



The Iran-Iraq war: Generalised Defeatism - not the Marxist method

Sun, 02/11/1980 - 14:36

?We Marxists differ from both pacifists and anarchists in that we deem it necessary to study each war historically (from the standpoint of Marx?s dialectical materialism) and separately.? (Lenin-Socialism and War). The war between Iran and Iraq, a war between two non-imperialist but capitalist states has thrown Lenin?s injunction to study particular wars and their historical implications, into sharp relief.

Marxists have always understood that, despite their brutal nature, wars can play historically progressive roles. Marxists have never been against war ?in general?. Wars of National liberation against imperialism for example are wars that we would regard as progressive. It was an understanding of this aspect of war that led Marx and Engels during the nineteenth century, to take sides in various wars between capitalist states They recognised that, in the era of the development of nation states in Europe, it was possible for capitalist states to play a Progressive role by destroying remnants of feudalism and establishing integrated national states and economies. This facilitated the development of a unified proletariat. Class Struggle against the bourgeoisie could take solace free from the need to struggle for national unity and independence alongside the bourgeoisie. It was legitimate for defence to support certain wars of national

Marx and Engels recognised the first phase of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 as a justified war of defence on Germany?s part. They saw the war as a potential vehicle for the defeat of Bonapartism in France and for the national unification of Germany. They argued this in spite of the fact that Prussia was governed by the reactionary Junker Bismarck. The nature of the regime did not determine their attitude to the war, whilst that war was a purely defensive one: ?That Lehmann (a nicknames for William I of Prussia -WP) Bismarck and Co., are in command and that it must minister to their temporary glorification if they conduct it successfully, we have to thank the miserable state of the German bourgeoisie, it is certainly very unpleasant, but it cannot be altered... In the first place, Bismarck, as in 1866 (the Austro-Prussian War - WP) so at present is doing a bit of our own work in his own way, and without meaning to, but all the same he is doing it.? Engels to Marx, August 15th, 1870)

The Social Chauvinistic

Marx and Engels? support for Germany did not mean cessation of the class struggle. They opposed German chauvinism, and the annexations Bismarck planned. They argued against a war on the French people and they supported Bebel and Liebknecht who abstained on the vote for war credits in the German Reichstag. However, viewed from a historical standpoint, despite Bismarck, a successful defence of Germany was the most progressive outcome. The social chauvinists of the Second International, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Hyndman and Co sought to use Marx and Engels? position on the Franco-Prussian war to justify their position of ?defence of the fatherland? in the imperialist war of 1914-18, This treachery was justified by a generalisation of Marx and Engels? position on a specific ?national? war, to war ?in general?. Lenin attacked the social chauvinists, who look no heed of the fact that since the 1890?s capitalism had entered into the imperialist epoch-an epoch of decline, with capitalism having outlived its progressive role. It was left to Lenin to designate the precise nature of the war and develop the only consistently revolutionary slogan with regard to it ? ?turn the imperialist war into a civil war?. For Lenin, in this war the ?continuation of politics? was the continuation of imperialist predatory politics. It was a war for the redivision of colonial slaves not a ?national? war of defence by either side. To side as the social chauvinists were doing with their own imperialist bourgeoisies, meant suspending the class struggle, abandoning a revolutionary perspective and sacrificing the interests and lives of the working class to the profit lusts of the monarchs, ministers and magnates of Europe and the USA. The position of

revolutionary defeatism, that is arguing that the defeat of one's own army is a lesser evil as compared with its victory as a result of the suspension of class struggle, flowed from Lenin's assessment of the imperialist nature of this specific war. Lenin's position did not flow from the fact that it was capitalist states that were doing the fighting. He argued that in general the age of justified national wars in advanced Europe was past, as most of these nations were clearly imperialist. However, he was also clear that national wars could still take place and that they would be justified ones deserving of the support of Marxists. This was most likely to be the case in areas such as the Balkans or Ireland, where the national question was unresolved, or in the 'backward' countries of Asia and Africa. Outside of the context of a generalised imperialist conflagration (i.e. one clearly aimed at the redivision of the world by the imperialists, in their interests and against the oppressed nationalities) a national war was possible even between two advanced capitalist powers: 'In my view, admission of, 'Defence of the Fatherland' in a national war fully answers the requirements of Marxism. In 1891 the German Social Democrats really should have defended their fatherland in a war against Boulanger and Alexander (former French Minister of War and the Russian Tsar - WP), This would have been a peculiar variety of national war,' (Letter to Inessa Armand, November 30th, 1916).

