, point that the suppression of 'carnavalesque' public festivities is correlated

with epidemics of depression and alcoholism.¹⁷

The 'no' consists in the inherent limits of Saturnalia, carnival and so on. These are feasts that unavoidably come to an end: most clearly in Carnival, immediately and inexorably followed by the privations of the Lent fast. It is just as true today that we cannot all be permanently on strike, out in the streets dancing or demonstrating, and so on. Food still has to be grown, produced and distributed. The power systems, transport and communications have to be kept running. Clothes have to be produced. And so on and on. Revolutionary crisis, mass strikes, etc, inherently disrupt the order of production. This disruption then becomes the basis on which, on the one hand, the mass of the subordinate classes become tired and demoralised and, on the other, the ruling class assembles a sufficient political coalition to 'restore order'. The phenomenon has been repeated over and over again.

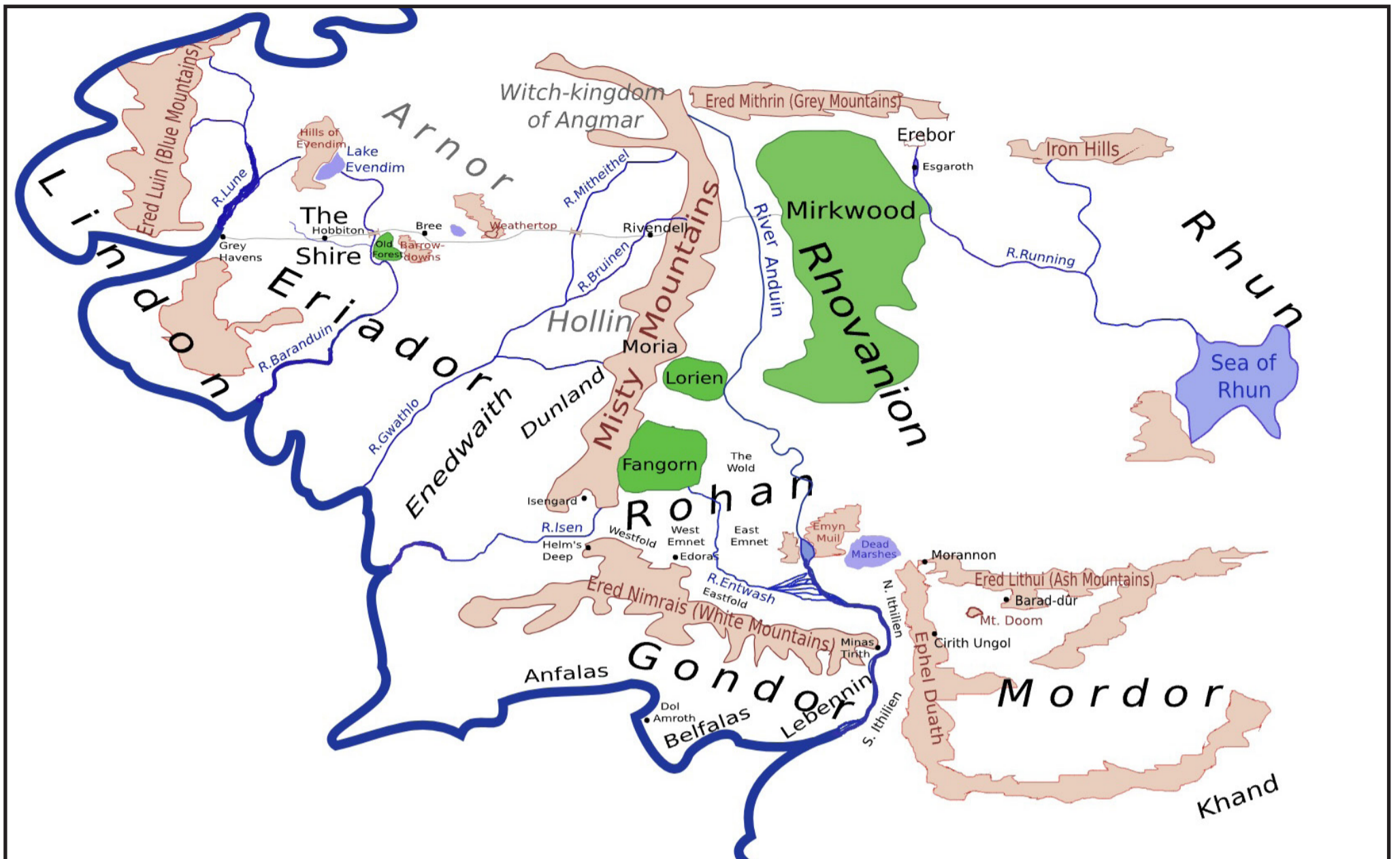
In this respect the image of the 'festival of the oppressed' is misleading. Our task is to create institutional forms that will enable the creativity of the masses *within the framework of continued productive life, not dependent on being temporarily freed from this* - both before the outbreak of revolutionary crisis, in the form of demanagerialised workers' parties, trade unions, cooperatives and so on; and after the resolution of revolutionary crisis, in the form of a new constitutional order that will be one of democratic self-government.

Onwards then to the new Golden Age of the semi-state and the transition to communism. ●

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Notes

1. Googling 'Saturnalia Christmas' produces 17.5 million hits. A sloppy example from the first page is here: www.academuseducation.co.uk/post/how-saturnalia-became-christmas-the-transition-from-ancient-to-present.
2. Wikipedia's entry 'Saturnalia' is carefully put together and well-referenced: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturnalia.
3. Christians adopted: 'Scriptor Syrus', Latin in GH Halsberghe *The cult of Sol Invictus* Leiden 1972, p174, English in R Hutton *The stations of the sun* Oxford 1996, chapter 1. For Aurelian, see Halsberghe chapter 6, especially pp144 and 158-59.
4. Wikipedia, 'Roman imperial cult': en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_imperial_cult.
5. F Dolansky, 'Celebrating the Saturnalia: religious ritual and Roman domestic life' in B Rawson (ed) *A companion to families in the Greek and Roman world* Chichester 2011, chapter 2.
6. R Hutton *The stations of the sun* Oxford 1996, chapter 9.
7. KJ Reckford, 'Some appearances of the Golden Age' *Classical Journal* vol 54, pp79-87 (1958); see also Virgil *Georgics* Book 1, lines 125-28. Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (book 1, lines 135-36) attributes landownership along with fraud to the fourth (iron) age.
8. JN Bremmer *Greek religion and culture, the Bible and the ancient Near East* Leiden 2008, pp82-83.
9. HS Versnel *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman religion* vol ii: *Transition and reversal in myth and ritual* Leiden 1993, p115.
10. R Hutton *The stations of the sun* Oxford 1996, chapters 1 and 2.
11. A Testa *Rituality and social (dis)order* Abingdon 2021, chapter 3.
12. See, for example, B Ehrenreich *Dancing in the streets* London 2007, chapters 5 and 6.
13. www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/ch13.htm.
14. J von Geldern *Bolshevik festivals, 1917-1920* Berkeley CA 1993.
15. See, for example, publishing. cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft6x0nb4g3&chunk.id=ch20&toc.id=&brand=ucpress. See also 'Epilogue', J von Geldern *Bolshevik festivals, 1917-1920* Berkeley CA 1993.
16. A Testa *Rituality and social (dis)order* Abingdon 2021 *passim*.
17. B Ehrenreich *Dancing in the streets* London 2007, chapters 7 and 8.

CULTURE

Their Tolkien and ours

Neo-fascist interpretations of JRR Tolkien's works are resurgent - and understandable. But can the left make room in its culture for hobbits? Paul Demarty revisits *The lord of the rings*

"Hey, you ever read Tolkien? You know, the hobbit books? His descriptions of things are really good ... makes you want to be there."

So goes a throwaway line in Rian Johnson's first film, *Brick*, released a few years after Peter Jackson's grand trilogy of film adaptations of the *Lord of the rings*. They are spoken by Lukas Haas as 'The Pin', the leader of a drug gang in Orange County, as he gazes into a winter sunset over the Pacific Ocean; The Pin is one of Johnson's great inventions - a monster selling heroin to teenagers who retains a perfectly childlike, slightly nerdy naivety. For all the ink spilled, in academic and popular commentary, on JRR Tolkien's work, he gets closest, it seems, to the enduring value of the thing, and its enduring appeal to a mass readership.

