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THE WORLD IN TURMOIL



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Donald Trump is a man in a hurry. Better prepared than when he came to office in his first term as President, he has embarked at breakneck speed on achieving his international and domestic objectives. He is not hampered by the niceties of diplomacy nor does he pay lip service to other countries and their leaders. This has come as a shock to Western “allies” of the US, whose second class position in relation to the world’s hegemonic superpower Trump has made painfully clear. They are struggling to adjust to this new reality.

Trump’s world order

The implications of this are explored by Frieda Park in, *Trump’s world order, the West and the UK*. She points out just how weak the other old imperialist countries are economically and how their political systems are failing. The EU, particularly is struggling with multiple problems of weak leaders and economic and political stagnation. In Britain too Kier Starmer’s government is failing to address the country’s economic problems nor is it trying to meet the needs of the British people. In fact, the reverse. It is threatening more cuts to welfare and services to fund war and the arms build-up.

So the old imperial European powers are not well placed to challenge Trump by carving out an independent road for themselves. But he will face other challenges from within the US establishment and from a disgruntled voter base, who will be made worse off by his policies. There will be resistance too from the Global South. The question is what will the long-term impact of his policies be and will he actually make the US stronger or weaker?

Trump’s focus on China

Trump is motivated by a desire to ensure US supremacy in the face of

China which is developing rapidly. No other country poses such a threat and he wants to clear the decks for that fight, hence his attempt to end the war in Ukraine on terms favourable to the United States. The dynamics of this are explored in *Beginning of the end of war in Ukraine?* by Alex Davidson. He also considers other aspects of Trump’s imperial agenda – his designs on Greenland and Panama and how they relate to his desire to prevent China challenging US power.

The threat from China to the US and the West is real but it is not a military one, as the media would have us believe, which is used as the pretext for increased arms spending. In fact, it is the US that has threatened to annex Canada, take over Greenland, take back the Panama Canal (which it has partly succeeded in) take over Ukrainian mineral resources and redevelop Gaza ethnically cleansed of Palestinians. By contrast, what China has been doing is developing its technology and industry so that it is now a leading force in hi tech and green industries. This came into sharp relief with the success of Deep-Seek’s new artificial intelligence system, which is described in Helen Christopher’s *Artificial Intelligence – China’s challenge*. This is what motivates Trump. He wants to focus on the serious challenge that China poses to the United States status as the world’s one superpower.

Solidarity with Palestinians

Although Trump is notoriously erratic, beneath the surface of this and his egregious, insulting behaviour there are consistencies. One is that he will continue to support Israel as the bastion of US interests in the Middle East. Despite the ceasefire in Gaza, which Israel had long resisted, there has been little respite for the Palestinians who continue to suffer from Israel’s

genocidal actions both in Gaza and the West Bank.

One bright spot in a rather grim political landscape in Britain has been the unified and determined campaigning by activists in solidarity with Palestine. Leila Ryan sets out their central demands and plans for future campaigning in *Palestine Solidarity: united, defiant, focused*. In particular we can learn from the past success of the boycott of South African apartheid to mobilise people to boycott Israeli apartheid now.

Syria

Whilst the Palestinians remain steadfast in resisting genocide, their situation has been made worse by Israel’s success in weakening Hezbollah and the fall of Assad in Syria. In *Syria and the implications of the Fall of Assad*, Simon Korner gives the history behind the West’s objective of destroying the government there and the long campaign of military action and sanctions which eventually led to Assad’s defeat. He also analyses the current situation and future prospects for Syria and the region. The West backs the terrorists who now control the country and who are oppressing and killing people from ethnic and religious minorities and women from all groups. Meanwhile the United States is still involved and Israel and Turkey are vying to carve up bits of Syria for themselves. The future looks grim for Syrians.

Where next for the world?

There have been several unexpected events in the last three years which have had far-reaching consequences and, especially with Trump at the helm, the world is in a very volatile phase. It is difficult to predict what the next event will be that will upset the global order and whether it will be one that will benefit imperialism or the forces ranged against it.

TRUMP'S WORLD ORDER, THE WEST AND THE UK

by Frieda Park

Since coming to office President Donald Trump's actions and words have laid bare the bottom line of US unipolar hegemony. Behind the façade of multilateral institutions and collaboration, the reality was always one of US dominance. Trump's aggressive assertion of US interests has made plain the truth that other powers are second class and their leaderships are struggling to cope with their erstwhile position as valued allies being suddenly and very publicly downgraded. It is also hugely humiliating for powers that went along enthusiastically with the US when it encouraged them to support its proxy war in Ukraine and, in the case of Germany trash its economy, only for the US to change course unilaterally and pursue a peace agreement. The ramifications and how to respond are only just beginning to be understood in the rest of the West.

US imperial power

The rise of the United States as the world's dominant imperialist power started before it became the one superpower with the end of the Soviet Union. It had been the hegemonic imperialist power since it decisively replaced Britain by the end of the Second World War with Suez being the nail in Britain's coffin. Weakened from the war and faced with the example of the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries, it was relatively easy for the US to dominate the old imperial powers – Britain, France, and defeated Germany, Italy and Japan. Whilst there were international

institutions and bi-lateral relations which expressed a sense of collaboration and consensually kept pro-Western forces on board, the reality was that these institutions largely served US purposes. Lacking the ability to assert themselves against US power and its overwhelming control through the dollar, its economic and technical might and its military, the old powers had no alternative to carry on in a second class position to the US, whilst trying to carve out a bit of space for their own interests. The saddest version of this was Britain's claim to have a "special relationship" with the US, which had supplanted it as the lead imperialist power. Starmer's desperate attempts to try to curry favour with Trump only underline that everything is entirely on the US terms and the relationship is not very special.

In that Donald Trump's first priority is pursuing the interests of United States imperialism this represents continuity with all previous administrations but, it is his approach that is different. President Roosevelt liked the aphorism, "Speak softly and carry a big stick: you will go far" This speaks volumes in itself and of course to nations of the Global South, subjected historically to big stick treatment, the "speak softly" part was always irrelevant. Now Trump has abandoned the "speak softly" part for Western "allies" too.

Ukraine

Donald Trump is a man in a hurry. He only has this term in which to achieve his objectives as he cannot

run for office again. His top priority ever since his first term, has been to focus on China's challenge to US hegemony. This explains his rush to conclude the war in Ukraine which in any case is being lost. Among the objectives of the Biden administration was to weaken and perhaps even dismember Russia to leave it open to exploitation by US firms. That will clearly not now be achieved by means of this war. Trump looks like he is eyeing up normalisation with Russia to gain access to its natural resources which in addition to oil, gas and other materials has some of the world's biggest reserves of the rare earths essential for hi-tech production. This also motivates his demands to extract Ukraine's mineral resources for the US. It is hard to efficiently exploit other countries in a war zone. Hence another reason why Trump is moving fast for a peace deal.

He has seen, and been critical of, the quagmire of the "forever" wars that left the United States bogged down in the Middle East and Afghanistan, so he prefers to crush the toes of the European countries, including Ukraine itself, and get a deal done quickly. The direct engagement of the US with Russia should leave no doubt about this being proxy war.

Another factor in ending the war was that it has undermined the long term US strategy of keeping Russia and China divided to play one off against the other. In fact the war brought them together in a closer alliance than possibly at any time in their histories. Trying

United States “big stick” the USS Theodore Roosevelt



PHOTO BY KAYLIANNA GEMER

to drive a wedge back into that relationship aids the US/Trump priority of isolating and taking on China.

Trump's gratuitous and insulting behaviour should not conceal the logic behind his actions. He aims to sustain the US as the hegemonic superpower and confront China without unnecessary distractions.

He has long advocated for other NATO members to up their arms spending. They are now in the process of doing just that, a great excuse for the war camp in each country who cite mythical threats, not only from Russia, but from Iran, North Korea and China. Our media tells us that we must get used to there being no peace dividend, implying that peaceful economic development is not a normal state of affairs, and instead look forward to the slashing of public spending, a project eagerly embraced by the Starmer government. Of course there is an alternative, and that is to jump off this warmonger's merry-go-round and seek peaceful, collaborative relations with other countries.

Israel Palestine

Clearing the decks of the Ukraine war is one thing, however, dealing with Israel and Palestine is quite another. Israel remains the bastion of US imperial power in the region despite the reactionary nature of petro-states like Saudi Arabia and others. Although his first term “peace plan” for Israel and Palestine went nowhere as it was totally biased in Israel's interests and rejected by the Palestinians, Trump did make progress in brokering diplomatic relations between Israel and some Arab countries through the Abraham Accords— The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. The Abraham Accords were designed to marginalise the Palestinians and consolidate reactionary Arab states along with Israel. It aimed to draw in Saudi Arabia, which would have been the jewel in the crown and it remains the hope of the US that it can be brought on board. Yet progress on improving relations with the Arab countries in the Middle East has been set back enormously by America's support for the genocide in Gaza.

To try to ease the situation somewhat for the US and Israel, Trump insisted on a ceasefire deal, evidencing that the US, as its major backer, has the power to force Israel to act since it had long rejected any moves towards such a deal. But Trump's way forward here is much messier than ending the war in Ukraine, with so many competing powers in the region, particularly with the fall of Assad in Syria. There remain two certainties, however, support for Israel will continue as will the continuing battle to destabilise Iran.

The European Union

The crisis within the imperial powers of Europe caused by Trump runs deeper than just the problem of how to respond to him, for these powers were stagnating, or declining, economically even before the further economic hit caused by the Ukraine war. The ongoing crisis of political legitimacy of the traditional parties which used to manage capitalism in a relatively stable way is deepening.

In Germany the elections gave the right, the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union the biggest number of seats, but far short of a majority and on the second lowest number of votes they ever received. The Social Democrats, which previously had the biggest number of seats and provided the Chancellor slumped, receiving the lowest number of votes in its history and coming third behind the far right Alternative for Germany. Having come out of the 2008 financial crisis as the leading economic power in Europe Germany's economy has now tanked. It was the worst performing major country in 2023 and has not got out of that hole.

Of course the EU as a whole has massive economic problems, is disunited on key issues, including the war in Ukraine and has put any question of enlargement on hold. To be an effective instrument of European imperialism (i.e. German and French) the EU's cumbersome structure, economic architecture and nominal rights of member states would need to change. It is possible that rather than integration on the basis of equality that there will be first and second and perhaps even third class EU members with the richest states driving economic and political policy. Any such move would inevitably lead to deepening splits within the EU, which is possibly what has held the

cuts to the public sector and further damage to the economy that are coming down the line and that is not to mention his mission to cuddle up closer to the failing EU. In-fighting within the right of the party, concerned at the prospect of losing the next election may have been put into abeyance by Starmer suddenly launching himself on the world stage as saviour of Ukraine and chief Trump whisperer, but the discontent is there.

Unfortunately there is little active opposition to Starmer in the shape of industrial action or protests. Disturbingly some unions have embraced increasing arms spending. The government has signalled that this will be achieved by cuts to public services.

The exception in this downbeat picture is the steadfast work of activists campaigning in solidarity with the people of Palestine and against Israeli apartheid and genocide.

Under the surface of a united front over Ukraine, the Labour government in Britain is in chaos caused by Starmer and his team's multiple failures on policy and terrible communication.

The economic crisis had several contributory factors, but a key one was Germany's decision, under pressure from the United States, to end imports of Russian gas and close the Nord Stream pipeline. All this has had its effects on the living standards of ordinary Germans, so it is no wonder that voters have deserted the traditional parties. The left, however, remains weak and the beneficiaries of this dissatisfaction have been the far right.

In France President Macron undermined his own legitimacy by calling elections in which he substantially lost ground. In this case the left was united and better organised and gained the biggest number of seats in the National Assembly, followed by Macron's party and then the far right National Front. Macron has refused to accept the left's position as the biggest bloc in the Assembly and the government is now very unstable.

idea back from being implemented so far. In other words the EU is in a state of paralysis with weakened leaders, economic failure, divisions among member states and discontented populations.

Britain

Under the surface of a united front over Ukraine, the Labour government in Britain is in chaos caused by Starmer and his team's multiple failures on policy and terrible communication. Whilst the Tories under Kemi Badenoch still languish, it is Reform UK which is picking up support and is on top in some polls beating both Labour and the Tories. Despite its own problems the SNP now has a clear lead once again over Labour in Scotland.

The media fanfare round his actions on Ukraine have boosted Starmer's popularity but that is unlikely to survive the bruising

Trump's legacy?

It is impossible to say a lot at this stage about what the long term consequences of Trump's actions will be. Will there be a similarly minded successor to follow him into the White House as the next President? A problem for that prospect and for Trump's remaining term in office is that his policies are undermining his support base. Trade wars and tariffs will push up prices for ordinary Americans and economically he seems focused on the tech industry which, while strategically vital to US imperialism, doesn't employ a lot of people, especially not in the Trump voting rust belt. Elon Musk is in fact putting more Americans out of work by decimating public sector jobs. A consequence of the suspension of US Aid has been that farmers face going out of business as they used to sell a lot of their crops to the government who then gave them to US Aid to send abroad.



President Macron and Prime Minister Starmer search for ideas

PHOTO BY NUMBER 10

Though he has set off at breakneck speed to get things done, Trump will also be slowed down at some point by differences within his own administration and opposition from within disgruntled parts of the establishment and sectors of US capital. This is already manifesting itself through the courts as challenges to his executive orders. The stock market which rose on Trump's election has recently fallen again amid unpredictability over on/off tariffs and the impact they may have.