Peculiar because it would have pitted Kaiser Wilhelm (William II) against Tsarist Russia and republican France. Justifiable because the French and Russian aim was to dismember the recently unified German nation. Lenin emphasised this possibility against those within his own ranks who played into the hands of the social chauvinists by renouncing national wars and 'defence of the fatherland' in general. For Lenin this error revealed a failure to understand that within an epoch there are varied phenomena: 'in which in addition to the typical there is always something else.' (Letter to Zinoviev August 1914). In the same letter he went on to argue: 'And you [Zinoviev] repeat this error, when you write in your remarks, 'small countries cannot in the present epoch defend their fatherland,' Untrue!! ... One should say, 'Small countries, too, cannot in imperialist wars, which are most typical of the current imperialist epoch, defend their fatherland,' That is quite different ... We are not at all against, 'defence of the fatherland' in general. You will never find that nonsense in a single resolution (cc in any of my articles). We are against defence of the fatherland and a defensive position in the imperialist, typical of the imperialist epoch. But, in the imperialist epoch there may be also 'just', 'defensive', revolutionary wars (namely, i) national, ii) civil, iii) socialist wars and suchlike),' (Collected Works Vol. 35 pp228-9, all emphases in original).

A ridiculous distortion

There is no doubt that for Lenin the position of revolutionary defeatism was only automatically the correct position with regard to wars that were definitively imperialist. To apply it to wars in general, even when those wars are conducted by capitalist states, is a ridiculous distortion of the Marxist position on war. The crucial thing is always to: 'examine the policy pursued prior to the war, the policy that led to and brought about the war.' (Lenin-A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism).

It is with this in mind that we must analyse the war between Iran and Iraq.

The Middle East, of which Iran and Iraq are a part, is an area where the borders have been drawn, not as a result of genuine national development, but according to the dictates of imperialism. The area is a 'balkanised' one. That is, its nationalities have been divided by states created by imperialism. The clearest example of this, although by no means the only one, is the Kurdish nation. The Kurd's homeland is divided between five states, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and the USSR. The states that were created out of the break up of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, into 'mandates' of French and British imperialists were turned into arms colonies with puppet rulers when these powers relaxed their direct control, to check the development of any anti-imperialist or socialist sentiments and activities amongst the masses. Thus when the British granted Iraq independence in 1932 they had already installed the Hashemite Emir Feisal I on the throne. Likewise in Iran, the British helped Reza Khan to the peacock throne in 1925. After the Second World War, following the consolidation of US imperialist hegemony the CIA toppled the bourgeois nationalist Mossadeq regime in 1953, thereby bringing the last Shah to power. In the various other countries of the oil rich region existing semi feudal regimes were bolstered (notably in the Arabian Peninsula) in order to guarantee that the West's vital interests would be served. The Shah of Iran from 1953 to 1979 acted as a faithful gendarme for imperialism, guarding the West's 'jugular vein' as he himself described the Straits of Hormuz.

The unresolved national questions and the maintenance of fiercely conservative regimes dominate the politics of the Middle East. In the West the existence of Israel and the denial of Palestinian national rights adds further dimension to this highly unstable region. Within this area the interests of the various imperialist powers meet and interlock and are confronted with the Soviet Union. The USSR shares borders with Iran and Turkey and has friendship treaties with Syria and Iraq (although as we shall see friendship with the latter is wearing a bit thin). This 'arc of crisis' by its very nature, is riddled with contradictions and will inevitably be dragged into wars and social upheavals. It is the modern equivalent to the Balkans. The imperialists have a direct interest in every move made in the area. It is in this context that the war between Iran and Iraq must be understood.