Other readings, of course, are available. One has achieved a certain notoriety since the election of Giorgia Meloni as prime minister of Italy. After World War II, Italian fascism regrouped, with the discreet and now notorious assistance of the western powers. Many of its adherents abandoned the heroic modernism of Benito Mussolini and its futurist antecedents; they turned, instead, to a more atavistic and anti-modern mode of thought. Julius Evola, ejected from the Fascist Party for extremism, became a hero. And so, after the publication of the *Lord of the rings* in the 1950s, did Tolkien. His combination of the heroic epic and the near-pantheistic pastoral inspired a generation of rightwing youth, to the point that several fascist-oriented

cultural festivals took place in the early 1980s under the title *Campo Hobbit* ('Camp Hobbit'). One of those young militants was a certain Giorgia Meloni, and her affection for these books seems undimmed.¹

It was not only the Italians. Tolkien became a big influence on the Norwegian black metal music scene of the early 1990s; and several of those bands swapped their initial adolescent satanism for a Norse-pagan orientation to neo-Nazism. Foremost among these was Kristian 'Varg' Vikernes, whose first band was called Uruk-Hai (a species of Orc), while his second was called Burzum ('darkness' in the Orcish 'black speech'), and who went by the stage name, Count Grishnakh (an Orc captain). In an interview in the book *Lords of chaos*, which despite the far-right leanings of its author remains a crucial document of this bizarre phenomenon, he takes the exact opposite view to the Italian hobbit-campers:

We were drawn to Sauron and his lot, and not the hobbits, those stupid little dwarves. I hate dwarves and elves. The elves are fair, but typically Jewish - arrogant, saying, "We are the chosen ones." ... But you have Barad-dur, the tower of Sauron, and Hlidskjalf, the tower of Odin; you have Sauron's all-seeing eye, and then Odin's one eye ... So I sympathise with Sauron.²

There has not been any equivalent attempt on the left to coopt Tolkien. It is undeniably a harder task, for reasons we will discuss. Instead,

Middle Earth at the end of the Third Age, showing Eriador and Rhovanion. At extreme left are Lindon and the Blue Mountains - all that remains of Beleriand after the War of Wrath

Ian McKellen as Gandalf the White, in Peter Jackson's 'The two towers' (2002)



controversy rages over whether Vikernes or Meloni have it right: the books present an irremediably racialised portrait of their world. On the face of it, there is plenty of evidence; there are the hobbits, of course - short, stocky Englishmen of a distinctly petty-bourgeois stamp; and the dwarves - prickly, niggardly and great geniuses of engineering (Scottish accents in the films); and the Men (Tolkien's world is extremely male) - the greatest of heroes and the weakest to the temptations of power. Their allies are the quasi-angelic elves, and their enemies the monstrous and brutal Orcs. The *nazgûl*, technically human antagonists throughout *LotR*, are described often as the 'Black Men'. The good races are in the west; the evil in the east. So it goes on.

This may be the wrong angle to look at it, however: an analysis that owes more to the prior framing of Tolkien's critics than the text as it stands. What is reactionary in the books has relatively little to do with race, but rather the genesis and architecture of the project as a whole. As to whether it can be saved for us: that will be a matter for our conclusion.

Biography and myth

In the high period of literary theory, there emerged a certain suspicion of biographical evidence in the analysis of texts; indeed, this was the crux of Marcel Proust's objections to the otherwise forgotten critic, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, which eventually metastasised into his vast novel. Yet books require authors; there is no Proust without *Sainte-Beuve*, and no 'Middle Earth' without the peculiar

course of Tolkien's life.

Born in South Africa, Tolkien was raised after his father's death in the west Midlands countryside by his mother; after her death in turn, he was taken on her wishes into the care of a Birmingham priest, and remained a devout and conservative Catholic for the rest of his life. His family background was solidly middle class, and he attended a minor public school and then a Catholic grammar school. He nonetheless made it to Oxford, studying the classics and English. As for many of his generation, World War I proved a traumatic interruption; he fought at the Somme and, though he escaped unscathed in the end, almost all his close schoolfriends were extinguished in the slaughter on the western front.

He returned, at length, to academia, becoming a formidable scholar of language and literature in historical depth - the way it was done in what used to be called philology. He translated the great Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, and in time the seeds were planted for a very particular project: the invention, out of whole-cloth, of an alternative mythical tradition for England - a process he called mythopoeisis.

Parts of it were circulated in the Oxford academic scene. Most famously, an informal grouping called 'the Inklings' began to gather in the upper room of the Eagle and Child, an Oxford pub, to read to each other. Besides Tolkien, their most famous member was CS Lewis; but it could be a demanding audience (at yet another long reading of Middle Earth material, Hugo Dyson, famously lamented:

“Not another fucking elf!”)

The first published portion of the Middle Earth myths, *The Hobbit*, began as stories he told his children; the *Lord of the Rings* was written over nearly two decades. During that time, of course, a second world war was fought out, which would prove even more bloody than the first. His only part in the affair was as a code-breaker; and he remained cloistered at Oxford until his retirement, living the rest of his life in Bournemouth. In that time, his fiction had become enormously successful, but he did not take readily to fame and lived quietly until his death in 1973.

Tolkien's biography, then, is one of a particular kind of upwardly mobile, middle class scion; a glancing blow at the colonies, a crooked course between rural and urban England, and a long career as a ferociously talented academic in a field that barely outlived him. When he was born, the British empire remained at roughly the greatest extent it would ever reach; when he died, it was just about gone altogether. He was less than a decade younger than the first practical machine gun, and matured just in time to see that weapon's gruesomeness coming-out party up close. His day job of literary archaeology, and indeed his religious traditionalism, offered some escape from the industrial slaughter he had witnessed. Yet his books are documents of both, sometimes in sudden and jarring contrast, along with a profound, rather idealised love of nature and rural life. Faced with a choice between nostalgia and facing the horrors of 20th century warfare squarely, Tolkien picked both.

That perhaps accounts for the structural oddity of the books. They would, ironically, never make the cut as works of commercial fantasy today. They do not play by the rules which they are supposed to have invented. *The Hobbit* and *The Fellowship of the Ring* are, in particular, extremely episodic. Guillermo del Toro, who was initially slated to direct the *Hobbit* films, defended his decision to make two pictures out of that one slender volume: there was, you see, a point in the middle where, if you open the book and lay it flat, you have two movies right there - one on the left and one on the right. That is true enough, but there are very many such points (indeed, Peter Jackson eventually stretched it out to three).

The heroes get into trouble, and rapidly out of it; peril alternates with rhapsodic description and long stretches of dwarven singing. It is, ironically, only after the killing of the dragon, Smaug - ostensibly the whole point of the affair - that any real, sustained narrative tension develops, when a fight rapidly brews over who gets to keep all that gold. (God is strangely absent from this devout writer's works, but original sin is everywhere.)

One such 'episode' - the hobbit Bilbo Baggins' discovery of a magic ring, which does not have any particular importance beyond giving its wearer the power of invisibility - is then given immense importance in its central role in the *Lord of the Rings*. (Among the many dark arts of genre fiction, Tolkien can justly be credited with the invention of retconning.) This whimsical little MacGuffin suddenly became a demonic force with a mind of its own, which deliberately 'found' Bilbo as a way of returning to its master, the plainly Satanic Sauron, corrupting the souls of all who possess it.

Perhaps all this is the genius of the mythopoetic method. After all, epics revise each other; the sack of Troy in Homer's *Iliad* propels Aeneas, at length, to western Italy, where his descendants can found Rome, per Virgil's *Aeneid*. It may be difficult to remember whether Bilbo and his companions are accosted by trolls

before or after Bilbo finds the ring; but then, casual readers of the *Odyssey* are unlikely to remember whether the Greeks encounter the Sirens or Circe first of all. Those epic poems, after all, are necessarily episodic, having likely been largely disseminated orally in chunks before being compiled into a longer text.

Accidentally or otherwise, Tolkien captures that mythic character well; and that contributes to the reader's experience of being taken out of everyday experience - the great high that launched a million high-fantasy imitators over the ensuing decades. These are novels inasmuch as they are fictional narratives roughly the same size and shape as other contemporary examples. (As Randall Jarrell put it, "A novel is a prose narrative of some length with something wrong with it.") Yet reading them is, in terms of narrative rhythm, far more familiar to readers of the ancient epics that were the staples of the classically-educated Oxford dons of Tolkien's day.

Epic Pooh

This obstreperously backward-looking character naturally incurs the suspicions of leftist commentators. Paradigmatically, there is Michael Moorcock's legendary essay 'Epic Pooh', which castigates several authors of high fantasy, of whom Tolkien is unquestionably the greatest (and takes up the largest part of Moorcock's attention). His title indicates his starting point - that the authors he discusses write in an infantilising fashion, imposing childishness on the reader:

The sort of prose most often identified with 'high' fantasy is the prose of the nursery room. It is a lullaby; it is meant to soothe and console. It is mouth-music. It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions, but for its lack of tensions. It coddles; it makes friends with you; it tells you comforting lies.³

Moorcock directs many barbs Tolkien's way - he delights in the unintentional humour of words being taken "seriously, but without pleasure", mischievously citing the wonder of the Shire hobbits at Frodo's decision to "sell his beautiful hole". But, above all, his Tolkien is an English petty bourgeois; his anti-urban outlook is inseparable from the fear of the mob by

a fearful, backward-yearning class for whom 'good taste' is synonymous with 'restraint' (pastel colours, murmured protest), and 'civilised' behaviour means 'conventional behaviour in all circumstances'. This is not to deny that courageous characters are found in *The Lord of the Rings*, or a willingness to fight Evil (never really defined), but somehow those courageous characters take on the aspect of retired colonels at last driven to write a letter to *The Times* and we are not sure - because Tolkien cannot really bring himself to get close to his proles and their satanic leaders - if Sauron and co are quite as evil as we're told. After all, anyone who hates hobbits can't be all bad.