So maybe after Trump's term of office there will be a return to the old norms of the US dominating the globe, speaking softly but with the big stick when that is more effective.

Even if there is a quick return to the good old (bad old) days, nevertheless Trump's actions will not be forgotten in the West and across the globe. The US will inevitably lose credibility and trust. What the impact of that will be remains to be seen.

Trump can woo other countries where he considers it advantageous and straight bullying tactics won't work, as with Russia, but mostly he is deploying intimidat-

tion including escalating tariffs or the threat of them against pretty much everyone. Bullying can be very effective if your victims have no alternative supports or if countries feel that acquiescing is a more stable route for them than taking an uncertain and risky direction.

But there is a growing alternative to US domination. Since the US lost its grip on the Global South over Ukraine and Gaza, there have been the development of bi-lateral agreements and multi-lateral bodies such as BRICS+, which has expanded, and trading and financial arrangements which allowed Russia to evade US sanctions. Russia and China moved closer and China continues to grow as a major world power economically and technologically. But none of this is consolidated in the way that post-war financial, political and military institutions were under US hegemony. Whilst the US certainly shows signs of decay and decline, nevertheless its power remains massive and countries might not think they can rely on the alternatives when under American pressure. Whilst at one level US bullying will still be a spur to resistance, nevertheless there will be countries that submit to it, with

new divisions appearing among the countries of the Global South.

The world is volatile. In the last three years there have been actions that have caused major upheavals: the Ukraine war, Israel's genocide in Gaza, the fall of Assad in Syria and the undermining of Hezbollah and Trump's re-election have all had impacts which could not be entirely be foreseen and resulted in shifting the balance of forces for and against imperialism. What might the next spark be and will it benefit the forces of progress or of reaction? There has also been a shake down of existing relationships between imperialist powers with US disregard and even hostility to its old allies. As the imperialist powers, including the US, fall into deepening crises and they seek to confront the rise of China the world will certainly not be a safer or more peaceful place. One clear legacy of Trump will be the West's growing hostility to China. Fortunately China's responses to world events tend to be less confrontational and more measured, but the United States sees its continued rise as a growing existential threat to its hegemony and has the potential to go to any lengths, including war, to stop it.

Beginning of the end of war in Ukraine?

by Alex Davidson

"The West has invested a huge amount of capital – political, economic and strategic – in the fight against Russia, and it has failed. Trump knows that and so he's ending the war..."

Freddy Gray, *The Spectator*
20 February 2025

"...Zelenskyy's bust-up with Trump was a minor episode in a superpower struggle for material resources and global technological dominance."

Niall Ferguson and Nick Kumleben, *The Spectator*
8 March 2025



PHOTO BY WHITE HOUSE

Zelensky – Trump confrontation in the White House

The Trump/Vance – Zelenskyy spat at the White House brought into public view the fact that the war in Ukraine is a US/NATO proxy war, that the US is in charge and that it will deal with Russia on its own.

The adjusted direction of US foreign policy on Ukraine reflects American weakness, the threat to its world hegemony, the development of a multi-polar world, the emergence of BRICS+ and the development of China as a super-power. The US, under Trump, is pivoting to deal with what it sees as its main threat, China. Trump, and much of the US ruling class, regard China as the main competitor of the US and therefore the biggest danger. This helps to explain the changing US position on Ukraine. The US wants to cut a deal with Russia, save US dollars in a lost Ukraine war, change its relationship with Russia and divide it from China.

Trump's 90 minute telephone discussion with Putin, their agreement to begin normalising relations and following this the meeting of diplomats from both sides about re-opening embassies and consulates have indicated the US direction of travel. This has been met with a gnashing of teeth and bleatings from Europe and Ukraine that they should be at the negotiating table. These pathetic complaints about their US boss from the Europeans and Ukrainians has been accompanied by them increasing their Russophobia and warmongering.

Ukraine losing the war

"The West has invested a huge amount of capital – political, economic and strategic – in the fight against Russia, and it has failed. Trump knows that and so he's ending the war: if that means insulting

Volodymyr Zelensky, parroting Russian talking points and playing nice with Putin, so be it." [1]

The US is clear: Ukraine is losing the war. "You have big problems... You have no cards", Trump told Zelenskyy during the course of the White House spat. Trump's plain speaking could not have been more clear. Trump wrote on *Truth Social*. "Think of it, a modestly successful comedian, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, talked the United States of America into spending \$350 Billion Dollars, to go into a War that couldn't be won, that never had to start, but a War that he, without the US and 'TRUMP,' will never be able to settle."

Trump wants to end the proxy war as it has failed and is no longer in US interests to continue. The US proposal to Ukraine over its rare earth and mineral deposits is pre-

sented as the US getting its money back from the billions spent on the war and an investment for Ukraine. Zelenskyy wanted a security guarantee. The Minerals agreement wasn't signed as planned and Zelenskyy was expelled from the White House in a humiliating fashion.

It has been made very clear that Ukraine's application to join NATO will not happen. However, Zelenskyy and the EU/UK want to achieve US security guarantees by the back door. Starmer refers to it as the US acting as a 'back stop': an admission that the US is needed to prolong the war.

After Zelenskyy's blunder in the White House the Europeans, led by the UK, have been desperately trying to patch things up with the US while ramping up their war rhetoric.

Starmer's 'Coalition of the Willing'

Starmer's emergency summit in London on 2 March, in which he announced the setting-up of a 'Coalition of the Willing' with France, and 'boots on the ground and planes in the air' has so far been met with a rather lukewarm response. Poland, which has the biggest land army in Europe out with Ukraine and has been in the forefront of the warmongering, said no to sending troops to Ukraine. The Baltic states (with a combined population of some 6 million, about the same size as Scotland) were not invited to attend the summit. Mark Rutte, NATO secretary-general, told Zelenskyy to apologise to the US.

EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, announced the proposal to set-up a European fund of €800 billion for Ukraine's war effort and indicated that in order to do this the EU's fiscal rules would be changed. Much of the money will be given as loans to individual countries to boost their so-called defence budgets. A lot of

the money will be spent on buying armaments from the US. This will take time and will still not make up for the loss of US military support and intelligence. Of course, Trump welcomed the European pledges to increase their defence budgets. After all he has been calling for this for some time.

"Europeans make the mistake of regarding Trump as an overmighty would-be emperor. In fact, he is actuated by a nagging sense of weakness. A dealmaking president must either strike enough deals around the world to power and equip his country's economy, or face an unacceptable level of dependence on China, the most powerful industrial and military foe the United States has ever faced..." [2]

Within hours of Starmer's London summit the US announced a suspension of military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine. The Europeans grovelling and promises of spending more didn't change the US position of withdrawal from Ukraine.

Eventually, and reluctantly, Zelenskyy said that what had happened at the White House meeting was a "regrettable incident" but still didn't apologise. This was later followed by another more conciliatory message that Ukraine was ready to sign the Minerals deal. Trump was getting his way.

Shortly after the White House argument, and while Zelenskyy was expressing regret, Trump's envoys were in Ukraine discussing with opponents of Zelenskyy the issue of his replacement.

Trump-Zelenskyy back-story

Given the extensive media coverage of the White House spat one should not forget the back-story of Trump-Zelenskyy relations. Since 2014 the then vice-president's (Joe Biden) son had been sitting on the board of

Ukrainian energy company Burisma. The son, Hunter Biden, was earning around \$1 million annually to advise a company in a sector about which he had zero expertise. Why did the company have Hunter Biden on its board? The answer is simple: so that the Biden name could bring contracts, grants and other support to Burisma.

In 2019 President Trump had a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The Democrats claimed that he had used the call to tell Zelenskyy that American aid to the country could be contingent on Ukraine helping to expose the Biden family's financial dealings. Trump was impeached over the call but acquitted by the Senate. Many Republican supporters came to the view that Ukraine was a corrupt country, which had enriched and cooperated with Trump's political opponents.

As an article by Freddy Gray, Deputy Editor of *The Spectator*, which can hardly be called a Putin mouthpiece or puppet, has now admitted, "There's no doubt that, in our (western political leaders and media) eagerness to champion the man in the military fatigues, we overlooked the more sordid aspects of his leadership. The Pandora papers showing his links to shady offshore bank accounts were forgotten about. His ties to deeply corrupt and double-dealing oligarchs...were brushed over. His ruthless suppression of Moscow-affiliated religious groups was dismissed as Kremlin 'disinformation'...Western politicians, and military-industrial types who have made a lot of money from the war effort, have always known, deep down, that in supporting Ukraine against Putin they have covered up awkward truths. What really frightens them now is not necessarily Trump's recklessness. It's that the murkier realities of the Ukraine-Russia relationship and the West's involvement in the conflict going back to 2014 and before, may soon come to light." [3]

The US withdrawal from the West's proxy war against Russia and its pivot to deal with China as the greater threat to its hegemony reflects the weakened position of imperialism. The Europeans, it would appear, do not understand and certainly do not want to accept their reduced power and role in the world.

: In the course of the US/NATO provoked, proxy war Zelenskyy became a western hero. He was called a 21st century Churchill. He was fêted in European capitals, Hollywood and on the cover of Vogue magazine.

: Elon Musk has suggested that Zelenskyy could be given immunity when he departs.

Panama

: The pivot to China by the US began as soon as the Trump administration took office.

: Marco Rubio's first trip abroad as Trump's secretary of state was to Panama, where he threatened the Central American nation over its relations with China. The Trump administration demanded that the Panamanian government force the Hong Kong-based company, CK Hutchison Holdings, to sell its stake in the ports surrounding the canal.

: Immediately after Rubio's trip, Panama withdrew from China's global infrastructure program, the Belt and Road Initiative. In an interview with Fox News on 26 February Rubio said, "And I'm very happy that, after our visit, I think the same day I was there, Panama became the first country in Latin America, in the Western Hemisphere, to get out of the Belt and Road initiative. And I think there will be more news coming up soon, with regards to Panama, all positive for America." [4] The news that followed was that a Blackrock consortium had bought ports on the Panama Canal from the Hong Kong owner, CK Hutchison. Blackrock is an American transnational investment company. It is the world's largest investment manager with \$11.5 trillion in assets. This development was welcomed by Trump in his State of the Union address in March.

: In the Fox News interview Rubio said, "The Communist Party of China, that leads the PRC (Peoples

Republic of China), is the most potent and dangerous near-peer adversary this nation has ever confronted. They have elements that the Soviet Union never possessed. They are a technological adversary and competitor, an industrial competitor, an economic competitor, a geopolitical competitor, a scientific competitor now — in every realm."

After his trip to Panama, Rubio then travelled to El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic for engagements with senior officials and business leaders to "promote regional cooperation on our core, shared interests" including "countering China." as stated in the official press statement of the visit issued by the US State Department. [5]

Greenland

The countering of China explains Trump's unsubtle public utterances about taking over Greenland. In his March 2025 State of the Union speech Trump said, "We need Greenland for national security and even international security, and we're working with everybody involved to try and get it... and I think we're going to get it. One way or the other, we're going to get it... It's...very, very important for military security." [6]

In the 1990s, the world was overwhelmingly dominated by the United States, which could impose its will on most countries. The overthrow of the Soviet Union and its socialist allies meant there was no longer a counterbalance to US hegemony. However, the world has changed and the threat to US hegemony has led the Trump administration to conclude that the US must re-assert its imperial sphere of influence and deal with China as its biggest problem.

Rubio spelled out why the US wants to own and control Greenland: "They (the Chinese) do not have an Arctic presence, so they

Keir Starmer addresses his Ukraine summit of the not very willing



PHOTO BY LAUREN HURLEY

need to be able to have somewhere that they can stage from. And it is completely realistic to believe that the Chinese will eventually... try to do in Greenland what they have done at the Panama Canal and in other places, and that is install facilities that give them access to the Arctic with the cover of a Chinese company but that in reality serve a dual purpose: that in a moment of conflict, they could send naval vessels to that facility and operate from there. And that is completely unacceptable to the national security of the world and to the United States.” [7]

Trump has appointed Ken Howery as his Ambassador to Denmark and Greenland. Howery is one of the “PayPal Mafia”. [8] He was a co-founder of PayPal in 1999 along with Peter Thiel and Elon Musk. After eBay bought PayPal he stayed on as Director of Corporate Development. He was appointed as Ambassador to Sweden (2019-2021) under Trump’s first presidential term. He has now been appointed Ambassador to Denmark by Trump in his second term.

In his post on *Truth Social* Trump wrote, “...For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout

the world, the United States of America feels the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity. Ken will do a wonderful job in representing the interests of the United States...” [9]

Ceasefire proposal

The US withdrawal from the West’s proxy war against Russia and its pivot to deal with China as the greater threat to its hegemony reflects the weakened position of imperialism. The Europeans, it would appear, do not understand and certainly do not want to accept their reduced power and role in the world.

The American/Ukrainian proposal for an immediate ceasefire reflected the weak position of Ukraine on the battlefield. The proposal was also disingenuous. Russia, understandably does not trust the West after it broke the previous Minsk and Istanbul Agreements, admitted to by Germany and France as a way of giving time to Ukraine to further prepare militarily. Hence Putin’s response with a series of logical questions in response to the ceasefire proposal. Russia, which holds the upper hand in the war, is understandably unwilling to sacrifice its momentum and give

time to the Europeans to re-arm Ukraine. It also wants the root causes of the war to be addressed so that a lasting peace can be secured. The Europeans, led by the British, want the ceasefire immediately so that they can freeze the situation whilst preparing to prolong the war. They are not interested in addressing Russia’s security concerns nor securing a more permanent peace.