Iraq, until recently, was regarded as hostile to imperialism. It overthrew its monarchy in 1958 and since 1968 it has been ruled by the Ba'athist Socialist Party. It was friendly to the USSR and was a vocal supporter of the PLO. However, beneath this picture of apparent radicalism, there exists a repressive Bonapartism, embodied in Saddam Hussein, jealous of its power, savage to its opponents (the Kurds) and to the Iraqi Communist Party

Millions of US dollars

Hussein and his Tikrit clique (the place many of them come from) are keen to establish Baghdad as the qala'a -the citadel of the Arab revolution. In practice this means impressing the neighbouring monarchies, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the others that Iraq can fill the gap left by the departure of the Shah, as the power in the Gulf. To do this, however, Hussein needs to win the support, not only of Khaled and Hussein (of Jordan) but also of US, French and British Imperialism. His eagerness to achieve this was demonstrated by his murderous repression of the Iraqi CP, his condemnation of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan and, most importantly, his escalation of oil production to meet the West's needs, which has made Iraq the second largest exporter in the world. Iraq has tried to become less dependent on Moscow by turning to France, in particular for weapons and technology.

In 1972 Iraq got 95% of its weaponry from the USSR and nearly all of its non-military imports. Now only 70% of its arms are from Moscow and the Soviet Union ranks fourteenth in the list of Iraq's trading partners, behind Japan, West Germany, France, Italy and Britain. France has financed the building of nuclear reactors in Iraq. The USA, which had until recently extremely cool relations with Baghdad, has been making extensive diplomatic and commercial overtures. Millions of US dollars are being pumped into a number of computer projects while Carter's National Security Adviser Brzezinski declared on television that: 'We see no fundamental incompatibility of interests between the United States and Iraq. We do not feel that American/Iraqi relations need to be frozen in antagonism,' (Newsweek 6.10.1980).

These sentiments were also expressed by the American bosses? 'Wall Street Journal': 'With revolutionary Iran creating so much tension in the Middle East Washington would clearly welcome any role that the Iraqis 'will play in stabilising the Persian Gulf.' (6.4.1980). Hussein has not been slow to respond to such come-ons from the west: 'We do not drink oil, we sell it, and we know that our major markets are in the West and in Japan.' he declared. (Time Magazine 6.10.1980). His bid to gain the favour of the West, prove himself to be a force to be reckoned with and fill the power vacuum left by the Shah, could well be clinched if he were to strike a death blow to Iran, whose revolutionary turmoil has been a source of instability to Imperialism's clients in the Gulf region since February 1979. In looking at the politics being continued on Iraq's part it is clear that it is an objectively pro-imperialist course that is being followed-one designed to allow imperialism to re-establish its control in a crucial region.

The mass movement that overthrew the Shah was objectively anti-imperialist i.e. it brought down the CIA's chosen client who ran Iran as a semi-colony for US capital for a quarter of a century. Subjectively i.e. in terms of the consciousness of the masses, it was profoundly contradictory. The masses of the urban poor, the intellectuals and the working class were consciously anti-Imperialist, i.e. they saw that no improvement in their lives was possible without the destruction of the economic and military stranglehold of the United States. Furthermore differing sections participated in the revolution to achieve their own social and political goals-the workers to win freedom of organisation, to throw off the Savak guards and informers, the despotic managers and their American overseers. The nationalities fought to win their autonomy within a more democratic Iran. The peasants fought to get their land back from the Pahlavi court clique, the agribusinesses etc.