Moorcock's essay is brilliant, above all for being wickedly funny, and for coming from a partisan position in favour of a widely derided genre of fiction. He is, of course, a fantasy writer himself, and perhaps justly concerned that the torrent of Tolkien imitations which began in the 1970s were giving everyone a bad name. I think he misses the genius of Tolkien, however, because he cannot really understand why anyone would idealise a lost rural idyll - for him, it is always a matter of an atavistic childishness, the return to the hundred-acre wood

- "the woods that are the pattern of the paper on the nursery room wall". He rejects the idea that modernity, with its attendant urbanisation, denies access to the countryside - after all, can the Londoner not get a train in any direction and end up somewhere wild and beautiful?

This seems both to get the point and somehow by doing so to miss it completely. The Shire - which takes up perhaps a hundred pages between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* - is a portrait of a society, not a landscape. It is one thing to spend a couple of hours on a sunny Saturday admiring the South Downs - I did it many times when I lived in the capital - but another thing to farm it. The woods on the nursery wallpaper are the negative image of the alienation of mass capitalist society. Those who find Tolkien's picture too twee can consult the sombre history in folk songs and other popular art of the trauma of the enclosures and the herding of people into cities to be near-enforced by mill-owners, or of the Irish masses scattered to all the corners of the earth by the great famine. The historical-theoretical record is known to Marxists from the long chapter in *Capital* on 'primitive accumulation'.

Grim darkness

There is more to Tolkien's critique than that, however. His 'mobs' - most obviously the *uruk-hai* - are themselves manufactured, and manufactured specifically to kill. The morbid feats of ingenuity of Saruman - Gandalf's wizard superior whose treachery occupies much of the first half of the *Rings* - are bought at the price of vast ecological devastation, the clear-cutting of forests and poisoning of rivers. (The quite horrifying portrait of Saruman's war factories is one of the few things Peter Jackson's movie trilogy gets very right about the novels.) Modernity, for Tolkien, is no mere aesthetic matter - of snapdragons being displaced by smoke-belching furnaces. There is an intimate and indissociable relation between the gleeful destruction of nature and mechanised warfare - of the sort that Tolkien saw first-hand on the western front in 1916, and which unfolded as he wrote in 1939-45.

And so, parallel to the urban-rural distinction, Tolkien mobilises another opposition - between the modern methods of total military mobilisation and a pre-modern vision of military virtue, itself not quite ancient and not quite medieval. It is as if Odysseus, Beowulf and Sir Gawain were to find themselves at the front in the Somme.

It will not be too much of a spoiler to note that in the end the heroes of old triumph against the products of the war machine. Yet the tone is not triumphalist, but elegaic. Gandalf, and other immortals, never doubt that their struggle represents the end of an age, after which they must finally depart and make way for the 'age of men', and so it proves. The strange episode of 'the scouring of the Shire', right at the novel's end, in which Saruman repeats his economic violence in the hobbit heartlands, indicates what that future may hold. Tolkien, then, is too much of a romantic to suppose that there is any reason that we will get back to the nursery room and, whatever his lies are, they are not comforting.

It is this that makes him great, and the likes of Terry Brooks and David Eddings intermittently enjoyable trash. The fashion in high fantasy shifted in the 1990s, after the success of George RR Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, in a darker direction - the word 'grimdark' has ended up being thrown around a lot. (It comes from the science-fiction-Tolkienesque tabletop wargame *Warhammer 40,000*, whose tagline once read: "In the grim darkness of the far future,

there is only war.") The differences between Martin's work and Tolkien's need hardly be mentioned. Yet the 'grimdark' turn in high fantasy is less anti-Tolkienesque (as was the case with China Miéville's breakthrough novels) but revisionist-Tolkienesque.

One striking commonality among many of the darker fantasy series of recent years is that they are allegories of the collapse of feudal societies into early-modern ones, and draw much of their horror from faithful fictionalisations of the attendant mass violence. That is true of Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, with which *A Game of Thrones* began, of Joe Abercrombie's *First Law*, and Daniel Abraham's *The Dagger and the Coin*. It is right there in the *Rings*, in the end of the Third Age; just as the closing of the frontier haunts the westerns of the classical Hollywood era, but is brought out in violent moral ambiguity in the great revisionist westerns of the 1960s and after.

That is the respectable part of the legacy of Tolkien's two published novels. The less respectable part is - well, Brooks, Eddings, *Dungeons and Dragons* (until the pen-and-paper role-playing game scene matured, and particularly the great D&D computer games put out by Black Isle at the turn of this century) - and so on *ad infinitum*. I am, again, a happy enough consumer of this sort of thing, as I am of burgers and cheap lager. Yet they are characterised by, on the one hand, perfectly machine-tooled narratives - however complex they may become over the course of long series of novels - that are little more than fictionalisations of Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* - and, on the other, vast overinvestment in endless world-building and lore. (Starting with 1977's *Sword of Shannara*, Brooks produced not less than eight novels and seven series with names ending in "of Shannara".)

This tedious pattern has, at length, spread into the wider culture. We need only think of the 'Marvel cinematic universe' - or is it now the Marvel cinematic multiverse? - which is just possibly now reaching the point of total soil exhaustion. Even the gloriously absurd gun-fu vehicle, *John Wick*, went down this useless path over the course of its sequels, with this year's bloated and tiring fourth instalment hopefully to prove the last.

But Tolkien was patient zero for this sort of thing. His private papers included vast quantities of such lore, of course - the whole thing had begun as an experiment in invented languages and cultures - which he was not minded to publish. His son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, was not so circumspect, and we have had no end of inessential material sluiced into bookshops, including commentaries by Christopher himself.

To that we may add Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies, which are fine enough pieces of work on their own terms, but basically straightforward action flicks that miss nearly all of the ambiguities of the source material, and from that point of view amount to megabudget fan fiction; and his *Hobbit* movies, which drag that cute little book out to three interminably prolix epics, largely by ladling on extra lore from *The Silmarillion* and elsewhere. This is very much industrial culture - there is no Shire quite so scoured as Tolkien's imagination. That is what the overproduction of lore gets you: endless excuses to create more, more, more, and the consequent diminishment of the original articles to mere trifles in a Borgesian library of infinite dimensions, but infinitesimal worth.

A worthwhile leftwing reckoning with Tolkien's work must confront both these aspects: the strange,

meandering, barely-even-novels on which his reputation as a writer stands, and the hypertrophic production they ultimately unleashed. (Not for nothing did some wiseacre on a long-forgotten Usenet group come up with the phrase, "extruded fantasy product", to describe the endless pulpy Tolkienesques.)

Romantic

If we must make an ideological diagnosis of the *Rings*, we should call it reactionary-romantic - a preference for the rural over the urban, the artisanal over the industrial, the supposed organic unity of pre-modern societies over the double-freedom of anonymous capitalist society. Because it is a *serious* example of that outlook, whose mass success in spite of its narrative clumsiness and donnish archaisms is something like a black swan event, its critique is bracing and provocative, if we want to hear it - just as Marx admired Balzac's reactionary novelistic critique of the French bourgeoisie. The wide but shallow 'lorescapes' that followed in the *Rings*' wake - from Shannara to the MCU - are of interest largely as symptoms of a capitalist culture wholly extractive in nature.

A certain parallel is offered by the case of Richard Wagner - politically speaking now known largely as a vicious anti-Semite, but also (when liberalism, nationalism and socialism were not so easily teased apart as they were to become) a revolutionary of 1848. Tolkien disclaimed any inspiration from Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, but the parallels are striking with the Middle Earth novels as a whole: we find cursed magic rings, grim mechanised labour, dragons jealously guarding treasure, and all the rest. George Bernard Shaw, in his pamphlet *The Perfect Wagnerite*, described Wagner's opera cycle as a *progressive* version of that story of Age passing into Age: the overthrow of the gods of the old world by Man.⁴ It was not merely a fancy of Shaw's: in 1912, the German Social Democratic Party celebrated an electoral advance by producing a postcard depicting "the Red Siegfried" slaying a dragon and securing victory in "the electoral battle".⁵

Wagner is rather less persuasively coded as a progressive these days, after his cooptation by Hitler's regime, and also his absorption at length into the conservative classical music canon (learned music critics at the time were largely baffled by his bombast and alleged crudity - a point taken mischievously as a recommendation by Shaw). That is no reason to let him go easily - nor Tolkien. After all, Meloni and her fellow hobbit-campers cannot even agree with Varg Vikernes as to why Tolkien should be so inspirational. Are the immigrants the Orcs, or the 'patriots'? Who cares, provided we get our revenge? So long as capricious gods rule over us, we will have need of Wagner; and, so long as humanity devours the rest of nature to produce the means of mass death, there will be something for us in Tolkien.

His descriptions of things, after all, are really good: they make you want to be anywhere other than here ●

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Notes

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OUR HISTORY

Socialism and socialising

Eduard Bernstein gets us into the Christmas spirit with his fascinating recollections of Frederick Engels' London home as an often 'squiffy' salon of international socialism and good cheer

It might seem odd that this publication should reprint a section from the memoirs of Eduard Bernstein. After all, he - more than most - greatly contributed to the reformist degeneration of Marxist socialism that remains a thorn in the side of the development of a viable revolutionary alternative to capitalism. Readers can rest assured that by doing so we are by no means engaged in a 'rediscovery' of his work in the 21st century.