Sir Keir Starmer may hope that his grandstanding and warmongering over Ukraine could rescue his Premiership in the way that Mrs Thatcher’s Falklands war worked for her. However, these are different times and Ukraine is nothing like the Falklands (Malvinas).

[1] Freddy Gray, “The cruellest thing about Trump v Zelenskyy? Trump is right”, *The Spectator*, 20 February 2025

[2] Niall Ferguson and Nick Kumleben, “Dirty Deal: what Trump really wants from Ukraine’s natural resources”, *The Spectator*, 8 March 2025

[3] Freddy Gray, “The cruellest thing about Trump v Zelenskyy? Trump is right”, *The Spectator*, 20 February 2025

[4] Marco Rubio interview with Mark Kilmeade, *Fox News*, 26 February 2025. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-with-brian-kilmeade-of-fox-news/>

[5] Press Statement, US State Department, 31 January 2025. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-rubios-travel-to-panama-el-salvador-costa-rica-guatemala-and-the-dominican-republic/>

[6] Donald J Trump, State of the Union Address, 4 March 2025

[7] Marco Rubio interview with Mark Kilmeade, *Fox News*, 26 February 2025

[8] The ‘PayPal Mafia’ is a term describing those who founded PayPal and who, with associates, went on to found additional tech companies in Silicon Valley such as Tesla, OpenAI, SpaceX, LinkedIn, YouTube, Reddit, Yelp and Palantir. The term was coined and then publicised by *Fortune* magazine in 2007

[9] Donald J Trump, *Truth Social*, President-elect Trump’s announcement of nomination of Ken Howery as Ambassador to Denmark, 22 December 2024

President Trump singing executive orders

PHOTO BY THE WHITE HOUSE

WHITHER TRUMP?

by Paul Sutton

In February, the veteran political journalist and BBC correspondent, James Naughtie, spoke to an Edinburgh audience about his many years of living in and reporting from the United States and commented on what Donald Trump was now doing as President the second time around. This time, Naughtie thought, Trump was initiating change that would be as momentous as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the attacks on the US of 11th September 2001. No one, anywhere, would remain unaffected and as change gathered pace the future under Trump would be a 'roller coaster' of spiralling global instability as well as a decisive departure from the patterns of US engagement at home and abroad since the end of the Second World War.

Trump's Blitz

The evidence of Trump in action from the moment he took office this time would certainly appear to confirm such an understanding. The blitz of executive orders, issued by him from Day One covered every-

thing from the vindictively trivial to the profoundly important. Among them were the imposition of trade sanctions on US imports, sealing of US borders and withdrawal from international agreements and international agencies, promotion of US territorial imperialism through ownership of Gaza and Greenland and control of Canada and Panama. Sections of the federal US government were closed such as the US Agency for International Development and the close monitoring and oversight of others was introduced through the so-called Department of Government Efficiency. There was the end of federal programmes promoting equality, diversity and inclusion and the Green New Deal as well as getting rid of the automatic right of citizenship to those born in the US. Around 1600 of those convicted of abetting and storming the US Capitol in January 2021, were pardoned and released from prison. The Gulf of Mexico was renamed the Gulf of America and much, much more.

In themselves many of these were idiosyncratic, disconnected, and contradictory actions with no

coherent overall discernible pattern to them other than they could be done and were being done to undo much of what had been done before. They were demonstrations of Trump the iconoclast.

Support for Trump

But what was to follow? No one seemed to know and perhaps Trump himself did not know. Perhaps he was caught in a blizzard of his own construction. He was undoubtedly behaving differently from his first presidency which had been slow to start and inconclusive in delivering change. This time around he was seeking to avoid this by priming his administration from the beginning with hand-picked officials who would do his bidding without question. They included those with experience of running corporations as well as those without, including in his cabinet no less than four US\$ billionaires as well as the world's richest man Elon Musk as a close advisor.

What these had in common, other than personal loyalty to Trump and/or a commitment to a more

self-serving capitalism, is difficult to detect. But it is perhaps the beginning of an examination as to what he can be expected to do, at least initially.

At the end of his first administration Trump was criticised and condemned by many of those who had served under him but also praised and supported by others who remained committed to his programmes even though they faced terms of imprisonment, such as Steve Bannon. He and others turned to the internet and the airwaves, drumming up support for Trump in social media, podcasts, interviews and sponsorship by right-wing broadcasting organisations. Others, with a more militant outlook and easy access to weapons such as the Proud Boys formed more defiant and belligerent groups, attacking those opposed to Trump.

Trump also retained the support of wide swathes of the US public including sections of the white working class, religious evangelicals of various persuasions, anti-elitist populists, and staunch conservatives and free marketers who traditionally supported the Republican Party. His capture of that party in his first administration and then the four years prior to the 2024 US election was complete. By the end of his first administration 47% of Republicans elected to office in Congress at the beginning had gone for various reasons, the highest rate of attrition in any administration back to the early 1960s. [1] They were replaced mostly by those more conservative in outlook and action, while others, such as the current Vice President JD Vance, changed their minds from opposition to Trump to largely uncritical support. The number of elected Republicans in Congress now willing to oppose him is a tiny minority.

Think Tanks

Outside of Congress numerous think tanks have either been formed or

become committed to a more right-wing agenda to propose policy. Among them two in particular stand out in their promotion of Trump: The Heritage Foundation and the America First Policy Institute.

The former rose to prominence during the Reagan administration where in his own words it was a “vital force”. Many of its domestic and foreign policy proposals were implemented and it remained important throughout the successor George H W Bush administration and then that of his son, George W. Bush. It supported Trump during his first administration, recommending and placing senior staff and by January 2018 claimed that Trump had embraced 64% of the 334 policies it had initially projected for him. [2] It has again sought to directly influence policy in his second through staffing and most importantly through the promotion of Project 2025.

This was a political initiative launched in 2023 to ensure Trump was fully engaged in right-wing policy actions from his first day in office. At its core is a 900 plus page agenda with, “four main policy aims: restore the family as the centrepiece of American life; dismantle the administrative state; defend the nation’s sovereignty and borders; and secure God-given individual rights to live freely”. [3] Once again it has sought and placed advisors in key government positions and once again a claim has been made of its key importance: “Four days into Trump’s second term, analysis conducted by *Time* found that nearly two-thirds of his executive actions ‘mirror or partially mirror’ proposals from Project 25”. [4] Project 25 is too long to list all the possible areas of activity but its principal concerns are the economy, education and research, environment and climate, expansion of presidential powers, federal staffing, foreign affairs, healthcare and public health, immigration reforms, gender identity, journalism, law enforcement,

national security, pornography, transportation infrastructure, and women’s reproductive health, including abortion. The plan has been seen by many as the precursor to authoritarianism in the US and so vigorously opposed, but there is no escape from its centrality to Trump’s policies even if he does claim not to be implementing it.

The other think tank, the America First Policy Institute was founded in 2021 to actively promote Trump’s policies. Its website states its mission as to advance policies, “that put the American people first. Our guiding principles are liberty, free enterprise, national greatness, American military superiority, foreign-policy engagement in the American interest, and the primacy of American workers, families and communities in all we do”. [5] These concerns match Trump’s political rhetoric, especially ‘Make America Great Again’, and its proposals echo those of the Heritage Foundation, with an even greater political assertiveness. *The New York Times* claims it will be more influential than Project 2025 and its leading personnel are close to Trump and include its billionaire Chair, Linda McMahon, proposed as the new cabinet Education Secretary.

Opposition

It is clear that Trump is better prepared now than he was in 2017 and will face far fewer restraints in government than he did in his first administration. That does not mean he will not face limitations on his power, whether those are imposed by Congress which now supports him but may not do so after the mid-term elections in November 2026 if the usual pattern is followed and the House of Representatives is won by the political party opposing the president’s party. Similarly, while the Supreme Court is now stacked in his favour it may declare some of his policies unconstitutional. Some of his recent executive decisions are already facing court action.



It is also the case that the US remains politically divided. While Trump won the popular vote with 49.9% compared to 48.3% for the Democrats, the winning margin in many of the constituencies was small. It is a mandate to govern but for many it is not the mandate for sweeping change that Trump says he is set upon. At the moment the Democratic Party is divided among itself and following its defeat it needs to rethink its electoral base and its policies. When it reforms and re-engages it will mount a significant challenge as it has the networks, resources and people to do so. They, plus the Democrats in Congress and the many think tanks and media channels sympathetic to the Democrats, can match and beat him.

Trump will also face opposition abroad. He has already set his administration against China and Cuba but as his actions in meeting Kim Jong Un in North Korea in 2019 and his direct engagement with Vladimir Putin to restore relations and dialogue, including ending the conflict in Ukraine show, he remains flexible and not wedded to concepts such as an alleged 'axis of evil' against the US. That said, his publicly uncritical support for Israel has a long pedigree and his recent proposal to expel the Palestinians from Gaza and turn it into prime American 'real estate' have been widely condemned, not least by generally supportive Arab states. He cannot take support or approval for his foreign policy for granted, except from the UK which remains committed to the 'special relationship' and which all Labour governments, including the present one, have never questioned.

What does Trump represent?

In conclusion, whither Trump? Is he a re-invented Hitler and Mussolini dedicated to fascism, a renewed Ronald Reagan or just something new and dangerously unpredictable as Naughtie suggested? There is evidence to support these views but it is better to take a long one and to put Trump into context. To do so is to turn to Marx and his celebrated *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* [6] which discusses the relationship of politics to personality and opportunity, among much else.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was the nephew of Napoleon. He was elected president of France in 1848, staged a coup in 1851 to stay in power, ruling as emperor from 1852 until deposed in 1870. Marx wrote his 'little book' in 1851/52. It contains several much-quoted passages one of which has direct bearing on Trump: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." This reminds us that Trump comes to power with considerable baggage which he must accommodate in some way.

On the other hand, the 'Bonapartist state' that Marx was analysing came to power, he argues, in "exceptional circumstances" in which all classes were temporarily rendered powerless allowing the state a relative freedom of action to impose condi-

tions, in this case in favour of Louis Napoleon. It is difficult to conclude that classes were rendered powerless in the US in 2024, but such a situation has been used in the past to explain the circumstances in which Hitler and Mussolini came to power and in which the ruling class pays a "political price" for remaining on top by "submitting to a dictatorship over which they had no genuine control", especially over foreign policy. [7] Ralph Miliband continues: "This is not a situation in which an economically and socially dominant class, however secure it feels about the ultimate intentions of its rulers, can contemplate without grave qualms, since it introduces into the process of decision-making, to which its members have been used to making a major contribution, an extremely high level of unpredictability".

This is where we are with Trump today - but it is not where we may be next year and beyond. Marx noted that "state power is not suspended in mid-air" and that ultimately Bonaparte's mission was to "safeguard 'bourgeois order'". [8] The political 'roller coaster' Naughtie anticipates will come to a stop but contrary to his expectations nothing much, and nothing of economic and social substance, will have been changed by Trump's turbulent politics in the US, leaving progressives and the working class still with everything to do.

[1] The GOP is Trump's party now, *ABC News*, February 10, 2025, website

[2] The Heritage Foundation, *Wikipedia* website

[3] Project 2025: The right-wing wish list for Trump's second term, *BBC News US and Canada*, February 12, 2025, website

[4] Project 2025, *Wikipedia* website

[5] Mission, *AFPI Institute*, website*

[6] In Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart: London 1968)

[7] Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Societies*, (Quartet Books: London, 1973) p.85

[8] Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE CHINA'S CHALLENGE

by Helen Christopher

The launch of the DeepSeek R1 Artificial Intelligence (AI) system in January this year exposed some important problems both of neo-liberal capitalism and of the failure of US attempts to strangle the Chinese tech industry via sanctions. It also offers an explanation as to why the tech giants have jumped into bed with Trump having previously been hugger mugger with the Democrats. Trump has indicated support for developing AI, crypto currencies and hi-tech weaponry notably his proposed “Iron Dome” missile “defence” system for the US. These advanced technologies are of strategic importance to the US and are more of a focus for Trump than reviving the traditional industries where his voters might have hoped for jobs. For example, despite being a massive economy and one dependent on trade and military might, America now builds only 0.1% of the world’s ships. (China builds over 50%, up from 5% in the late 90s.)

US monopoly threatened

Trump’s hostility to China is well known, and the tech oligarchs want to preserve their lead over it, but they also have business interests there too and will want to influence the direction of travel by being close to Trump. That is, it is all about preserving their monopolistic control of the global market in hi-tech systems, which they dominate. But this lead is increasingly being undermined by China.

United States companies have led the way in key strategic technologies such as chips and computing systems, including AI. It seemed that few could compete with them so there was shock when it was revealed that DeepSeek had created an AI application rivalling and bettering existing market leaders such as OpenAI and its ChatGPT. By using a different, more efficient, approach to running systems it has been able to use less computing power and energy and use less advanced chips

to obtain these results. One of the notable aspects of this achievement is that it did not try to copy the existing AI models but took an innovative approach.

This runs counter to the US tech industry drive to continuously increase the complexity and cost of the chips it builds and uses which ensures a monopoly for manufacturers as they are increasingly difficult to replicate and has fuelled the rocketing share price of companies like Nvidia. So not just the technology, but the monopolistic business model of US firms is threatened. If a system can be run on less advanced chips, using innovative processes, then there is the opportunity for others to catch up.