An Islamic safeguard

But they fought with profound religious prejudices. Khomeini's intransigence and the bazaari-mullah organisation demagogically convinced them that an Islamic Republic would safeguard all their interests. In fact Bazargan, Bani Sadr, Khomeini and the Islamic Republican party have been able to use these prejudices to confuse and obscure the proletariat's class consciousness and limit their shoras to the most elementary stage of workers control - a veto over local management and central government directives. The regime has been able to partially negate democratic rights-of speech, assembly, right to self-determination etc. It has inflicted 'Islamic dress' on women and Islamic law on the populace in general. It has launched vicious full-scale war on the Kurds and a dictatorial police regime in Khuzestan. Yet this repression is, we repeat, partial. Why? Because large sections of the population are armed and have resisted and even rolled back Khomeini's attacks. The Kurds, the Left, the working class defend their gains against Khomeini. The question is, is the present war predominantly a continuation of the Khomeini regime's brutal attacks on these gains or is it a continuation (by other means) of the masses' struggle against Imperialist-Pahlavi oppression? Are the masses via their Islamic false consciousness being mobilised against Iraq to further crush democratic rights or smash the working class, or are the masses in spite of Islamic consciousness defending an invasion whose success would directly serve the interests of imperialism? We would argue that it is the latter that is dominant. The Khuzestani Arabs are fighting the Iraqis in Abadan and Khorramshahr not in the name of Persian chauvinism, but because they know that behind the Iraqi lines are the pro-Shah émigrés like Bakhtiar and General Oveissi, the notorious architect of the Black Friday massacre in Teheran. They know that the 5000 strong force of pro-Shah shock troops have been welded together, under the protection and encouragement of Hussein, the 'butcher of Baghdad'. To deny the progressive aspect of the masses struggle against such elements in this war, and to see only that they are defending Khomeini and his counter-revolutionary aims, must logically lead to denying that the Iranian revolution had any progressive content.

Sectarian abstraction

Every revolution against Imperialism, to the extent that bourgeois forces participate in it and lead it, has forces of counter-revolution within it. Bourgeois (and pre-bourgeois forces) can only be episodically, tactically, in conflict with Imperialism. They can and will turn with bloody repression on the workers and peasants as did Chang Kai-Shek in China, as did Nasser in Egypt, Kassem in Iraq etc. But to draw from this the conclusion that 'at night all ants are black' is merely to testify that one has the bandage of sectarian-abstraction bound tight about your eyes. To see no difference between Restoration in arms against the gains of a revolution and that revolution's internal foes, temporarily forced to defend it to save their own skins, is a frank confession of political bankruptcy. For those like the International Spartacist Tendency who never saw anything progressive in the overthrow of the Shah it is at least consistent. For those like Workers Action/Socialist Organiser and the Workers Socialist League it is a signal that they have given up on the Iranian Revolution-besmirched and disfigured as it now is by clerical reaction. Trotsky however did not assess revolutions on the basis of how pleasant or unpleasant it was to be associated with them: 'a revolutionary cannot recognise the revolution as finished until objective indication leave no room for doubt?' (The Spanish Kornilov's and the Spanish Stalinists).

We argue that Iraq's invasion is an attempt, from the outside, to finish off decisively the Iranian revolution, on behalf of Imperialism, the reactionary feudal states of the Gulf, and counter-revolution inside Iran. The fact that there are counter-revolutionary elements within Iran (Khomeini and Bani Sadr) who in the present situation pursuing an objectively progressive goal (the successful defence of Iran) is no mystery to those who have learnt anything from Marx and Engels assessment of Bismarck's role in the Franco-Prussian war.

But the United States and all the other Imperialist powers are neutral in the present conflict. We know this because every bourgeois diplomat, and their camp followers in the press, repeatedly tell us that this is the case. This in itself is an immediate cause for Marxists to look beyond United Nations speeches. In an area so central for the imperialists, to think that they are not implicated in the events now talking place is ludicrous. As Lenin pointed out when the imperialists were busy pretending neutrality in the squabbles in the Balkans and Ottoman empire: - 'Indeed it would be childish to believe the words of the diplomats and disregard their deeds, the collective action of the power against revolutionary Turkey (NB the revolution in Turkey at that time was a bourgeois nationalist one being led by the Young Turk movement-WP). The very fact that the present developments were preceded by meetings and conversations of the Foreign Ministers and Heads of State of several countries, is enough to dispel this naive faith in diplomatic statements,?