That said, we should not forget his significance in the history of the left. As the editor of the outlawed German publication *Der Sozialdemokrat* (*The Social Democrat*), which was smuggled into Germany from Switzerland during Bismarck's Anti-Socialist

Laws (1878-90), Bernstein was one of the most influential Marxist thinkers and publicists of the time in the minds of friend and foe alike. So it was that in 1888 the Prussian authorities put pressure on the Swiss government to deport him as the dangerous revolutionary that he then was. He fled to London and only returned to Germany in 1901, when his arrest warrant expired. In London he grew particularly close to Engels and came into contact with various representatives of socialism on these shores, as well as internationally through other London-based exile communities that would often convene in Engels' house.

Despite at times publicly disapproving of some of his

editorial choices and political positions when in Switzerland, Engels (and Marx, while he was alive) were clearly fond of Bernstein and saw him as one of those, such as August Bebel, who would take forward their project after their demise. Not only did Bernstein learn from both of the elder statesmen, but clearly enjoyed himself in the company of Frederick in particular. I recall reading somewhere that the stock in Engels' wine cellar that he left to the German Social Democratic Party in his will was so valuable that it provided quite a fillip to party funds in 1895.

Bernstein wrote the following in 1915, long after he had broken with the strategic fundamentals of

Marxism to embrace so-called revisionism - a project that in essence amounted to a contradictory, misinformed and on occasion slanderous attempt to gut Marxism of its revolutionary content. In this sense, the hopes of Marx and Engels were misplaced and another student of theirs - Karl Kautsky - was the one who took up the fight against Bernstein.¹

Nonetheless, his memoirs provide a fascinating insight into his relations with some of the socialists he met at Engels' legendary Sunday-evening get-togethers, as well as his impressions of how cultural norms and values in various countries - Britain and his native Germany in particular - also found reflection in personal

behaviour and political attitudes.

During the holiday period, your company will sadly probably be nowhere near as stimulating as Bernstein's back then (and the booze offering will certainly be no match for Engels'), but hopefully this article can bring some holiday cheer. And don't forget to arrange a Christmas pudding for each of your dearest comrades.

This is a condensed version of chapter 9 of Bernstein's memoirs, first published in 1915.² I have not been able to check the translation thoroughly against the original German, but have silently corrected some obviously outdated language ●

Ben Lewis

Engels was not only democratic in his opinions: he was thoroughly democratic in feeling as well. His manner of living showed in many characteristic ways that he came from a good middle class home, but he had chosen a girl of the lower middle classes as his life's companion; and in the choice of his associates he recognised no class distinctions.

At the same time, he did draw distinctions. Those who wished to be invited to his social evenings must either have done good service in the socialist cause or must be of some consequence intellectually. On the other hand, if socialists, they need not necessarily be Marxists. In this respect, there was little of the pedant about the co-founder of the Marxist school. Even socialists who were not social democrats were tolerated. Dr Rudolph Meyer, the friend of Karl Robertus (a socialist-conservative, and formerly the publisher of the *Berliner Revue*), was often among the guests at Engels' house, during the time of his stay in London. His entrance ticket was his expert knowledge in the sphere of political economy, and the circumstance that he was living in exile, having been persecuted by Bismarck. As a good East-Elber he was no enemy to alcohol, and one evening at Engels' he drank a regular skinful. It was extremely droll. Quite conscious of his condition, he kept on shouting, in a slightly thickened voice: "Well, well, if anyone had ever told me that I, a Prussian conservative, should one day, here in London, be made squiffy by the revolutionary communists!" This was on Christmas Eve, and then, to be sure, such things might well befall one in Engels' house.

Christmas was kept by Engels after the English fashion, as Charles Dickens has so delightfully described it in *The Pickwick papers*. The room is decorated with green boughs of every kind, between which, in suitable places, the perfidious mistletoe peeps forth, which gives every man the right to kiss any person of the opposite sex who is standing beneath it or whom he can catch in passing. At table the principal dish is a mighty turkey, and if the exchequer will run to it this is supplemented by a great cooked ham. A few additional attractions - one of which, a sweet known as tipsy-cake, is, as the name denotes, prepared with brandy or sherry - make way for the dish of honour, the plum pudding,



Blue plaque outside 122 Regent's Park Road in the London borough of Camden

which is served up, the room having been darkened, with burning rum. Each guest must receive his helping of pudding, liberally christened with good spirits, before the flame dies out. This lays a foundation, which may well prove hazardous to those who do not measure their consumption of the accompanying wines.

In this connection, I cannot help thinking of an evening at Engels' which preceded the Christmas celebrations. It was on the day when the dough, or rather paste, for the Christmas puddings was prepared. An enormous quantity was made, for there was not a single friend of the house who did not receive a Christmas pudding from 122 Regent's Park Road. Professor Karl Schorlemmer, Engels' medical advisor, Dr Gumpert of Manchester, friend Sam Moore in Yorkshire, the

old Chartist, Julian Harney, in Jersey, Peter Layoff, the honoured leader of the Russian socialists, as well as Marx's sons-in-law, Paul Lafargue and Charles Longuet in Paris, various intimate friends in London, and, if I am not mistaken, some friends in Germany as well, were always remembered.

Hence, on a given day, about a fortnight before Christmas, the lady friends of the house turned up early in the morning, and worked on until the evening, chopping great heaps of apples, nuts, almonds, candied peel, etc into little bits, and stoning and chopping pounds upon pounds of raisins; and, as may be supposed, it was a thoroughly cheerful party: As the ingredients were prepared, they were put into a huge tub. Later in the evening the male friends of

the house arrived, and each of them was required to lay hold of a ladle that stood upright in the tub, and stir the paste three times round - a by no means easy task, which needed a good deal of muscular strength. But it had rather a symbolical meaning, and those whose strength was inadequate were mercifully exempted.

The concluding touch was given by Engels himself, who descended into the wine cellar and brought up champagne, in which we drank to a merry Christmas and many other things as well. All this, of course, took place downstairs in the great kitchen, which enhanced the charm of the whole proceeding, for to linger in a spacious kitchen always puts one somehow in mind of one's home. At one time even well-to-do people used to eat in the kitchen: and this would have

answered capitally in Engels' house, for the kitchen was a roomy one, with the range built into the fireplace after the English fashion, so that it did not take up any room to speak of. Like so many things in England, it combined the old with the new. The construction of the range was at that time regarded as modern, but the old-fashioned turnspit or meat-jack was not lacking, on which a hanging joint of beef could be roasted, while underneath was a dish to catch the dripping fat. In Germany, in a small house or tenement, the kitchen has often enough to serve as a sitting room; but hardly so often as in England, where in the advertisements of dwelling houses the kitchen, in the smaller houses, is briefly described as a 'living room', to distinguish it from the best room, or sitting room, as it is called. Of course, in such houses the scullery is always shut off from the kitchen.

But, whereas Engels' kitchen was never used for meals, there were occasions on which it seems to have served for drinking, owing to its proximity to the cellar. Engels himself told me of at least one such occasion. With a certain good friend of his he once sat the livelong night in the kitchen, arguing and drinking wine, until his wife came down early in the morning and made coffee for them.

This friend was Dr Eugen Oswald - a German, who in his youth, after spending some time in France, came to London as a fugitive, made himself at home there, and obtained a position as teacher in the Greenwich School of Navigation. Although he was not a socialist of the Marxian type, but contented himself with a democratic republicanism, he was on friendly terms with both Marx and Engels, and in my days he was a constant visitor on Engels' social evenings.

Guests

Oswald was almost the only German living in England who was not a social democrat, yet visited Engels' house. At the same time, in my days, apart from Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx, only one prominent English socialist used to frequent Engels' house. This was the author and man of letters, Ernest Belfort Bax - a man of many-sided culture, who had a good knowledge of German philosophy and spoke the German language fluently. Until the Great War he had in most things a very high opinion of the German character, but on the outbreak

of the war he was, of course, to be found in the ranks of those English socialists who turned absolutely against Germany. An extremely outspoken atheist and republican, he is, in the matter of politics, a good deal in sympathy with the French radicals: the inexorable Marat is his hero, and the subject of one of his books. As an author, he is highly esteemed, and he has undoubtedly done great service in the propagation of socialistic opinions in England. He is one of those English intellectuals who, early in the 80s, first resorted to socialism, which was then regarded as defunct - its civil rights in the world of letters. He has also done his part in creating the English socialistic lyric, as poet and composer. He is, it must be added, a cultivated musician, and about 1890 he was joint musical critic with George Bernard Shaw in the radical evening paper, the *Star*.

Casting my mind back to those days, I remember a very amusing, friendly smack that Bax received from Shaw. "My colleague," wrote Shaw in one of his criticisms, "had fallen asleep beside me. As on the way home I was telling him what I thought of the performance, he suddenly interrupted me with the words, 'How can you pretend to give an opinion when you were asleep the whole time?'" The humour of this remark resides in the fact that Bax, as all his acquaintances were aware, was prone to become completely lost in speculation, and was capable of the maddest paradoxes, which he, unlike Shaw, always took very seriously.

His paradoxes made him a lively contributor to the conversation round Engels' table. He upheld them in spite of all our contradictions, and defended them with the greatest obstinacy. As an anti-feminist he was absolutely fanatical. With his pen he asserted and defended the opinion that in England the men constitute the downtrodden sex, while the women are privileged to excess. It may indeed be admitted that the protection which English law extends to the woman, in mitigation of her general condition of statutory tutelage, does in individual cases result in the unjust treatment of the man. Such anomalies are possible in all legislation intended to protect the socially or personally weaker party. But to conclude from this that in England the man is legally the "bondsmen" of the woman betrays a very one-sided consideration of the matter.