DeepSeek’s approach threatens the tech companies’ monopoly in other ways as well. It has made data about how the model is constructed and trained open-source, giving comprehensive technical details enabling others to use it freely.

The shock which has greeted Chinese advances in AI and chip manufacture is an expression of the disbelief that US tech prowess and bullying of other countries can be successfully challenged. Though in theory neo-liberalism espouses free markets, we know that capitalist freedom is entirely freedom for those who own and control resources, those who do not are at the mercy of those who do.

OpenAI (contrary to what its name might suggest) keeps this information a closely guarded secret. DeepSeek also offers its products at much cheaper prices than competitors. The speed at which DeepSeek was adopted demonstrated its value to users, with over 10 million downloads in the first weeks after its launch. It is also being used within companies.

The threat to the US and its tech industry is twofold. It comes from the technical challenge of DeepSeek's model and its cost-effectiveness, which is linked to the second and in some ways more profound challenge which is that by making the technology cheaply available and open-source Chinese companies and China gain markets and influence globally. Both these arenas are central to the United States continuing mission to maintain its world hegemony. It's hegemonic strategy, however, has increasingly been predicated on forcing others to adopt its technology, just as coercion is increasing the only tool in its armoury to maintain its unipolar domination. Its mission is not to win allies but only compliance.

China defies sanctions

China, as the US principal rival, has also been the main target for such coercion. The imposition of export bans and sanctions against China, initiated by Trump in his

first Presidency, continued by Biden and carrying on in Trump's second term, were aimed at preventing hi tech breakthroughs, yet as has been widely remarked on, including by Western commentators, sanctions and tariffs have had precisely the reverse effect. Although it should be acknowledged that DeepSeek has used US tech, including data and Nvidia chips, stockpiled before US bans on their export to China came into effect.

Having said that China's chip industry is making progress. At first the sanctions regime looked as though it was having an impact. By 2020 a shortage of chips threatened the future of Huawei, a critically important Chinese tech company. However Huawei did not collapse but sought to solve the problems it faced and, along with a Chinese chip maker Semiconductor Manufacturing International Company, developed its own advanced chip. It was launched in Huawei's Mate 60 series of smartphones in August 2023 and the two companies are continuing to work on creating new, more advanced chips, including graphics chips which will begin to challenge Nvidia's. As with DeepSeek, Huawei's success was greeted with exclamations of "surprise" in the West.

The shock which has greeted Chinese advances in AI and chip manufacture is an expression of

the disbelief that US tech prowess and bullying of other countries can be successfully challenged. Though in theory neo-liberalism espouses free markets, we know that capitalist freedom is entirely freedom for those who own and control resources, those who do not are at the mercy of those who do. The other neo-liberal fiction is that US tech companies' success is due to free market competition, when they have, since their inception, had a symbiotic relationship with the US government especially in military research and spending. This includes businesses belonging to the man currently in charge of slashing government spending – Elon Musk. Over the past decade SpaceX and Tesla received at least \$18 billion in federal contracts, steadily rising from \$0.6bn in 2015, to \$3.6bn last year. It has also been pointed out that without critical support from the US government, Musk's firms could not have succeeded. We should not expect Musk's DOGE chainsaw to cut into these tax-payer funded subsidies to his, and other's, business interests. This is government by the oligarchs for the oligarchs.

The myth of free markets is also exposed by the way in which the hi-tech market is run by a cartel of monopolies which as well as forcing others to buy their products at enormous cost, has now been demonstrated to stifle innovation. This applies in other areas of industry. The US arms industry is now dominated by only five companies, accounting for 86% of government spending and are notorious for late delivery and overspend on projects, with innovative development hampered by the procurement process. At the end of the Cold War there were by contrast 51 top contractors.

The primary focus of US big tech is to extract as much profit as possible through having a monopolistic control of the technology. This drives those companies to double down on the technological models that they

have created – albeit innovations at the time - with little incentive to explore cheaper, more efficient options like DeepSeek’s. This has remained the case even where there have been emerging problems questioning the longer term viability of the AI models that they have created. There are issues about getting enough high quality data to train the systems and problems of them reinforcing incorrect information and biases, there are physical problems in reducing the size of chips any further and problems with the vast amounts of energy it takes to run the systems and power data centres. Financial commentators have expressed concern that there is an AI bubble developing where the promise of the technology will not live up to the hype nor justify the amount of capital being poured into it. Indeed DeepSeek’s launch led to plunging share prices for US tech giants, especially Nvidia whose share price fell by 18%.

State intervention

DeepSeek, like Huawei, is a private company, but in China the state is

much more interventionist in the economy, in ways that are strategic rather than simply subsidising key industries. The Chinese government formulates five year plans for economic development and steers priorities for the private sector to meet the needs of the country. It also provides financial support to achieve this which is viewed in the West as somehow unfair, despite the cash thrown at Musk et al.

Successive plans in recent years have emphasised the need to shift from low value industries to hi-tech development. Made in China 2025 (MIC 2025), is more ambitious and is a ten-year plan launched by the Chinese government in 2015, coming to fruition, therefore, this year. Made in China’s principal goal was to move from having predominantly low-tech assembly industries servicing foreign companies, to produce more domestically and develop key technologies and industries. It is estimated that the Chinese government has invested over \$1.4 trillion dollars to support MIC 2025. The plan has been hugely successful as the Economist of 18/1/25 acknowl-

edged. Referring to the benchmarks set out it said, “China appears to have exceeded most of these.” It aimed to develop 13 key sectors and has had major successes. To give a few examples, there was a target for Chinese companies to sell 3 million electric vehicles (EVs) by 2025 – last year it sold 10 million and BYD, China’s biggest EV maker, now out sells Tesla in battery only cars. China’s biggest drone maker, DJI, has a 90% share in the market for consumer drones. In 2015, when MIC 2025 was announced China produced 65% of the world’s solar panels – now it is 90% and it produces 70% of batteries – it was 47%.

As DeepSeek’s success shows China is continuing to make progress challenging US leadership in the tech industry. It is no wonder in this context that the tech oligarchs are cosying up the President Trump to attempt to ensure political and economic support for their ambitions to retain dominance in the field.

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PALESTINE SOLIDARITY UNITED, DEFIANT, FOCUSED

by Leila Ryan

Following the International Court of Justice's finding that Israel's collective punishment of Gaza amounts to plausible genocide, the International Criminal Court, last November, issued unprecedented arrest warrants for Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and defence minister Yoav Gallant. Neither has yet been detained and they are clearly expecting friends in high places will shield them from justice.

Complicity with Israel

The genocidal onslaught lasted from 8 October 2023 to 19 January 2025, the day before their most powerful friend, President Trump, was inaugurated in Washington. The subsequent ceasefire could have been agreed as early as May 2024 had Netanyahu and his Western backers not preferred ongoing genocide instead.

At the time of writing (4 March 2025), Israel and its US sponsor seem to be bringing the ceasefire to an abrupt end, opening the way to the completion of the genocide either by resuming direct military assaults or doubling down on the other war crimes of starving Gazans into submission and forcing them off their land. [1]

Israel's genocidal actions from October 2023 to early 2025 were so dependent on Western military, diplomatic and propaganda cover that the US, Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands (and possibly other countries) amply deserve prosecution alongside Israel itself, even if some alternative strategy – or renewed global outrage – halted the genocide altogether.



PHOTO BY SETE RUIZ

There should also be room in the dock for Poland, which has NATO's biggest army in Europe. On 27 January 2025 (Holocaust Remembrance Day), in a serious case of obstructing the course of justice, the Polish government gave Netanyahu immunity from arrest so he could attend the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. By inviting Netanyahu, the butcher of Gaza, the Polish government insulted the memory of the nearly 47,000 Palestinians killed up to that time in the Gaza genocide. As if that were not insulting enough, it also failed to invite any Russian representative to the anniversary event, thereby also insulting the memory of the 600,000 Soviet Red Army troops who gave their lives freeing Poland from Nazi invaders and liberating Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945.

Accountability for genocide

The Gaza genocide was the most intense and large-scale slaughter and displacement of Palestinians since the original Nakba ("catastrophe") or ethnic cleansing, on which Israel was founded as a set-

tlar colony back in 1948. The global and almost 24/7 coverage of what Israel did to Gaza in 2023-2025 makes it the first genocide to be live streamed on social media. It cannot now be wiped from the collective memory of mankind.

Those responsible for any state's complicity with genocidal Israel are now being targeted in campaigns by their fellow citizens and others. Beyond and within nation-states, transnational corporations and public bodies will be coming under closer scrutiny than ever for evidence of complicity with apartheid at best and genocide and other war crimes at worst.

The ICC's evidence against prominent perpetrators Netanyahu and Gallant is already in the public domain but others are also being pursued. Campaigners in Belgium are seeking posthumous justice for six-year-old schoolgirl Hind Rajab, who witnessed the deaths of five of her family before her own last moments were recorded in a phone call for help to a medical aid worker. The family had been fleeing south by car from Gaza City on 29 January 2024. They were slaughtered by

potentially identifiable members of Israeli ground forces. [2] Other activists in Brazil and Sweden, for example, are pursuing further cases in which recorded evidence shows Israeli soldiers breaking international or humanitarian law.

Although Israel gives its citizens in the IDF impunity from prosecution, the activists hope that where an accused soldier has dual nationality, a non-Israeli jurisdiction may permit a formal trial. If that happens, at least some of the truth about its conduct, which Israel's prohibition on media access to Gaza during the genocide was meant to restrict, will at last be made public.

Even before his inauguration, President Trump had begun defunding UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. He also explicitly proposed the ethnic cleansing of Gaza – a war crime – which he declared the US would then take over. Simultaneously, his administration is encouraging the intensified repression and further illegal settlement expansion already underway in the West Bank.

A people united still undefeated

The terror already unleashed on Gaza has failed in its declared objective of destroying the resistance. Neither has it broken the spirit of Gazans or Palestinians as a whole.

The sheer scale and intensity of what Palestine has endured so far and its uncertain future can have a numbing effect on those contemplating it (or averting their eyes from TV coverage of the carnage or its after effects). Yet millions who in their own lifetimes knew neither the horrors of South African apartheid nor the satisfaction of helping defeat it now know enough about Israeli apartheid to be ready, in growing numbers, to help dismantle it. The only antidote to despair is to get involved. The rest of this article

will therefore consider some of the plans recently announced by the main body organising solidarity with Palestinians.

Palestine Solidarity Campaign

After a year of unprecedented growth in activity and membership, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) [3] held its packed annual general meeting in London on 1 February 2025. The AGM featured lively debate but impressive self-discipline and unity of purpose. One issue likely to resurface, as the UN and other international bodies, and civil society solidarity, all have a role in ending Israeli apartheid, is how these forums of action can best work together. The recognition of Palestine as a state (whatever the ultimate form of that state, to be determined by the Palestinians themselves) currently divides PSC members even though most countries officially recognise it (shown in green on the map – over page). [4]

Trade Union links

Building on past successes in winning commitment to Palestine from union executives and conferences, above all at last year's TUC, a programme of activities is planned to encourage further support throughout union structures and in workplaces as well. Workers experiencing falling living standards will become increasingly aware that potential restrictions on the right to protest about Israel can also be used against those taking industrial action.

Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions

At the heart of PSC's campaigning work for 2025 is a strategic expansion and intensification of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaigns against Israel and its accomplices – the flexible, coherent, realistic, manageable and monitored approach launched by the Palestinian-led BDS national committee back in 2005, and which has proved itself ever since with a growing list of successes, each building on those that came before.

It was especially appropriate, therefore, that guest speaker Omar Barghouti, perhaps the best-known founder of the BDS movement and its most eminent champion, reminded those present how BDS is geared to the overall Palestinian demands for freedom, equality and justice, and is an opportunity to popularise the cause of Palestinian self-determination. [5]

The AGM heard of a new decision to add Coca-Cola to PSC's existing portfolio of apartheid-complicit targets; the company's welcome vulnerability on this issue is suggested by how its sales have plummeted in the Middle East since the start of the genocide. It would once have been unthinkable to take on a well-resourced behemoth like Coca-Cola, so this is a sign of how things are changing. (Since there was no Coca-Cola nor even Pepsi available at the AGM's buffet lunch, delegates happily drank Pal-

Another echo from the past is the successful boycott of South African apartheid produce. The PSC executive and delegates enthusiastically endorsed the idea of a simple leaflet aimed at supermarket shoppers that will list the most common Israeli products to avoid buying and suggest more ethical alternatives.

estinian owned Gaza Cola, or Cola Gaza, instead). [6]

Barclays' Bad Habit

Pressure will also be increased on savers and investors to withdraw their accounts from Barclays Bank, which helps finance the arms trade with Israel in violation of international law.

The bank was once a major corporate prop of white minority rule in South Africa and only later admitted how the anti-apartheid movement's successful campaign for students to close their accounts had rattled its London board. The thinking behind the boycott was that, at least in those days, students going to college opened bank accounts and tended to stick to the same provider after graduating and perhaps for the rest of their lives. There was therefore sharp competition between rival banks to get students to sign up with them. No wonder Barclays were dismayed to find existing student customers, disgusted by the bank's complicity with South African apartheid, closing their accounts and switching to a non-complicit competitor. Perhaps a new push on behalf of Palestine will help Barclays finally kick its bad habit of underwriting apartheid regimes.