There are various instances of such one-sidedness to be observed in Bax. Since he is well read and perspicacious, he can plead his case cleverly enough, so that a colleague on the socialist weekly *Today* once exclaimed in the middle of a criticism with comical effect: "Why is Bax so unanswerably in the right and so hopelessly in the wrong?" One can understand how such a man will keep the conversational ball rolling.

Shaw himself I never met at Engels', nor any other of the then better-known Fabians. For a long time Edward Aveling stood between him and Engels, and also between him and myself. On account of Aveling, indeed, many people kept away from Engels' house; as did, even before my time, Frau Gertrud Guillaume Schack, who had done so much for the German working-women's movement. This lady, who was descended from the noble family of Schack, was a warm-hearted, convinced socialist, and was, on account of her good humour and her unassuming character, an extremely pleasant companion, whom Engels was always delighted to see. One day he received a letter from her, in which she begged him not to suppose, if she refrained from coming to his 'evening gatherings', that it was due to any lack of esteem for him. So long as Dr Aveling visited his house, she could not enter it.

He received a similar letter when I was just settled in London from a highly cultivated lady - the English socialist who, under the pseudonym of 'John Law', wrote of the conditions of the seamstresses of Manchester, and the work and character of the Salvation Army in the East End of London, and described similar social conditions and phenomena in the form of fiction. Both 'Miss H' and Frau Schack flatly refused to give Engels any further reason for their desire to avoid Aveling.

One is forced to suppose that Aveling had been guilty of some insult of a kind that a refined woman would not willingly speak of. Even in Englishmen I have encountered a strong disinclination to allow accusations of a serious nature to go beyond a very narrow circle. In 1895, Aveling was excluded from the London branch of the affiliated league of the Independent Labour Party. The reason given for his exclusion was non-committal, so that at the time it was supposed that it was put forward in place of the real one. Three years later, when I had occasion to establish the truth concerning Aveling, I one day asked the secretary of the league, in a friendly conversation, what the real cause of his exclusion had been. He could safely confide in me. However, I could get nothing out of the fellow. He replied, on the other hand, almost protestingly, that he had "the greatest respect for Dr Aveling's talents and knowledge", and when I pressed him further his remarks became almost evasive. I could get nothing more out of him, except that he finally decided to make a confession: "Well, I will tell you. The reason given was not the real reason. The matter is simply this - that we don't want to have anything more to do with the fellow." These last words were spoken with peculiar emphasis, and I saw that it would go against the grain with him to say anything further. Yet he knew things of the excluded member which would have sufficed to land him in prison.

The predilection for the expedient of indulging in partial praise of a person, in order to avoid telling the unpleasant truth about him, was a thing that astonished me soon after my settling down in London. About the end of the first year my wife and I received a social invitation from Mr and Mrs Hubert Bland, who belonged to the inner circle of the Fabians. They and their guests were interesting people, and the conversation was very natural and spontaneous. But when in some connection or other I spoke of the Avelings, there was suddenly a suspiciously unanimous chorus of praise of them: "Oh, the Avelings are very clever people." "Oh, everybody must admit that they have been of great service to the movement" - and so forth, in the same key, so that it was at once clear to me that there was something in the air. I diverted the conversation to politics. But a judge of human nature might have blurted out the question: 'What's the truth about them, really? Have they murdered their children, or what?' I am, however, not certain that I should be entitled to speak of hypocrisy in connection with this manner of evading a definite accusation: we are dealing with a deeply rooted custom, which is practised from youth onwards, so that in any case no-one is conscious of deception and, as it is a national custom, no-one is deceived by it.

That it prevails in literature as well was made very plain to me on one occasion, when I was running through a book of mine with a cultured and open-minded English lady, who was advising me on points of grammatical correctness and style. I no longer remember precisely what it was about; but in various polemical passages my advisor would inform me, categorically: "That is much too

crudely put; you mustn't say that; you couldn't possibly say this in the better class of literature." And yet I don't think I am regarded as a peculiarly contentious writer.

Socialists

Of course, there are plenty of people, even in England, who are capable of holding their own, in the matter of a contentious and quarrelsome tone, with the pugnacious Teuton. Among them is, or was, HM Hyndman, the leader of that wing of the English socialists which derived its political doctrine from Marx. Hyndman, who had made Marx's acquaintance during the last years of his life, and had steeped himself in his writings, has written a very readable book on the *Economics of socialism*, which is, indeed, not without its defects, but is still able to hold its own with the average German work devoted to the popularisation of Marx's teaching.

But the practical application which he gave this doctrine was violently sectarian, and his manner of stating it was often arrogantly disputatious. In this connection, the irony of the facts so ordered matters that he, who was regarded as the appointed apostle of Marxism in England, was to find the house of Marx's collaborator and his formally appointed apostle closed to him. Hyndman, when he had published his first socialistic work, sent it to Engels, asking if he might call on him; but he received the cool reply, which amounted to a refusal, that Engels would receive him when he had publicly made it known to whom he owed the ideas contained in his writings. As a matter of fact, of course, he had availed himself extensively of Marx's writings, but, as Hyndman himself explained at a later date, he had not mentioned Marx for reasons of expediency. However, although there was no question of malicious plagiarism, Friedrich Engels was always in deadly earnest where Marx was concerned, and when Hyndman had repaired his mistake certain squabbles which had in the meantime occurred in the English socialist movement had the result that the interdict was never raised.

William Morris, the distinguished poet and artist, and the leader of the Socialist League, which in 1884 seceded from the Socialist Federation, was, up to the time of this schism, an occasional visitor in Engels' house, and Engels always spoke of him with respect, but they never became intimate. The principal reason was this - that Morris was the central star of a circle of his own. Moreover, he could only with difficulty get away on Sunday evenings. Beside his beautiful house, which was in the western part of London - namely, in Hammersmith, facing the swiftly-flowing Thames - beside Kelmescott House was a long, narrow lecture hall, where socialist propagandist meetings were held on Sunday evenings for the greater part of the year, and at these meetings Morris was often in the chair. I have twice delivered a lecture there with Morris as chairman, but I never heard him speak himself.

But I do not believe that he had any great rhetorical gift. Certainly he could express his ideas in a very arresting manner, but this was when speaking to a comparatively small circle in an unconstrained, gossiping tone. Rhetoric, properly speaking, was not natural to him; his whole nature was, if I may say so, anti-rhetorical. This strongly-built man of middle height, with his fine, impressive head, was an artist through and through; but not an artist of the spoken word. The principal scene of his activity was his workroom or his studio, whether that of the literary or the plastic artist. As a painter and designer he is one of the founders of the style which, variously distorted, is known in Germany as the *Jugendstil* (*art nouveau*); as a poet he

is, in his longer works, a teller of tales, richly embellished by his imagination. A follower of Ruskin in the first place, he is essentially a romantic - no-one but a romantic could have written that interesting picture of the future, which has been translated into every language, *News from Nowhere*. But, although he regarded socialism essentially from the standpoint of the artist, William Morris was by no means the type of aesthete who merely writes of socialism now and again. No, he was in the heart of the movement; he was among the first to assist in its organisation, and to do propaganda work; and at that time one might often see the admired poet, the well-to-do manufacturer, the designer of tapestries for the most select houses in the West End, at some street corner in a working class district of London, preaching the message of socialism to a handful of working men.

When socialist propaganda was resumed in England it encountered, in the working class population, an uncommonly stubborn material. The members of the trade unions and other organisations were as often as not supporters or allies of the Liberal Party, which included a powerful radical contingent, especially of the left wing of the party, and the uneducated working men stood as yet on a very low intellectual level, and were therefore all the more difficult to organise. The difference between the artisan and the uneducated working man in the matter of wages and cultivation was, for the most part, until lately, very much greater in England than with us; which explains, among other things, why the German, on coming to England, having read that the English worker is better paid, and works shorter hours than the German worker, at first receives the contrary impression. Since the uneducated workers constitute the great majority, it is they who give the tone to certain working class districts, though not to all.

Gifted proletarians

One of the first artisans to join the socialist movement was the engineer or machinist, John Burns, who later became a cabinet minister. He now and then visited Engels, who was very well aware of the superior capacities and the weaknesses of this undoubtedly gifted proletarian. In conversation with me, he once compared him to Cromwell, of whose capacities he had a great opinion. He placed him, in the military rank, as high as Napoleon and, as a statesman, above him. Of Burns he used to say, if any one criticised him unfavourably: "He is more sinned against than sinning." A sinner he was, to be sure; his conceit, which verged upon the childish - in itself very comprehensible in a man who is astonished by his own capacity - caused him to behave with a want of consideration which is only with difficulty forgiven in the labour movement. But he was absolutely honest in his devotion to the cause, and for many years had performed a vast and unselfish amount of work for the movement, while he was still earning his living as an artisan. Strong as a bear, endowed with a tremendous voice, with a mastery of striking images and comparisons which it would be difficult to beat, he combined, with the outward attributes of the popular speaker, the virtues of the worker who takes a delight in acquiring knowledge, and is an eager and omnivorous reader. His pride and treasure is his library, which was already considerable before he became a minister.

I got to know him when I had, one day, some transaction or other with a very capable English socialist, the ex-naval lieutenant, HH Champion. We met at a restaurant in the City, and Champion introduced me to Burns, who already had a reputation in the

movement, but who impressed me, at first, merely as a man of great energy. He ordered nothing to eat or drink. I learned later that he ordered no food because he had not the money to pay for it, and was too proud to eat at our expense; and no drink because he was a strict abstainer. Until then I had never met an abstainer face to face - I had only just heard of the Temperance Party. But that so sturdy a worker should on principle abstain from the least drop of beer was to me quite an unexpected phenomenon. I thought it a curious and interesting fact that Champion and I, both 'intellectuals,' should drink beer, while Burns, the manual worker, was an abstainer on principle - a contrast which I was often to note later on. A large percentage of English working class socialists are total abstainers, while the majority of middle class socialists do not despise the delights of beer, wine or whisky. Every one who has read his letters knows that Friedrich Engels was no abstainer.

How English workers sometimes conceive of total abstinence is shown by an incident that occurred in Zurich in 1893, on the occasion of the International Socialist Congress, which was held there. Eleanor Marx encountered, in one of the finest beer gardens in Zurich, a number of English labour leaders, whom she knew as total abstainers, cheerfully sitting with glasses of beer in front of them. She scornfully reproached them, remarking that their principles apparently had not survived the change of air; but the gigantic leader of the Gas Workers' Union, Will Thorne, coolly replied that she was quite mistaken, for lager was a "temperance drink".

Will Thorne, who today is playing an influential part in the public life of England as a member of parliament and a member of the Trade Union Parliamentary Committee, was at that time the representative of one of the so-called 'new unions': that is, of a struggling union of uneducated workers, and was himself quite the proletarian. Eleanor Marx and Friedrich Engels thought very highly indeed of him. Engels gave him a copy of the English edition of Marx's *Capital*, with a long personal dedication, and only the great distance of his place of residence - the extreme East End of London - prevented him from becoming one of Engels' regular guests. Between him and Eleanor Marx there was a real friendship, and when, in 1898, we gathered round the poor girl's coffin, in order to accompany her body to the crematorium, the strong man was so overcome that his valedictory speech was uttered in a tremulous voice, while the tears rolled incessantly down his cheeks. During the Great War, he was one of those English socialists who held German militarism to be responsible, and he regarded its defeat as the imperative war-aim of democracy.

However free and easy Engels might be, and however democratic in his relations with his political friends, he was nevertheless respected as the master of the house, and he never forgot the excellent manners which he had learned in his parents' house. And as master of the house he was skilful in contriving that, even in moments of the greatest extravagance of his circle, guests always preserved a tone which was true, let us say, to the demands of a cultivated taste ●

Notes

1. And this in spite of the fact that Marx was not exactly overwhelmed by Kautsky, whom he found to be somewhat of a know-it-all and pedant. (If I had a penny for every time this passage has been cited as some kind of proof of Kautsky's later renegacy, then the beers would certainly be on me.) Engels, by contrast, came to treasure Kautsky's role within German Social Democracy in the 1890s and they became very close. See www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bornstein/works/1915/exile/ch09.htm.

JESUS

An international socialist?

Daniel Lazare has Jesus reaching out to the Roman oppressors, disowning his siblings and mother and affronting popular morality, to promote what was a cause parallel to modern socialism. There is always the danger, when we look back at the past, of finding a reflection of ourselves - but Jesus was undoubtedly a revolutionary



Socialists have long celebrated Jesus as a class warrior - understandably so, since his words fairly resonate with the anger of the poor against the rich.

But another aspect is less understood: his internationalism. The prevailing tendency of his day was to see politics, history and theology through an ethnic lens. It was a question of good people versus bad, which in the case of Palestine in the early 1st century meant the Jews versus everyone else. This is not to say that class was absent. On the contrary, the Hebrew Bible is unusual in terms of its sympathy for the poor. Deuteronomy 24 is typical:

Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to Yahweh against you, and you will be guilty of sin (14-15).

There is nothing remotely like this in Homer, Deuteronomy's rough contemporary. But the Old Testament (as Christians would later call it) still sees the poor as people whom the literate classes are obliged to help. "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits," says Exodus 23:6. "Your" is the key word here, since it implies that responsibility for the proper administration of justice lies with the upper rungs in charge of the courts. The idea of the poor meting out justice on their own is entirely absent. The idea of them meting out justice on the rich is even more alien. The idea of them joining with the poor of other nations in order to do so is downright incomprehensible.

It is this subordination of class to nation, to put it in modern terms, that Jesus set out to challenge. He did so

in a way that would strike today's 'unity at all costs' leftists as sectarian in the extreme. Instead of calling for a popular front of Judea (to quote Monty Python), he is the kind of ideological troublemaker who first wants to know what terms like 'Judea' and 'popular front' even mean.

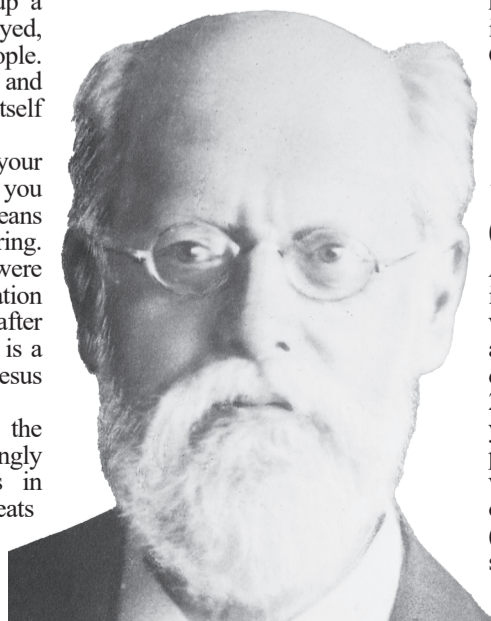
Consider the kingdom of God that the day of judgment will supposedly usher in. A centuries-old Jewish tradition described the end-times as a series of earth-shaking events, in which God scatters his enemies to the winds in order to establish his direct reign on earth. The Book of Micah, which dates from the 8th century BCE, says that "mountains [will] melt ... and the valleys split apart, like wax before the fire, like water rushing down a slope" (1:4). The Book of Isaiah promises the Israelites that "strangers will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards ... You will feed on the wealth of nations and in their riches you will boast" (61:5-6). The Book of Daniel, written in the 2nd century BCE, says that God "will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (2:44).

'Liberation' means smashing your enemies to smithereens, so that you can revel in booty and slaves. It means joy over other people's suffering. Revenge fantasies like these were obviously appealing to a small nation struggling to hold itself together after repeated kicks and blows. But it is a moral and political dead-end, as Jesus was beginning to realise.

Hence, his description of the heavenly kingdom is strikingly different. The key passage is in Luke 13, which Matthew 8 repeats nearly word for word. In it, Jesus tells members of the upper-class Pharisaic party:

Gaudenzio Ferrari 'Stories of the Life and Passion of Christ' (1513): fresco at the Church of Santa Maria, Varallo Sesia, Italy

Karl Kautsky's Foundations of Christianity: a classic and still required reading for anyone wanting to understand the Jesus party and its evolution into the official religion of the Roman empire



There will be weeping there and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed, there are those who are last who will be first and first who will be last (28-30).

Instead of armies scattered to the four winds, there is merely a feast. Rather than kingdoms, it is class relations that are trampled, so that those on top are now below and vice versa. Instead of Israel robbing and enslaving others, foreigners from "east and west and north and south" - which is to say all nations on earth - are invited to dine together in peace.

Moreover, they are invited to do so in contravention of the Jewish dietary laws, which were of growing importance in Jesus's day and which, under ordinary circumstances, would have made any such gathering impossible. Jesus thus conceives of God's reign as less a kingdom than a village - a peasant international in which ethno-religious divisions fall by the wayside and half-starved countryfolk sit down at the same table and at last eat their fill.

Context

A bit of historical context is necessary in order to understand what made such words so powerful. Jesus's "mission", as far as scholars have been able to determine, extended from the late 20s to his crucifixion in or about the year 33. Several things about this period stand out. One is that Judaism was still a loose and baggy collection of national traditions that the rabbis (literally, 'masters' or 'teachers') were struggling to iron out, but which were still in relative flux. As a result, there was plenty of room for a renegade

thinker to engage self-proclaimed experts in intellectual debate.

A second is that Jews were still living in the shadow of a mini-empire that the Hasmoneans - a Jewish landowning family also known as the Maccabees - had carved out beginning in 167 BCE. The kingdom, which extended from the Sinai to modern-day Lebanon and Syria and across to Jordan in the east, was novel. Where most conquerors were religiously tolerant, not caring what deity people worshipped, as long as they paid their taxes, the Hasmoneans were aggressive Judaisers, who demanded that subjects conform to Jewish law, pay religious taxes and sacrifice to Yahweh in his temple in Jerusalem. "Such a policy of conquest was not unusual; but it was quite unusual for such a policy to develop into one of religious expansion," observed Karl Kautsky in his classic 1908 study, *Foundations of Christianity*.¹ But the Maccabees went at it regardless: "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," God says in Exodus 19 - and that is what the Hasmoneans set out to establish by imposing an unprecedented degree of religious uniformity, including in the newly Judaised frontier province of Galilee.