"Every Little Helps" (Thank you, Tesco)

Another echo from the past is the successful boycott of South African apartheid produce. The PSC executive and delegates enthusiastically endorsed the idea of a simple leaflet aimed at supermarket shoppers that will list the most common Israeli products to avoid buying and suggest more ethical alternatives. This harks back to the still-widely remembered boycott of Outspan oranges, which encouraged a convenient and eventually habitual token of support for the victims of apartheid while doing little more than the weekly shop. This campaign was never likely nor intended



to undermine apartheid all on its own, nor did shoppers expect it to; but who knows what its cumulative effect may have been?

Yet many people expressed themselves in this modest way, signalling (even if only to themselves) whose side they were on - a private gesture for which you don't even need to be an activist. Those arguing for something similar now guess that Israel's reputation among the general public has fallen so far that such an idea might well catch on again. We shall see. It's not clear if Jaffa oranges will make it onto such a list, but if they do, shoppers might be reminded that boycotting Outspan helped bury one kind of apartheid and doing the same to Jaffa could help bury another.

Next steps

In mid-January 2025, some commentators, including London Mayor Sadiq Khan, naively declared that the imminent ceasefire in Gaza meant demonstrations for Palestine should end. If the Mayor thought a ceasefire, especially one as curtailed as Israel now seems to think it can get away with, was all that Palestinians could hope for, or would clear marchers from London's streets, he was predictably mistaken. Moreover, the failure of attempts over the following few days to demonise or criminalise pro-Palestinian demonstrations, especially one in London on 18 January 2025 opposing the BBC's bias against Palestinians, has strengthened the resolve of the solidarity movement to continue its

actions unintimidated by genocide apologists.

At its AGM, PSC Director Ben Jamal gave a defiant answer to Sadiq Khan and his fellow critics: the solidarity movement will never be silent until every Palestinian, wherever they are, has the right to return to a free Palestine.

All online references given below were accessed on 4 March 2025.

[1] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/2/israel-renege-on-ceasefire-deal-warns-amas-of-consequences> Without exception Western mainstream media have blamed Hamas for ending the ceasefire and have barely reported recent Israeli attacks on Damascus

[2] <https://youtu.be/LiWVgnCp8Z0?si=Xob66rrEA2bSC6lv>

[3] The Palestine Solidarity Campaign is not the only pro-Palestine campaigning body in England and Wales but, with about 100 branches, it is the broadest-based and most experienced. Scotland and Ireland have their independent equivalents. For more information about its work, including campaigns etc. not mentioned in this article, see: <https://palestinecampaign.org/>

[4] More detailed information on this issue are available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_recognition_of_Palestine#:~:text=Among%20the%20G20%2C%20nine%20countries,the%20United%20Kingdom%2C%20and%20the

[5] <https://youtu.be/O5RkUQ6ZgCc?si=8zDjX3kbOAEWNE2>

[6] www.colagaza.com. According to its website, this product is 100% Palestinian owned and (as if not being Coca-Cola were not enough) all profits go to rebuilding hospitals in Gaza

SYRIA

and the implications of the Fall of Assad

In this two-part article **Simon Korner** considers the background to the overthrow of President Assad in Syria, why it happened and the implications for Syria and the wider region.

PART 1 Background to regime change and Syrian resistance

From 2011-2024, Syria – supported by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – withstood a sustained regime-change war orchestrated by the CIA that killed over 600,000 people and displaced half the country's population of 23 million. The world's most warlike powers sought to bring down by force the last secular Arab nationalist state, which was a stone in the shoe of the USA and its enforcer Israel, denying them complete geo-political control over the region with its oil and vital trade routes.

Since its inception as a state in 1946, Syria promoted pan-Arab unity. It fought against Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973, hosted Palestinian training camps and Palestinian resistance group headquarters since the 1960s, and supported Hezbollah from its foundation in Lebanon in 1982. As a key element in Iran's Axis of Resistance, Assad's Syria provided a vital land bridge through which Iran could send arms to Hezbollah. In 2011, the then Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak declared: "The toppling of Assad will be a major blow to the radical axis, a major blow to Iran... it will weaken dramatically both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza." [1]



Former President of Syria Bashar al-Assad

Lead up to regime-change

Syria became a target of western interference early in the Cold War, when the US, attempting to break Syria's growing ties with the USSR and weaken the powerful Syrian Communists, staged the first of several coups in 1949. This was only three years after Syria had gained independence from French control. [2]

The secular Arab nationalist cause was aided by the rise of the Ba'ath party to power in Syria in 1963. However consecutive military defeats at the hands of Israel, leading to the Camp David normalisation between Egypt and Israel in 1979, reversed the progress. The defeat of Soviet socialism two

decades later set it back further. Following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Bashar al-Assad gave short-lived co-operation to the US War on Terror, including 'extraordinary rendition', and was awarded the French Legion of Honour that year, which he later returned. Western semi-acceptance didn't, however, prevent Syria from remaining targeted for US regime change – one of seven countries, as General Wesley Clark revealed in 2007: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran. [3]

In 2011, the CIA took advantage of the Arab Spring and discontent over Syria's partial economic liberalisation to fan the flames of protests into full-blown war. Its secret Jordan-based Operation Timber Sycamore was a major training programme for Syrian insurgents, including Al Qaeda, as Jake Sullivan admitted in an email in 2012 to Hillary Clinton, clarifying that: "AQ [Al Qaeda] is on our side in Syria". Timber Sycamore was "one of the costliest covert action programs" in the CIA's history at over \$1 billion. [4] It bore fruit finally in the fall of Assad on 8 December, 2024.

Throughout these years, Britain's MI6 played a key role alongside the CIA, using its base in Cyprus to pass intelligence to the CIA-backed rebels, branded as the Free Syrian Army. SAS troops based in Jordan were also entering Syria on missions, according to *Declassified*. [5] At the same time, the MoD under Lt.

PHOTO BY FABIO RODRIGUES POZZEBOM

Colonel Kevin Stratford-Wright was running the largest British StratCom (Strategic Command) operation since the Cold War, an operation which included the establishment of the White Helmets led by James Le Mesurier, an alleged MI6 asset. These purportedly humanitarian rescue workers, much lauded in the western press, were in fact jihadi fighters central to spinning the false-flag chemical weapons narrative that formed a pretext for increased western interference.

The fighting: 2011-2015

According to a US Defense Intelligence Agency document leaked in 2012, the US regime-change plan had early on envisaged dividing Syria up along sectarian lines to include a Kurdish statelet in the north-east and a Salafist principality on the Iraqi border. The first stage of this balkanisation process took place in 2011 when Turkey took control of the northern province of Idlib along the border, using several jihadi militias as proxy forces. One of these groups, Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), which had links to Al Qaeda, eventually defeated its rival militias and took over the province, ruling it brutally.

Meanwhile, in 2014, the US had sent troops from its Iraqi bases into north-eastern Syria, ostensibly to target ISIS. This gave it control over a huge triangle of territory, which contains the two main pillars of the Syrian economy, agriculture and oil. The 1,000 US troops (recently the number has been revised up to 2,000) relied on Kurdish PKK and YPG fighters in what came to be called the Syrian Defence Force (SDF) as their combat soldiers. This effective occupation gave the US enormous leverage over Syria, and continues today. In addition, the US occupied an enclave on the southern desert border with Jordan and Iraq around a large US military base at Al Tanf where ISIS fighters and families were given protection.



US boots on the ground in Syria

PHOTO BY JENSEN GULLORY

It is worth remembering also that since 1973 Israel had occupied the strategically important Golan Heights in Syria's south-west. All in all, Syrian territorial integrity was severely impaired.

Syria fought alone against the western-proxy jihadis before requesting infantry reinforcements from Iranian-backed militias and Hezbollah and, crucially, Russian airpower, which began bombing the insurgents in 2015. With the aid of its allies, Syria managed to prevent the country's total dissolution and a fragile ceasefire was agreed in February 2016, though fierce fighting continued in Aleppo until government forces liberated the city at the end of that year.

Precarious peace

When the main fighting subsided, President Assad controlled scarcely two-thirds of Syria, though that was up from only a fifth at the lowest ebb of the government's fortunes in 2015. He presided over a war-ravaged country that needed an estimated \$400 billion to rebuild its economy. The ensuing US economic siege tightened the noose, reducing the Syrian economy by 85%, from a GDP of \$60 billion in 2011 to \$10 billion in 2024, pushing 70% of the population below the

poverty line. Post-conflict reconstruction was deliberately prevented. Dana Stroul, the top Pentagon official for the Middle East said in 2019 that the US should "hold the line on preventing reconstruction aid and technical expertise from going back into Syria." [6]

Before the war, Syrians had enjoyed "one of the best-developed health systems in the Arab world" according to a 2015 World Health Organization report, providing universal free healthcare. Education was likewise free, with an estimated 97% of primary school-aged Syrian children attending school and literacy rates of over 90% for both men and women. Syria was also self-sufficient in food. Daily caloric intake "was on a par with many Western countries," with prices kept low via state subsidy. [7] Subsidised electricity reached most Syrian villages by 1990. War and US sanctions destroyed all these achievements. [8]

In the face of this campaign of immiseration and division, most Syrians nevertheless understood that Assad and the Syrian Arab Army represented the only hope of preserving a unified pluralistic state in which minorities were protected. Syria has long been home to many different religious and ethnic

groups, including Shiites, Alawites, Christians, Druze, Kurds as well as the majority Sunnis. In 2014, Assad won a landslide election victory on a very high turnout. People wanted peace and stability above all, and supported the president and the army for these reasons, even if there was discontent over corruption and a desire for democratic constitutional reform.

As part of peace terms agreed after the liberation of Aleppo and consolidation of government rule, Assad gave the various groups of jihadi terrorists in southern Syria a choice of integrating into the Syrian army or being bussed to the Turkish-controlled northern Syrian province of Idlib near the border, designated a 'safe zone'. The concentration of terrorists in this province by 2018 solved an immediate problem of what to do with demobilised rebels, but stored another one up in the future, representing the limit of what could be achieved at the time. It was from Idlib that Hayat Tahrir al Sham would launch its successful military coup against the Syrian government.

The intervening years of neither war nor peace allowed the jihadis under Turkish auspices to be reorganised and reinforced by thousands of foreign jihadi fighters, including Uyghurs from Xinjiang. Some 30% of HTS fighters are non-Syrians, according to Jolani, the leader of the group which emerged out of the Al-Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, to lead the jihadi forces.

During the same period, Syria was unable to rebuild its strength. The devastation caused by the war, the massive refugee drain and the crippling American 'Caesar' sanctions completely disabled its economy. Its major commercial and industrial cities Aleppo and Homs were in ruins and its foreign currency earnings from oil exports were appropriated by America. Moreover, Israel continued its campaign

of softening up Syria through sustained targeted bombing of military and civilian targets.

The stalemate meant that the country remained fragmented and could not recover. It was thus a severely weakened Syria that succumbed to the lightning assault by jihadi forces lavishly funded by Qatar, directed by Turkey and aided by high performance drones operated by Ukrainian advisers. It finally fell in December last year.

The speed of the fall

The war and US sanctions had fatally weakened the Syrian military, which by 2020 only had 130,000 soldiers remaining, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies thinktank Military Balance, citing desertions and other "wastage". Though some brigades remained strong and intact, parts of the army had been irregularly structured into weaker militia-style organisations. Bribery was reportedly a problem, understandable given the severe economic hardships suffered by the largely conscript troops: Syrian officers earned \$40 a month, compared to HTS fighters earning up to \$2000 a month. [9] Several poorly paid generals may also have been turned, as diplomatic contact with between Syria and the Gulf states increased. Some generals gave orders, apparently without government approval, to abandon Homs without a fight - the last city before Damascus.

As for Russia, criticised by several observers for not saving Syria a second time, it had no choice but to avoid being dragged into a chaotic quagmire, according to US realist John Mearsheimer. Russia avoided the trap laid out in the US Rand Corporation's 2019 strategy document *Extending Russia, Competing from Advantageous Ground*, which advocated sparking wars in Syria, the Caucasus and Belarus to deliberately over-extend Russia's military. [10])

Though Putin put on a brave face in an interview after Assad's fall, Russia could not afford a second front against Turkey and Israel – effectively US surrogates – and had avoided such a war for the past 10 years through careful diplomacy. While its regional standing may have been damaged, and the future of its two Syrian bases rendered uncertain, Russia made an orderly retreat to avoid fighting a second, potentially existential, conflict. And it shouldn't be forgotten that Russia made real sacrifices to support Syrian unity. Its humanitarian teams suffered attacks in Aleppo in 2016, for example and it bombed ISIS positions in the US-created exclusion zone around the illegal base at Al Tanf. [11]

Iran likewise lacked the capacity to send new troops to defend Damascus a second time. It too had sacrificed much for Syria, having spent \$30–50 billion and lost many of its Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) during the war, for instance at the battle of Khan Touman in 2016 as well as two senior IRGC commanders killed by Israeli airstrikes in 2024. [12] This, on top of the damage done to Hezbollah's leadership in Lebanon, had substantially diminished Iran's capability. Moreover, many of Iran's commanders in Syria had had to return to Iran following Israel's airstrikes in 2024. The US assassination of General Suleimani in January 2020 had clearly been a very heavy blow to the unified resistance in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq. Hezbollah similarly had had to move most of its fighters in Syria back to south Lebanon to fight off Israel's invasion.

While Iranian *Fars News Agency* claimed Assad had refused advice to make concessions to Turkey and ignored warnings from Ayatollah Khamenei of an impending HTS blitzkrieg, these claims have not been substantiated. Assad's newly re-established ties with the Gulf states may have weakened close

co-operation with Iran, but his position was an impossible one. The overall balance of forces by December 2024 clearly favoured the pro-imperialists, who seized their chance the moment a weakened Hezbollah agreed a ceasefire with Israel.

Thus, Netanyahu was partly right in describing Assad's fall as "a direct result of the blows we have inflicted on Iran and Hezbollah, Assad's main supporters", including "perhaps a thousand airstrikes" in Syria before October 7th.

But his description ignored the broader reasons for Assad's defeat: that the US's war, plunder and sanctions had fatally damaged Syria; that Iran was dealing with the grave threat of war from Israel; and that Russia had a dangerous major war on its own doorstep. Meaning that neither Russia nor Iran was in a position to do for Syria what they had done in 2016 – a reminder that Russia is not a superpower like the USSR, and that the world's anti-hegemonic forces cannot risk avoidable escalation with the West.

On the other side, by 2024 HTS could muster a well-trained and highly-paid army of 30,000 troops. Assad was also criticised by some for not finishing off the jihadi rebels in their Idlib redoubt before they could effectively regroup. But when the Syrian airforce did try to retake Idlib in 2020, Turkey inflicted significant casualties in response, including the destruction of huge amounts of Syria's armaments, demonstrating Turkish and American preparedness to go to war to protect their terrorist enclave.

A consistent defender of Syrian national sovereignty, Assad stayed put throughout the entire western-backed conflict and waited until the very last minute to leave Damascus, even as the airport was partially encircled by jihadi troops. He only narrowly escaped the grisly fate of Libya's Gaddafi.

PART 2 Current situation in Syria and implications for the region

The jihadi terrorist leader of HTS, Jolani, now known as al-Sharaa, declared himself President of Syria on 29 January 2025 and immediately postponed elections for four years, annulling Syria's 2012 constitution. Having dissolved parliament, the military and security agencies, and banned several patriotic parties, including the Syrian Communist Party, he is ruling as a dictator, controlled by foreign powers. The US has removed the \$10 million bounty on Jolani's head.

Many of the foreign HTS fighters, like Jolani originally members of ISIS or Al Qaeda, have been rewarded with top positions in the new Syrian army. Out of five Brigadier Generals, three are non-Syrian Al Qaeda fighters, one of whom is infamous for beheadings. Of the new Cabinet, all but Jolani have dual Turkish nationality.

Meanwhile, propagandist western media reports of thousands of underground prison cells, prisoners "gasping for air" and women being released from Sednaya prison have been debunked and retracted in the weeks following Assad's overthrow. [13]

Persecution

Under the new order, minorities who until recently co-existed as equal Syrian citizens now fear for their lives, with good reason as reports come out daily of sectarian murders, torture and mutilation. Greek Orthodox Archbishop Paul Hazigi and Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim have been abducted, their fate, shared with many other Christians, unknown. The new educational curriculum brands Christians as heretics, and eating during the

daylight hours of Ramadan, even for non-Muslims, has been prohibited. Some Christians have fled to the mountains. An ancient community of 1.5 million now stands at under 300,000.

Meanwhile, the three to four million Alawites, a minority Shiite group associated with Assad, have suffered sectarian massacres by regime forces ever since the toppling of the government in December. In early March this year, a four-day genocidal rampage of sectarian violence, reminiscent of Sabra and Shatila in 1982, left at least 1,500 Alawite civilians dead (according to western sources), with some estimates numbering the deaths in the thousands.

The Kurds, who make up 10% of Syria's population, have also come under renewed attack from Turkey's second proxy force, the anti-Kurdish Syrian National Army and 100,000 Kurds have recently fled their homes in Syria's north-east and east.

Altogether, Syria has very rapidly disintegrated into divided ethnic and religious groupings. One Syrian quoted by veteran reporter Vanessa Beeley said: "I no longer love this country that used to unite us as Syrians of all sects. Now we have all become enemies... We have begun to distinguish between people, such as this one is an Alawite, this one is a Sunni, this one is a Druze..." Now Assad's government has fallen we can see its importance in preserving Syrian unity, its authoritarian rule a defensive response to decades of imperialist encirclement.

Women are now segregated on buses and endure strict dress codes, according to *The Conversation*. [14] The body of a well-known Alawite female academic was recently found murdered with her fingers amputated. Rape and consequent sexually transmitted diseases are rife, particularly in Idlib after years of HTS rule there.

Palestinian organisations in Syria have been forced to shut down and their military formations have been disbanded. Two high-ranking members of the Al-Quds Brigade have been accused of crimes against the Syrian people and other activists have been arrested. The key supply route from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon has been cut.

Meanwhile, the new regime has wasted no time in privatizing important state assets; over a hundred of Syria's state-owned industrial concerns and ports are being sold off. Up to half of the one million public sector workers are being made redundant, and protests have begun over fears of a sectarian jobs purge. The HTS government has opened Syria up to western corporate domination; its former strict import and export controls are gone and the IMF has been welcomed in. This is an economy without monetary sovereignty. Free health care and universal education are things of the past. The end of Assad has seen an immediate 40% drop in purchasing power in an already devastated economy with 75% of the population now dependant on humanitarian aid. [15]

Israel-Turkey rivalry

Israel has been a clear beneficiary of Assad's fall, which it helped bring about through its air support for HTS's southward advance. As Damascus fell, Israel completely destroyed Syria's land, sea and air forces in a massive four-day bombing campaign. It also killed Syria's leading scientists in a series of targeted assassinations. At the same time, it rapidly sent reinforcements into the occupied Golan Heights and invaded the UN buffer zone with Syria (set up in 1974), with no objection from HTS. It occupied Mount Hermon, Syria's highest mountain, giving Israel strategic control over southern Lebanon and Syria, including Damascus, and has declared that it will stay there



European Commissioner for Preparedness, Crisis Management and Equality Hadja Lahbib with HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa

PHOTO BY EC – AUDIOVISUAL SERVICE

“indefinitely”. In addition, Israel's capture of two important dams gives it control of 40% of the vital water resources shared by Syria and Jordan. Israel has since expanded into south-western Syria and prohibited HTS troops from venturing south of Damascus. It plans to annex a large strip of territory known as David's Corridor connecting Israel directly to Iraq and the Kurdish statelet in the north-east, which it seeks to control.

However, this Greater Israel strategy faces a potential challenge from Turkey, whose neo-Ottoman ambitions have been encouraged by Assad's overthrow. Turkey's northern proxy, the Syrian National Army, has also moved quickly against the Kurdish Syrian Defence Force. This army has for a decade been providing the US occupation's boots on the ground and safeguarding stolen US oil assets, and also looks to Israel for support. The SNA's rapid territorial gains at the SDF's expense have for now thwarted the Israel-to-Iraq land grab. Moreover, Trump's purported plan to pull US troops out of Syria has left the Kurds especially vulnerable, forcing the SDF to accept a 'breakthrough' deal with the HTS government in which they agree not to secede and to dissolve their armed forces into the Syrian national military – though this remains

highly uncertain. In terms of the Israeli-Turkish rivalry, this deal agreed in early March appears to disrupt Israel's plans to use its 'protection' of the Kurds as a pretext for expanding into their territory, giving Turkey an advantage.

In addition, Turkey has not been slow to claim an economic exclusion zone off the coast of Syria, infuriating fellow NATO members Greece and Cyprus, and is also backing HTS sectarian incursions into northern Lebanon.

While Syria's military was destroyed by Israel, a replacement is now under formation by Turkey. At two new Turkish military bases in Syria, in which fifty Turkish F-16s have been deployed under a joint defence agreement, Turkey is training Syria's new armed forces. It is also placing its drones, radar and electronic warfare systems along the Syrian border with Israel.

All this sets the scene for an intensified rivalry between Israel and Turkey as they carve out their respective spheres. Already the rhetoric is heating up. Erdogan called Israel's destruction of Syria's military a “national security threat”. Turkish Nationalist Movement Party leader Bahçeli said Israeli expansion means

The potential for a united and peaceful Syria has been destroyed. Its coup government, dominated by Turkey, Israel and the US, is incapable of asserting national cohesion. Syria will be lucky to avoid the fate of Libya and Iraq

“the confrontation between Turkey and Israel will be inevitable.” Israel, for its part, countered: “The last country that can speak about occupation in Syria is Turkey...” Not that this means imminent conflict. The two regional players have co-operated throughout the regime-change war, and Turkey continues to supply Israel with energy – notwithstanding Erdogan’s anti-Israel rhetoric, which is designed for domestic consumption. But the contradictions between these two ambitious regional players are likely to sharpen.

Reaction from other countries

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Jordan fear the rapid expansion of both Turkish and Israeli power and are also worried by the resurgence of extreme Islamism in Syria, which has brought HTS to power and could upset their fragile equilibrium at home.

In Iraq, the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), which historically supported Assad and the Palestinian resistance, now face a potentially hostile neighbour in Syria and are under pressure from the US to dissolve.

As for Iran, badly damaged by the loss of its Syrian ally, it has made pragmatic contact with the new HTS regime and says it won’t cut relations with such a big regional power. Iran still exerts considerable regional influence outside Syria, both through Ansarallah in Yemen and the Iraqi PMUs, while

its normalization with the Saudis and other Arab countries has reduced its isolation, as has its strategic co-operation treaty with Russia signed this January.

Russia has held substantive discussions with Syria’s new leaders, who claim they want good relations. Meanwhile, the fate of the Russian bases in Syria at Tartus (navy) and Khmeimim (airforce) remains uncertain. Russia has pre-empted the potential loss of its bases by moving air-defence systems to eastern Libya, where it is seeking docking rights in Tobruk and Benghazi to enable it to continue supplying the Sahel countries struggling against French and US neo-colonial rule.

China for its part has concerns about the involvement of Uyghur terrorists in HTS, fearing their victory could encourage renewed secessionist violence in Xinjiang. In addition, its 2022 Belt and Road agreement with Syria is uncertain, though this doesn’t preclude China’s ongoing economic relations with the new government.

Outlook grim

The potential for a united and peaceful Syria has been destroyed. Its coup government, dominated by Turkey, Israel and the US, is incapable of asserting national cohesion. Syria will be lucky to avoid the fate of Libya and Iraq. Its division into a Turkish Sunni centre, an Israeli south ‘protecting’ the Druze, and a self-governing Kurdish northeast is likely, while France

may offer ‘protection’ to the Druze and Alawites as a way of regaining a physical presence in coastal Syria.

The Palestinian and wider anti-western cause has suffered a major defeat, but the continued resilience shown by Palestinian guerilla forces suggests that the fall of Assad may not, in the longer term, be as disastrous a strategic defeat as the Six Day War in 1967, which saw a triumphant Israel establish hegemony over the whole Middle East. For example, Hamas has shown that its organisation remains intact by staging military parades during the hostage handovers, while Hezbollah’s leader Naim Qassem declared: “Yes, Hezbollah has lost the military supply route through Syria at this stage, but this loss is a detail in the resistance’s work.” Hezbollah will adapt to the loss of its Syrian supply line by increasing local manufacture – particularly drones that can be made using civilian technologies – and by increasing use of smuggling routes. The fact that a quarter of Lebanon’s population turned out for assassinated Hezbollah leader Nasrallah’s funeral in late February demonstrated the enduring ideological power of the resistance.

While the terrible suffering of the Palestinian people will continue, anti-Zionist sentiment has risen in the region due to the Gaza genocide, and Trump’s ethnic cleansing plan has come up against serious objections from Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia; the long-sought normalisation between Israel and the Saudis has yet to be secured.

The outlook for the Syrian people is grim. Secessionist conflicts are likely to worsen as the country is effectively partitioned. Meanwhile, a report from the UN Development Programme warns that in such circumstances economic recovery cannot be expected before 2080.

[1] <https://x.com/aaronjmate/status/1864017640857199024>

[2] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/19436149.2023.2199487?needAccess=true>

[3] https://www.democracynow.org/2007/3/2/gen_wesley_clark_weighs_presidential_bi

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc_story.html

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[8] <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/24/syria-growth-contraction-deepens-and-the-welfare-of-syrian-households-deteriorates>

[9] <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20241208-why-the-assad-regime-collapsed-in-syria-and-why-so-fast>

[10] https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3063.htm/

[11] <https://beeley.substack.com/p/why-doesnt-russia-do-more-when-israel>

[12] <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2024/12/why-did-iran-allow-assads-downfall?lang=en>

[13] <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/28208>

[14] <https://theconversation.com/syria-doubts-increase-over-new-regimes-commitment-to-womens-rights-and-inclusivity-249305>

[15] <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2591027/middle-east>

TIMELINE OF SYRIAN REGIME-CHANGE WAR

■ 2011

Demonstrations fanned into violence by foreign powers. Armed jihadi insurgency spreads

■ 2011

Turkish-backed jihadi groups take control of Idlib province in the north

■ 2012

Iran sends troops and militias to support Assad

■ September 2012

Ancient Aleppo badly damaged by rebels

■ Early 2013

Obama authorises CIA Operation Timber Sycamore

■ May 2013

Hezbollah troops sent to support Assad

■ June 2014

Assad wins landslide in election

■ May 2015

ISIS occupies Palmyra and destroys ancient artefacts

■ September 2015

Syrian government control falls to 20% of the country. Assad requests Russian intervention. First Russian air attacks.