But then the Hasmoneans collapsed after extensive religious and political infighting, allowing the Romans to take over in 37 BCE. It was left to various thinkers and schools, the Jesus movement among them, to try to figure out what had gone wrong.

Finally, there is a third factor. Although the empire was relatively peaceful under Tiberius, who ruled from CE 14 to 37, social tensions were rising, as a new crop of Greco-Roman cities sucked more and more wealth out of the impoverished countryside. One result was growing ethnic tensions with Hellenes and Samaritans - the latter a semi-Jewish people who revered Moses and the

Torah, but refused to worship in Jerusalem, preferring their own cultic centre on Mount Gerizim some 30 miles to the north. (A tiny Samaritan community still survives in Israel and the West Bank.)

But ethnic tensions were not the only thing on the upswing - class tensions were as well. Faced with two such countervailing tendencies, Jesus's great decision was to firmly side with one against the other, in the process forging a striking new ideological critique.

A number of examples stand out. One is the story of the Roman centurion in the Galilean town of Capernaum, who has heard that Jesus is a powerful healer and begs him to cure a servant who has fallen ill. "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof," the centurion says. He continues:

That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.

With this, Jesus turns to the crowd and says, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (Luke 7:1-9).

The comment must have taken Jesus's Jewish followers aback. After all, they were the chosen people, they had a special relationship with the divine, so how could a Greek-speaking foreigner even come close? If Jesus had been a conservative nationalist, he might have haughtily dismissed the centurion's faith as far below Jewish standards. If he had been a nationalist of a somewhat more liberal bent, he might have acknowledged that it was nearly on a par with that of the Jews, but not quite the same. But declaring that it *exceeded* that of the Jews was altogether different.

Since the story also appears in Matthew 8:5-13, it apparently comes from a book of sayings that a New Testament analysts call 'Q', from the German *Quelle* ('source'), that both authors drew upon in composing their gospels. Since scholars believe that Jesus's followers may have begun compiling such sayings as early as the 40s, it brings us to within just a few years of Jesus himself and is therefore as accurate a rendition of his words as we are ever likely to get. If so, then it seems that the historical Jesus was setting out to challenge the concept of a divinely chosen *ethnos* head on.

Another example is even more radical. This is the story of the good Samaritan, which appears in Luke 10:25-37. It begins with an expert in Jewish religious law posing a trick question:

Lawyer: Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus: What is written in the law? How do you read it?

L: Love Yahweh your god with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbour as yourself.

J: You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.

L: And who is my neighbour?

This is the nub of the question. Rather than answering directly, Jesus launches into one of his famous parables:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road and, when he saw the man, he passed by on the

other side. So too a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and, when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

Then Jesus poses a question of his own: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

"The one who had mercy on him," the lawyer replies.

Says Jesus: "Go and do likewise."

'Neighbour'?

Since the priest, the Levite and the injured traveller are all clearly Jewish, the lesson is the same as in the story of the Roman centurion - only a good deal sharper. Jews and Samaritans were not on friendly terms. The Hasmonaeans had attacked the Samaritan temple in 128 BCE while, somewhere around CE 9, according to the Roman-Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, Samaritans had desecrated the Jerusalem temple in return by scattering human bones in its interior. Indeed, a mini-war between the two neighbours would erupt some 20 years after Jesus's execution.

So it is rather as if, at the height of the US civil rights movement, Martin Luther King had told a story about a white man stopping to help a wounded black traveller after two eminent black clergymen pass him by - something that not even King would have dared do. Or the equivalent could be an Israeli telling of a Palestinian who stops to help a wounded Jew or a Palestinian telling of a Jew stopping to help a wounded Muslim. The bottom line is that Jews, blacks, Palestinians, etc should not think so highly of themselves, since it turns out that a despised foreigner is more generous and upright than they are.

Since the parable appears nowhere else in the Gospels, it is evidently not part of Q. Nonetheless, members of the Jesus Seminar - an effort by 50 or so biblical scholars, beginning in the mid-1980s, to distil the essence of the real historical Jesus - argued that it is authentic regardless on the grounds of "dissimilarity": ie, the notion that the parable is so strange, unusual and at odds with Jewish orthodoxy that none of his followers would have dared make it up.² It is rather like the story of the early Christian, who falls asleep during one of Saint Paul's lectures and tumbles out of a window (Acts 20:9). That story is not only odd, but embarrassing, since the implication is that the apostle was not the liveliest of speakers. Hence, it is not the sort of thing that followers would make up either. Its oddness speaks to its truthfulness.

If so, then Jesus was a combative intellectual of a particularly cantankerous sort. A German New Testament analyst named Gerd Theissen argues that defining 'neighbour' in moral terms enabled Jesus to make a number of conceptual leaps. Not only was the moral community different from the ethno-religious community: apparently, it was fundamentally at odds. If Jewish superiority was suspect, then so was ethnic enmity. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy,'" Jesus declares in the Sermon on the Mount. "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-44; see also Luke 6:27-31). Jesus goes even

further by questioning family ties as well.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters - yes, even their own life - such a person cannot be my disciple," he declares in Luke 14:26. In Mark 3:33-35, he makes a point of keeping his mother and brothers waiting when they come to visit. "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asks. Then, looking at his followers sitting around him, he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." When a woman calls out from a crowd, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you," he answers: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:27-28). Most startling of all is his advice to a follower who begs leave to bury his father. "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God," he says (Luke 9:60, Matthew 8:22). In an age in which filial piety was the closest thing to a universal principle, it was the ultimate affront. Today's Christian evangelists may think Jesus was a champion of "family values" as currently understood, but he was in fact the opposite.

"The primitive Christian ethic of love of neighbour is a radicalisation of the Jewish ethic," Theissen writes - one that Jesus takes to greater and greater heights. "First, love of neighbour becomes love of enemy," he says. "... Secondly, love of neighbour is extended to become love of the stranger." Ultimately, it even "becomes love of the sinner."

"Whereas normally those who are closest of all are preferred and loved," Theissen adds, "... here the situation is reversed. Disciples may risk conflict with the family, but they are to practise love towards outsiders!"³ As Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount,

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them ... But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the most high, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Luke 6:32-35; see also Matthew 5:43-48).

Jesus's forte was turning everything upside-down and-inside out - neighbour, family, sinner, whatnot. Religious assumptions, ethnic pride and even ordinary business practices were all weighed in the balance and found wanting. Obviously, lending without expecting to be paid in return is impractical in real life. So is turning the other cheek. But 'impossibilist' ethics like these were meant to point to a heavenly future, in which they become practical after all, because everybody would be a member of the same moral and spiritual family. As they used to say in Paris in 1968, "Be practical - demand the impossible."

Revolutionary

The parallels with socialism are clear. Marxism also takes common bourgeois assumptions and stands them on their head. By urging the working class to demand what capitalism is incapable of producing, it tries to point the way to a revolutionary social order capable of providing what humanity needs so urgently. Where Jesus looked to God to establish a heavenly reign on earth, socialism looks to the international proletariat to create a new kind of society based on solidarity, cooperation and new heights of democracy.

As is often noted, early church fathers sought to tone down class conflict in the wake of the great Jerusalem revolt of CE 66-70 in the hope of making the new movement

more palatable to the Roman authorities. "The destruction of Jerusalem destroyed the last reservoir of popular energy in the empire," Kautsky observes. "All rebellion now became hopeless. Christianity now became pagan Christianity only; this made it submissive, even servile."⁴ The charge is undeniable, as a glance at Luke and Matthew - both of which date from the mid-80s - shows. In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, we read:

But woe to you who are rich, For you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, For you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, For you will mourn and weep (6:24-25).

But Matthew, whoever he might have been, leaves such words out, presumably on the grounds that they were unnecessarily provocative. Instead, he has Jesus say:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, For they will be comforted (5:3-4).

What counts now is not so much the poor as those who are merely "poor in spirit". Instead of angry and vengeful, the lower classes are now gentle and submissive. But perhaps by way of compensation, Matthew emphasises internationalism even more. It is he, not Luke, who comes up with the famous line, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (5:5). The poor will become masters of the globe - and, even if events did not quite work out that way, the movement that Jesus founded did go on to conquer Rome some three centuries later. It is an open question as to whether Christianity rendered the empire any better or not. But there is no doubt that it transformed it.

Just as the parallels with socialism are clear, so are the parallels with today's Middle East. Instead of a mini-war between Jews and Samaritans, we now have a major war between Israelis and Gazans. As bad as communal hatreds were in the early first century, they are now a thousand times worse. Hamas's terrorist assault on October 7 has opened up the floodgates of sectarianism on both sides of the divide and, the more the war spreads, the more all-consuming they become.

But it is the job of socialists to oppose such currents and point the way to a solution. However impossibilist, the call for a Israeli-Palestinian workers' state in a socialist Middle East grows more practical by the day, simply because there is no other way out of the abyss. Like the internationalist Jesus, we must point to a proletarian solution, in which workers unite not only in order to lose their chains, but their guns and RPGs. "What would Jesus do" should be our slogan - not in a direct sense, needless to say, but dialectically, so that his yearning for international moral solidarity becomes our own.

The goal is a world in which bombs do not fall, children are not buried in rubble, and neighbours do not seek to tear one another apart limb from limb - a world, in other words, in which it is possible to wish one another 'Merry Christmas' after all.