■ 2016

Fragile ceasefire following Syrian government's successful counter-offensive, including recapture of Palmyra

■ July 2016

Partial Russian withdrawal

■ December 2016

Aleppo liberated

■ 2017

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) takes provincial capital and Syrian-Turkish border

■ July 2017

Trump announces end of Operation Timber Sycamore

■ 2018

Syrian forces retake southern suburbs of Damascus and south-western Syria. Jihadi fighters bussed to Idlib under 'safe zones' agreement

■ 2019

Syrian attempt to recapture Idlib ends in ceasefire in 2020, brokered by Russia and Turkey

■ 2023

Arab League invites Syria to rejoin

■ December 2024

HTS advances on Damascus

■ December 2024

Assad flees Damascus. Israel destroys Syrian military and expands into south-west

■ January 2025

Jolani declares himself president. Turkey signs defence deal with new government

The German Democratic Republic - a different world

by Pat Turnbull

'The development of the productive forces and socialist relations of production have enabled our people to attain a standard of living without precedent in their history. Unemployment is a concept from a different, alien world. Material comfort, a sense of security, full employment and equal educational opportunities for all children are a matter of course. For us, the highest priority is to preserve peace and, hence, assure our future existence.'

These words from Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the SED (Socialist Unity Party) Central Committee and Chairman of the German Democratic Republic Council of State, open the little book *The German Democratic Republic* (Panorama DDR, Berlin 1986).

They're words from a different world, a world that came to an end 35 years ago on 3rd October 1990, when the GDR ceased to exist. This year, 2025, is also the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War on 8th May 1945, when the country that was to become the GDR started on its road.

These anniversaries are an occasion to remember what the GDR really was, in contrast to the crude propaganda picture spread by the ruling classes in the west.

FOUNDATIONS

The foundations of the GDR were established in the Soviet Zone of a Germany divided between the four occupation powers - the Soviet Union, the USA, Britain and France.

The occupation zones of the three western allies had together a population of about 43 million; the Soviet Zone had about 17 million.

In the Soviet Zone, as early as June 1945, the Soviet Military Administration in Germany authorised the formation of antifascist and democratic parties and mass organisations. The German population could see posters with Stalin's famous declaration, 'Hitlers come and go, but the German people and the German state remain' – a statement he made on February 23rd 1942, when the Soviet Union was embroiled in a bitter war with Hitler's forces.

On 14th July 1945 the Communist Party of Germany, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany and the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany formed a bloc of antifascist and democratic parties, from 1949 onwards known as the Democratic Bloc. The first mass organisations were the Confederation of Free German Trade Unions, the League of Culture, and youth and women's committees.

That summer too new administrative bodies were formed, made up of antifascists and excluding fascist war criminals. A reform of the legal system was undertaken and a police force set up that served the interests of the working people. From autumn 1945 to 1946 a democratic land reform was carried through by land commissions including more than 52,000 peasants, agricultural and industrial workers. Large estates of over 100 hectares (250 acres) and land belonging to nazi activists and war



Pedestrian precinct in Karl Marx Stadt

criminals were expropriated without compensation, making more than 3.3 million hectares of land available for redistribution. A total of 550,000 farmhands, re-settlers from the former eastern territories of Germany, industrial and office workers, craftsmen and smallholders received new land and 1.1 million hectares remained public property and were allotted to state farms, state forestry enterprises and research institutions. The Mutual Farmers' Aid Association was formed to represent the rural population.

In autumn 1945 a school reform created a single state school system giving all children the same right to education. The ranks of the 'new teachers' was formed from

40,000 young people, retrained to take the place of the former fascist teaching force. Special efforts were made to help more children from workers' and farmers' families to gain admission to higher education. The press, radio, film and publishing industries, theatres and museums were de-nazified and passed into public ownership.

On 21st and 22nd April 1946, 548 Social Democratic and 507 Communist delegates met in Berlin and unanimously decided to unite the two parties and form the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. The congress elected Wilhelm Pieck of the Communist Party and Otto Grotewohl of the Social Democrats as chairmen of the party, with equal rights. Thus the leading forces of the working class were finally united.

Following a plebiscite in Saxony on 30th June 1946 in the Soviet zone of occupation a total of 9,281 enterprises, including 4,000 industrial establishments owned by Nazi activists and war criminals, were confiscated without compensation. They included all large enterprises and former arms factories throughout the Soviet zone. The expropriated enterprises were passed into public ownership and became the basis of the economic power of the working class.

In 1948 another two parties with mass influence were founded, the Democratic Farmers' Party of Germany and the National Democratic Party of Germany. They, as well as the Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the Free German Youth organisation and the Women's Democratic Federation of Germany were admitted as members of the Democratic Bloc.

WEST'S BAD FAITH

The Potsdam Agreement had envisaged a unified, democratic, demilitarised and denazified Germany. While this was being created in the Soviet zone, the other occupation

powers, determined to preserve capitalism come what may, set out to divide Germany. As early as September 1946 the United States and Great Britain announced the merger of their occupation zones. In June 1948 a currency reform was carried through in the western zones resulting in the introduction of the dollar-based Deutschmark. In September 1949 the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was established in breach of the Potsdam Agreement.

And so on 7th October 1949 the People's Council unanimously decided to constitute itself as the People's Chamber of the German Democratic Republic. The administrative functions which until then had been performed by the Soviet military authorities were transferred to the new government.

The German Democratic Republic had little of the industry of Germany as a whole. The western zones had all the coal; the Soviet zone had to rely on lignite. A metallurgical basic industry was set up with the help of the Soviet Union, heavy engineering expanded and a start was made in building a merchant fleet in the first five-year-plan from 1950-55. In the second half of the 1950s a number of big power stations were built. The basis of raw materials present in the GDR which

GDR celebrates International Women's Day 1954



Enormous economic and political damage was caused to socialist construction in the GDR by the open border with the FRG and West Berlin, the latter a nest of agents and counter-revolutionaries stuck right in the middle of the GDR.

could be exploited to build up the economy and the chemical industry were developed. The admission of the GDR to the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1950 was very important for the GDR's economic development. The trade agreement with the USSR for the period from 1966 to 1970 was at the time regarded as the most comprehensive such contract in the history of world trade.

The first agricultural cooperatives were set up in 1952, starting the transition from individual farming to large-scale socialist production in agriculture. By 1960 the transition to cooperative production in agriculture was completed.

Rearmament in the FRG and the country's integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1955 cemented the division of Germany. In May 1955 the European socialist countries signed the Warsaw Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. After its formation in 1956, the GDR's National People's Army was integrated in the Warsaw Treaty Organisation.

Enormous economic and political damage was caused to socialist construction in the GDR by the open border with the FRG and West Berlin, the latter a nest of agents and counter-revolutionaries stuck right in the middle of the GDR. On 13th August 1961 the National People's Army and the workers' militia, which had been formed in 1953, together with other armed bodies of the GDR, assumed control over the border which had been open until that point. The action had been agreed with the other Warsaw Treaty countries. The Berlin Wall was known in the GDR as the Anti-Fascist Protection Wall, a reminder that while the GDR had de-nazified, in the FRG prominent Nazis had retained or gained leading positions in the armed forces, the judiciary and the secret service.

FOR PEACE

In April 1968, 94.5% of all those eligible to vote gave their support to the new socialist constitution. The constitution, which was extended and amended again in 1974, defined the GDR as a socialist state of workers and farmers, as the political organisation of working people in town and countryside, led by the working class and its party.

Since its foundation, the FRG had insisted on claiming to be the sole representative of Germany. This meant a diplomatic blockade against the GDR. Nevertheless In 1969-70, the GDR established diplomatic relations with 14 countries. In 1973 the GDR was admitted to the United Nations and by the end of 1974 diplomatic relations were established with more than 100 countries. The GDR participated actively in the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). In implementing the Final Act of 1975, the GDR agreed many treaties and agreements with capitalist CSCE countries covering nearly every field of activity – measures to safeguard peace, economic relations, science and technology, culture and sports.

It was an unshakeable principle of the GDR to do everything possible to prevent a new war emanating from German soil.

For me, among many visits to the GDR between 1969 and 1990, the family visits of 1988, 1989 and 1990 stand out, especially the 1988 visit to the little town of Hohnstein in a picturesque region of sandstone pillars famous in the GDR which till then I had not even known existed. On all our family visits we stayed at trade union holiday homes, in 1988 and 1989 alongside GDR families. The home in Hohnstein was small and intimate and every morning my son would go down and play table tennis with the GDR children on the outdoor tables. We

have photos of those lovely GDR children and I sometimes wonder what happened to them after 1990. In 1990 the signage of the Free German Trade Unions had already been removed from the front of the building and there were no GDR families there. As we crossed the border back to the west, one of our British group said: 'They have destroyed a nice little country.' And as we now know, they did.

With Germany now limbering up to lead the armed forces of western Europe in a crusade against Russia, it is not only the citizens of the GDR, but those of the whole world, who miss the German Peace State.

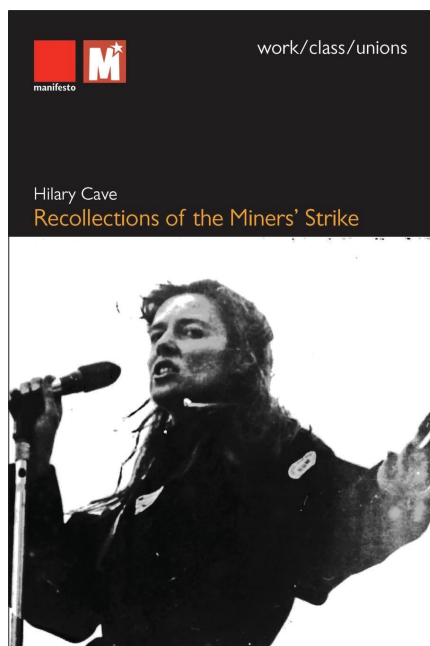
From The Socialist Correspondent 10 years ago

Britain should stop interfering in Syria

"In addition [to oil and gas reserves] several pipelines or potential pipelines cross her territory. This fact, along with her spirit of independence and her friendship with Russia and Iran can be seen as a major reason why Syria's population has, since 2011, been subject to a brutal war which has cost the lives of, variously estimated, 100,000 to 200,000 people, and has forced millions to leave their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries or inside Syria..."

Issue 22 Spring 2015

Pat Turnbull



Review by Peter Latham

Forty years ago this spring, the miners returned to work after their heroic battle with the Thatcher government. It was a sad occasion. Emotions were high after the delegate conference took the decision to go back, after a year without pay or strike pay. It was hard for all. Yet there was immense pride, and rightly so, amongst the miners in what they had done. The mighty British state had been challenged in a new way and on a new scale. Pits and jobs were not saved but an immense well of sympathetic support had been tapped, not just in Britain but around the world too.

Once the National Union of Mine-workers had been defeated, successive governments reordered the economy to manage with less industry, less public service, less public ownership and a smaller social wage. Bigger and more numerous corporations exploited the working class, gaining higher profits. Much of this went to the City and finance generally. This change should be understood in order to work out how to proceed today – so it is fitting to have this useful, readable and enjoyable book to mark the occasion.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE MINERS' STRIKE

by Hilary Cave / www.manifestopress.coop

Bringing the strike to life

Hilary Cave worked at the NUM from May 1983 to April 1988 as Education Officer and once the strike commenced at the South Yorkshire pit of Cortonwood, she was fully occupied in fighting the biggest class battle of recent times. A woman in a man's world, she brings a fresh perspective, plainly explained, and the book is of great interest. The many and varied incidents described are brought vividly to life using dialogue to recreate conversations as if they had taken place yesterday. These can be funny, uplifting, questionable or worrying, and they illustrate what it was like at the time to work for the NUM in a crisis, showing how the course of events often depended on quick thinking as well as on principled consideration.

The issue of principle is strong in the book. The author challenges the notion that the NUM was a one man show run by its President. She shows rather how the three national leaders, President Arthur Scargill, General Secretary Peter Heathfield and Vice-President Mick McGahey, acted collectively and worked through the union's democratic procedures to discuss the many questions that arose, ensuring that the miners' elected delegates took good decisions as far as possible. This approach helped keep people together. Many active shop stewards will know the value of consulting their members regularly, informing them, educating them and encouraging them to act together when it counts. This applies at all levels of the labour movement. The examples of such practice quoted in the book are most telling.

Of course, not everything went as well as it might. The author makes clear her views in such cases from a principled standpoint of her own. The avoidance of rancour makes her points more valid, not less. There are lessons here for activists to heed.

Mention should be made of the Special Delegate Conference in Sheffield on 19 April 1984, when it was decided not to hold a national ballot on strike action to save the pits, but to support the strikes against closures already in progress, and to urge all NUM members to join in. This is what the miners already on strike wanted. The author's role was to organise the traditional miners' rally outside the meeting in the City Hall (a huge task in itself), at which she spoke to the miners, introducing speakers. The delegate meeting was an example of working class democracy in practice, in a battle for livelihoods and publicly owned industry. Had the miners been truly united, had the Nottinghamshire leadership not acted against the strike, and had the workers in the power stations refused to use coal, then the outcome of the strike might have been different. This is made clear in telling the tale.

The list of characters is long. Many names are well known: Roger Windsor, George Bolton, Ken Capstick, Frank Watters, Trevor Cave, Henry Richardson, Roy Lynk, Mick Clapham, Barry Johnson, Blanche Flannery, Ray Buckton, Jimmy Knapp and many more. That the author worked with so many people over so long a struggle is notable in itself. Then there are those she met

whose names are less well known but acted locally, either in the NUM or in solidarity. This is the nature of a big strike, something we should all remember. Truly touching are the author's dealings with people who felt as she did, comrades in spirit who could not do enough to help.

The role of the State

There are chapters explaining Thatcher's Law, such as the difficulty in travelling around Nottinghamshire and North Derbyshire without being turned back at police road blocks. On one occasion the author was on her way to a legitimate meeting in Mansfield. She stood her ground expecting to be arrested, but was let through. There is also a description of the Ridley Report, explaining the ruling class strategy to wreck trade union power in a nationalised industry, part of which was published in *The Economist* in the late 1970's; and the role of Ian MacGregor. MacGregor was a union buster brought from the USA to be the new Chairman of the National Coal Board. He turned the Area Managements against the strike using all kinds of manoeuvres

and sackings to undermine it. Previously local management had been from mining backgrounds and understood the realities. Under MacGregor, local managers communicated directly with miners instead of going through the NUM, the usual way of doing it, and started using threats and intimidation to get their way. He boasted in the *Sunday Telegraph*: "People are now discovering the price of insubordination and insurrection."

Other chapters cover marches and rallies, state power used against the miners especially at Orgreave, the upsurge of solidarity efforts including women's groups, and the split in Nottinghamshire, with the formation of a rival union after the strike. The author's role as a union woman, including as a union representative for staff employed by the NUM adds another dimension. She was not easily intimidated when dealing with the breakaway union leadership.

After the strike

The author uses the name "The Lamp Cabin" for her role as an educator amongst the miners. Just as

miners carry a lamp underground to see their way, so trade union education was needed to help miners see through the complexities of acting together under capitalism. Before the strike she found that attendance at national NUM schools was more a reward for long service than preparation for action. This she was able to change, with the support of Scargill and Heathfield

After the strike, the NUM used the issues of Peace and Anti-Apartheid to help bring their members together in the Miners United campaign. The author wrote the union's pamphlet on Peace, arguing against the cold war and nuclear weapons. For Anti-Apartheid, the NUM Branch Secretary at Bentley pit helped her by arranging a photograph of two miners who were best mates, one black and one white. The picture was made into an NUM poster that she treasures to this day.

The book benefits from being a diligent study of the author's own records, checked with other contemporary sources. It deserves to be widely read.

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Extract from *Return to my Native Land* (1938)

My name is Bordeaux and Nantes and Liverpool and New York and San Francisco
not a corner of this world but carries my thumb-print and my heel-mark on the
backs of skyscrapers and my dirt
in the glitter of jewels!
Who can boast of more than I?
Virginia. Tennessee. Georgia. Alabama.
....

What can I do?

I must begin.

Begin what?

The only thing in the world that's worth beginning:
The End of the World, no less.

Extract from *On the State of the Union* (1960)

I imagine in Congress
this message on the State of the Union:

situation tragic

all we've got left underground is 75 years of iron,
50 years' worth of cobalt

but for 55 years' worth of sulphur and 20 of bauxite,
what is there in the heart?

Nothing, zero

a mine without ore,
a cave where nothing lives,
not a drop of blood left.



Césaire (1913-2008) was born and grew up in poverty in Martinique, a Caribbean island that had been a colony of France since 1635. He won a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris, returning to Martinique in 1939 and was elected mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945. The following year, when Martinique became a département of France, he won a seat representing Martinique in the French National Assembly, a position he held until 1993.

A long-standing member of the PCF, the French Communist Party, Césaire left the party in 1957 to co-found and later head the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais (PPM).

His epic poem *Return to My Native Land* was written in 1938 just before he went back to Martinique after his university studies and contained the first-ever use of the term "Négritude," a word coined by Césaire and fellow-student Léopold Senghor, later president of Senegal. The idea inspired a generation of writers, including Langston Hughes.

State of the Union is a later poem written after the murder of Emmett Till in 1955. The extract reproduced here is the opening to it.

What Have We Here?

Co-curator Hew Locke

Review of exhibition and catalogue
by Brian Durrans

Widely respected, much visited and often criticised as a treasury of imperial loot, the British Museum recently organised an exhibition called *What Have We Here?* [1] Co-curated by British Guyanese artist Hew Locke and curator Indra Khanna in collaboration with British Museum curators, it conveyed something of the scale and brutality of Britain's colonial empire using selected objects, artworks, documents and images, mainly from the British Museum's but some from other UK collections.

What Have We Here? had much to say about both the history of the around 200 objects it featured and how they came to the Museum. The catalogue suggests possible reasons why the British Museum organised the exhibition at this time, but that subject deserves more space than can be spared here. This review therefore simply sketches the exhibition's coverage and discusses a few highlights and how it tackled its theme.

Exhibiting colonialism

The exhibition showed how colonial power has been asserted through symbols like portraits, crowns, thrones, or coats of arms, which sometimes appropriate objects or images of the colonised themselves; the relationship between trade, armed conquest and various forms of subjugation; and the colonial conversion of objects of veneration or symbolic or simply utilitarian purpose into trophies, treasure, art or trash.

The show was organised around specific examples of colonisation

mainly in Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia), Asia (India, China) and the Americas (Caribbean and the Atlantic seaboard of north America). The Atlantic slave trade was, understandably, a major theme. Attention was also given to pre-colonial trade and varied forms and fortunes of anti-colonial resistance. There was more information about them in the exhibition itself and even more in its still-available catalogue, but three items, selected here more or less at random – a mask, a gun and a print – give a sense of different aspects of colonial power conveyed in the exhibition.

Mask (from Nigeria yet in one sense via London to the world)

In 1897, from the Oba's (King's) bedroom in his palace in Benin City, soldiers of the British 'Punitive' Expedition stole what would become an epitome of sub-Saharan creative genius: the 16th century pendant ivory mask commemorating Queen Mother Idia of the Edo people in Nigeria. The mask's dignified face looks more serious than the Mona Lisa's but is similarly inscrutable. Ten Portuguese figures, inlaid with copper, form an openwork arc from ear to ear, over the top of the head. Since the late 15th century, Portuguese engaged with Benin in the ivory trade and as mercenaries against its rivals. The mask was one of five made or commissioned by Idia's son in the first half of the sixteenth century to be worn by successive Obas on ceremonial occasions.

Stealing the mask undermined the exiled Oba's authority but after the British Museum bought it in 1910, it was seen by thousands of museum



PHOTO BY ANDREAS PRAEFCKE

Commemorative mask of Queen Mother Idia, permanent collection of the British Museum

visitors and by many more via photographs, drawings and copies. It then became widely known and admired but mostly understood as a stand-alone art object rather than part of Edo royal regalia. Despite repeated requests for its return to Nigeria along with the Benin 'Bronzes', it remains in the Museum.

The mask was never loaned but, in what was described as "a potent decolonial move" (catalogue, pp32-34; see also pp137-39), its image was adopted as the emblem for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Lagos and Kaduna in 1977. This description captures the power of what has been done with the image, despite or even because of the "exile" of the mask itself: but the "decolonial move" might be better seen as part of an ongoing

chess game at least until Nigeria on the up escalator meets Britain on the down to facilitate an equitable settling of cultural accounts.

Since colonisation entailed much more systemic injustice than just stealing cultural artefacts, and persists as neo-colonial indebtedness of the global South, [2] so decolonisation must amount to more than merely moving objects between museums. Whether such moves can play more than a symbolic role in weakening imperialism remains to be seen.

Machine-gun (British, used in China)

The second item in the display I'd like to focus on is a rapid-fire Maxim machine-gun of the type used by troops of the 1903-04 Younghusband Expedition to slaughter more than 700 Tibetan soldiers, armed only with swords and single-shot rifles, in what became known as the Massacre of Chumik Shenko. That day, 31 March 1904, the commander of the British detachment followed his general's orders but later wrote "I hope I shall never again have to shoot down men walking away" (catalogue, pp29-32, 154; "walking away" would today and possibly then be a euphemism for "in the back"). During the entire Expedition, some 2-3,000 Tibetans are estimated to have been killed. It was in 1927, less than a quarter of a century later, that Mao Zedong is reported to have first used the expression "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun". Perhaps he had Chumik Shenko in mind.

Although the displayed object was not one actually used against the Tibetans, its physical presence, amplified as an image in some of Locke's 2D prints, makes the Younghusband episode almost as unforgettable as if it had been.

Unlike in Benin only seven years before, the Younghusband expedi-



Frontispiece of book by John Gabriel Stedman

tion of 1903-1904 included two British Museum representatives who were instructed to collect books and manuscripts for their employer. They did as they were told. It took 400 mules to extract the spoils of armed aggression from the country. In 1905 the Museum bought an amulet, lama figure, chalice and wicker shield from the expedition's Chief of Staff. Other items derived from this imperial looting and killing spree still occasionally come up for sale, its notoriety only making them more collectable (catalogue, p154).

Print (British but featuring Suriname)

The last of my three chosen expressions of colonial power would have been easy to overlook but speaks volumes and especially to the imperialist present. Throughout the exhibition, Locke cites evidence that colonialism was not just brutal but resisted by the colonised themselves. A book by Dutch Scottish soldier John Gabriel Stedman, published in 1796, describes his personal experience of the suppression

of a slaves' rebellion in Suriname (then Dutch Guiana), illustrated in sometimes horrific detail by William Blake.

Locke, however, drew attention to the book's frontispiece, from an etching by another artist, showing a dead or dying slave on the ground, above whom stands his nemesis, a white European soldier armed with sword and pistol, his right arm resting on a rifle as tall as himself and his left hand indicating his victim. The soldier is author Stedman himself and the couplet quatrain below the frame of the image is his repellent excuse for both the scene depicted and the other examples of inhumanity which the book is about to reveal to the reader, even though much of its content was about the author's love life and the colony's natural history:

"From different Parents, different Climes we came,
At different Periods;" Fate still rules the same.
Unhappy Youth, while bleeding on the ground;
'Twas **Yours** to fall _ but **Mine** to feel the wound. [3]

The book went on to fuel the abolitionist cause, but Stedman's grotesque stanza is a monument to the moral bankruptcy of imperialism as a whole. Whilst the death of those subjugated by colonial rule or challenging it was condoned by fate or God, we are meant to believe that so was the conscience that paid at least as high a price for it.

The poem echoes the "manifest destiny" of US settler colonialism fifty years earlier in its genocide of indigenous north Americans; and it anticipates, a century later, Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899, urging US colonisation of the Philippines). In the next century, Bob Dylan nailed such hubris in *With God on Our Side* and, in *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* (both songs 1964), charging high-minded apologists for racist

murder as "you who philosophize disgrace". Yet imperialism's more recent deceptions, such as "humanitarian intervention" or "right to protect", still garnish their vastly deadlier firepower with the same old brand of conspicuous remorse. Stedman would have a column in *The Guardian*.

The Watchers

The most enigmatic of Locke's own artworks in *What Do We Have Here?* deserve a brief comment. The Watchers were semi-abstract, flamboyantly-dressed, carnivalesque figures, roughly three-quarter life size, stationed above the display cabinets to "look" at visitors looking at the exhibits. Except that they were silent, Locke suggests they worked like a Greek Chorus to comment on the action. The ancestors or descendants of the makers, or gods, security guards, or even the British Museum's own trustees? Whoever they were, they added an uncanny dimension to the visiting experience for anyone distracted from the engrossing exhibits themselves.

Caveat

Presented as an artist's installation, *What Do We Have Here?* was naturally non-didactic. The exhibition's coverage ends in the early 20th century. It showed colonialism in lockstep with capitalist greed, but colonialism's segue into modern imperialism was nowhere in sight. By ignoring their historical relationship, the exhibition made "colonialist" and "imperialist" equivalent terms of disapproval, prudently insulating itself from the reality that British imperialism currently has 145 overseas military bases and no doubt support among the Museum's visitors, trustees and present and potential future funders.

Facts and artefacts

The gallery hosting the exhibition was created as part of the British Museum's Great Court project

for the new millennium with the original 1857 round reading room at the core. What Do We Have Here? was therefore only a few metres from where Marx and Engels in the second half of the 19th century, and Lenin in the early 20th, sat working on sources in that library to track the development of capitalism and imperialism in Britain and elsewhere. Writing from exile in Geneva in the first half of 1916, Lenin drew on that work to define the special features of imperialism that were emerging almost exactly a century before the Great Court was completed. [4] Those studies embraced the rise of imperialism up to their own day, with special emphasis on its current forms emerging from colonial antecedents and described them in the standard terms of historical political economy, such as scales of investment, production, distribution, consumption, wages, profits, competition for resources, labour and markets, and the drive to war.

Although *What Do We Have Here?* paid special attention to money and share certificates, and the rise of commodities, its main interest was in the colonial conversion of objects' indigenous use and exchange values into those required for colonial trade and for buttressing the authority on which it depended.

It turns out that the political economists and curators were exposing the power of capital by complementary means.

The reviewer is a long-retired British Museum curator with a critical interest in cultural politics.

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(1) British Museum paying exhibition (£16 / concessions, free Fridays), 17 October 2024 – 9 February 2025; catalogue, 2024, £25).

(2) E.g., Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, 2018 [1972])

(3) Emphases in the original. The poem is irredeemable. In Scots the words "ground" and "wound" can rhyme.

(4) V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism* (Petrograd, 1917)