And so ends our sermon for the week! ●

Notes

1. K Kautsky *Foundations of Christianity: a study in Christian origins* New York 1925, p259.
2. P Rhea Jones *Studying the parables of Jesus* Macon Ga 1999, p15.
3. G Theissen *The religion of the earliest churches* Minneapolis 1999, pp66-67.
4. K Kautsky *Foundations of Christianity* New York 1925, p392.

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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Living on a knife edge

Attacked on all fronts over Rwanda, Rishi Sunak survived the vote this time. But, with the various factions pulling in opposite directions, he seems to be heading for a general election defeat, writes **Eddie Ford**

For a while, it seemed that Rishi Sunak was in big trouble - facing a major rebellion by rightwing Tory MPs over his flagship Rwandan policy to 'stop the boats' that some thought could possibly have pushed the government to the brink of collapse, or even trigger a general election. All day on December 12 there was excited talk about the vote on the emergency legislation being on a knife edge and, if ministers had been defeated at the second reading stage, it would have been the first time a government has lost such a vote since 1986, when dozens of Conservative MPs rebelled to defeat a plan by Margaret Thatcher to liberalise the Sunday trading rules - something that was hardly at the heart of governmental policy, let alone a priority pledge.

With only 29 Tory MPs voting against the bill needed to defeat it and Sunak's authority already fragile, he went back and forth like a ping-pong between MPs representing what is commonly dubbed the 'five families' on the right of the party (like the five families alleged to control the mafia in the United States). Membership of the European Research Group, Northern Research Group, New Conservatives, Common Sense Group and the Conservative Growth Group sometimes overlaps and, of course, basically they want the same thing: legislation that is more or less invulnerable to legal challenges. A legal Holy Grail that will not go down to the supreme court, which, predictably, ruled last month that the Rwanda policy in its previous form, violated both domestic and international law.

Unworkable

Accelerating the crisis for the prime minister, the ERG's 'star chamber' of lawyers had said the day before that the bill did not go far enough to deliver the policy as intended - with veteran backbencher Sir Bill Cash claiming that "significant amendments" would be needed to stop the removal of people to Rwanda being frustrated through legal challenges. Of course, Robert Jenrick compounded the crisis when he resigned as immigration minister last week on the grounds that the draft legislation was unworkable. Even more damagingly, he accused Sunak of failing to keep his word "to do whatever it takes" to "stop the boats" - as the legislation did not allow the government to override the international laws that have stopped the deportation of asylum-seekers to central Africa.

Sunak also held discussions with what you could call the 'sixth family' - the One Nation group of Tories on the centrist or liberal wing, which is the biggest and maybe the most cohesive grouping within the party. On the opposite end, they view the legislation in its current form as the very most they can tolerate and regard all notions of overriding the European Court of Human Rights, let alone



Then British home secretary Priti Patel and Rwanda's foreign minister Vincent Biruta signing deportation policy on April 14 2022

leaving it, as a 'red line' they will never cross - or so they say, and there is no particular reason to disbelieve them. Disregarding or leaving the ECHR would have major implications for Britain, as it would essentially mean breaking with the post-World War II international political-legal architecture set up by the Atlantic alliance. This would leave the UK in the same company as Russia and Belarus - a highly uncomfortable situation, to put it mildly. Equally, it could trigger a whole series of crises relating to Northern Ireland and a host of other things for that matter.

Then again, it is near impossible to see how the inhuman policy of flying people off to central Africa could succeed while Britain remains part of the ECHR. According to Sunak's emergency legislation, Rwanda is a "safe country" - a bit like calling a cat a dog and hoping no-one will notice. Thus James Cleverly, the recently appointed foreign secretary, told parliament that the proposed law puts "beyond legal doubt the safety of Rwanda" (though it does nothing of the sort) - while admitting that the actions taken by the government are "novel" and "very much pushing at the edge of the envelope", yet somehow "are within the framework of international law". (He is reported to have previously described the Rwanda plan as "batshit" - a more honest response.)

Obviously, Jenrick and his co-thinkers, like Suella Braverman, the former home secretary who did everything she could to get the sack, are amongst those who want to pull out of the ECHR - which they regard as part of the lefty-woke establishment they have sworn to overthrow. However, ahead of the vote on the bill, the new minister for illegal migration, Michael Tomlinson, said that stopping all legal appeals against deportation by people who arrive in the UK through irregular means would not be "the British thing to do" - a comment that upset the patriotic sensibilities of

many on the right.

Adding to Rishi Sunak's woes, the Rwandan government had said it would pull out of the deal if the UK breaks international law - leaving the prime minister with next to no room for manoeuvre. Even the government's own legal advisors have said there is no more than a 50% chance of deportation flights leaving for Rwanda before the next election, which seems like an extremely generous assessment. Most people would put the odds much lower.

Showdown

In the end, resisting calls from the right to pull the vote, Sunak won by a relatively comfortable majority of 313 votes to 269, with 37 Tory MPs abstaining. Downing Street might perhaps take some comfort from the fact that not a single Conservative MP actually voted against the bill - despite the threats - while the number of abstentions was significantly lower than the 100 claimed by the so-called 'five families', making the rightwing rebellion look a bit of a damp squib.

Having said that, Rishi Sunak now has a showdown with his backbenchers to look forward to in the new year - weeks of chaos, as he struggles to hold his mutinous party together, with the various factions pulling in diametrically opposite directions. A delighted Damian Green, chair of the One Nation group, argued that the successful vote and 44 majority for the government showed that the prime minister did not need to amend the Rwanda bill for it to survive - which appears naive, if he really believes it. But for Green and his faction Rishi Sunak "should stick to his guns" and leave the legislation as it is - no more pushing of the envelope, otherwise they will bail out.

Conversely, the right wing has allowed the bill to live another day, but without amendments or "major surgery" on the third reading they will do everything they can to kill it off next month. Therefore, Mark

Francois, chair of the ERG - which became a household name during the Brexit crisis - said lots of MPs voted with the government on the basis that it would be "prepared to entertain some changes" to the plan and "have said so publicly". He suggested, or warned, that the numbers were worse than they looked for Rishi Sunak if he did not "play ball" with the rightwing MPs. Whilst supporting "the principle of the bill", Miriam Cates of the New Conservatives, who is the new Tory 'darling' and rising star of the right, said it was "defective" and will not stop the boats - stating the obvious. As for Robert Jenrick, he used his Commons speech to push for 'unBritish' stricter curbs on an individual's ability to legally challenge a removal.

In other words, the ball is now in the government's court - it has to decide what it wants to do next. Unhappily for the prime minister, the different factions seem on a straightforward collision course - running the Brexit wars all over again, but in an even more desperate way. If Sunak were to suffer the same fate as Theresa May, that would be an ironic reversal of events. The 'five families' of the right have about 100 MPs between them and the One Nation 'family' have 106 registered MPs, so between them they can scupper legislation at any time. Which means that now the government is stuck in one hell of a mess, trying to face all ways at once. James Cleverly has suggested that it wants the ECHR to change the way it operates, rather than Britain leaving it - which seems like a pipedream. Nor can the government fully decide whether the Rwanda bill is compliant with international law or not. On December 13, a briefing from the joint committee on human rights concluded that it was not, while officially the government claims it is. Yet Cleverly has said he cannot be sure if it is compatible with the ECHR, and he often deploys other evasive language - thus the remark about the bill being "within the framework of

international law", which could mean almost anything.

Further adding to the sense of crisis over Rwanda (if not doom for the government) were the revelations about the escalating cost of the scheme. For long, the home office and ministers have refused to spell out the full costs of the programme, citing "commercial sensitivity." But eventually the parliamentary public accounts committee managed to drag out the information that, having originally budgeted for £140 million, the price tag has now increased to £290 million without one aircraft taking off for Africa - except for those containing government ministers going to Kigali to horse-trade with the Rwanda government. You could not make it up.

Unsurprisingly, the home office has now been ordered to give the full cost of Rwanda deportation plan. As it turns out, the £290 million figure does not take into account the actual deportation of migrants to the country, which could end up sending the bill over £400 million.

Costs

The impact assessment for the scheme says a theoretical cost for sending 1,000 migrants to Rwanda could be £169 million - or £169,000 a person - in contrast to the £106 million it would cost to accommodate them in the UK. But ministers still insist that the Rwanda plan is value for money because of the "deterrent effect" - something that is totally unproven and almost certainly does not exist. In a key testimony to the supreme court, as it deliberated on the Rwanda bill, the UN refugee agency gave evidence about a similar Israeli scheme, suspended in 2018, in which all of those deported to Rwanda ended up in Europe or elsewhere. If people are desperate enough and determined enough, they will keep trying to enter the UK, regardless of governmental policy.

Yet again, the only impression that you can be left with is that the wheels are falling off the Sunak government. Everything we are witnessing now, whether Jenrick's resignation or Suella Braverman's sacking, can only be understood within the context of the post-Sunak Tory Party rather than the forthcoming general election - the result of which seems less and less in doubt, as the prime minister's net favourability ratings hit a new low of -49, according to YouGov (comparable to that of Boris Johnson's at the time of his resignation).¹ The increasingly ugly rows, the personal and political attacks, the jockeying for position - all are about the struggle for the soul of the party itself ●

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Notes

1. yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/48157-sunak-slips-to-worst-ever-favourability-rating-amid-government-rwanda-policy-rows.