(Events in the Balkans and in Persia October 16th 1908),

Like Lenin we prefer to look at the deeds that imperialism is performing in the Gulf. There can be no doubt that, via the channels of secret diplomacy and their satellite surveillance systems, the USA knew that the Iraqi invasion was in preparation. Indeed the US State Department admitted as much when it commented that Washington was 'neither forewarned nor surprised by the fighting,' (8 Days October 4th 1980). The imperialists have acted, not to check the attack or discourage Iraq, but to prevent the war from spreading and further disrupting oil supplies. They are not bothered that Iran was attacked but merely that Iraq has not been able to finish the job off quickly enough. The Economist lucidly explained: 'If Iran had cracked at the first tap of Iraq's hammer, Mr Saddam Hussein, without much cost would have demonstrated his muscle, short circuited the spread of Shiite fundamentalism and, maybe, basked in the thanks of a grateful world.' (October 11th 1980).

Reinforcing the fleet

The US has supplied Saudi Arabia, whose King telephoned Baghdad at the start of the war to wish Hussein good luck in his adventure, and whose airfields have been used by Iraqi planes, with four AWACs. The US only has 19 of these specialised reconnaissance planes in its entire armoury. It has also reinforced its fleet in the Gulf with the guided missile destroyer the 'Leahy'. The other imperialist powers have joined in, publicly renouncing the idea of a naval task force, hot to practice creating one. There are 150w 58 warships in the region-British, French, Australian and American. Since it is hardly likely that Iran is about to invade other Gulf States these gunboats have one express purpose-to intimidate Iran and prevent it from taking any action against Saudi Arabia or Oman should they enter the war. The US pretext was a supposed Iranian threat to the Straits of Hormuz, through which the oil tankers bound for the west pass. As the American magazine Newsweek put it: 'These actions were designed, in part to reassure the Saudis and other Gulf states of US protection. But their primary goal was to counter any Iranian threat to the Persian Gulf oil supplies?' (October 13th 1980-our emphasis WP). Yet the recovery of the Tunb islands in the Straits was an Iraqi war aim and the only troops reported moving there were Iraqi ones. Success for Iraq would benefit the imperialists by putting an end to the destabilising effects that the Iranian revolution has been having. It would also pave the way for a new power bloc of Iraq/ Saudi Arabia/Jordan (two of whom are already armed by the US, the other increasingly so by France) which could replace the deposed Shah as gendarme. Hussein's failure to win a swift and decisive victory, due mainly to the dogged resistance of the local population and the Islamic and left militias is already losing him friends. Sadat-the US's staunch ally has done an about face and condemned Iraq. Hussein will discover that there is no honour amongst thieves. Faced with his failure the US may well move to apply pressure to terminate the war.

The reason cited for adopting a defeatist position by both the Socialist Organiser and the Socialist Press (paper of the Workers Socialist League), is that both regimes are capitalist and nasty. Socialist Press has perceptively noted that: 'Though neither is a direct client state of imperialism, their anti-imperialist rhetoric cannot hide the fact that both are reactionary governments administered by petty bourgeois demagogues within the framework of domestic and world capitalism.' (Socialist Press October 1980). Socialist Organiser doesn't go any further: 'The war between Iran and Iraq is a war between two reactionary regimes. The outcome can only be further misery for the masses and the national minorities in both countries.' (27th September 1980).

Both of these tendencies are guilty of seeing the Iranian revolution as over. They have both seemingly forgotten that the Iranian revolution did not topple capitalism, but was a revolution nevertheless which revolutionaries would have defended against Iraq if it had invaded in March, April, and May 1979 despite the then reactionary capitalist nature of the regime. It is not the nature of the regime that determines our attitude, precisely because it is not the regime that we are defending-it is specified gains of the revolution that the masses have won for themselves that we defend. We know the regime of Khomeini is 'reactionary', that it attacks the Kurds, women, the left. We know that even during the war the regime has slaughtered 80 Kurds and that Khomeiniite guards ordered the Fedayeen fighters to remove their red arm bands. Do we support or defend this? Of course not! We stand with the Kurds against Khomeini. We stand for total and uninterrupted political opposition to Khomeini. We favour his overthrow and the replacement of his Islamic - Republic by a workers State. We take every opportunity to denounce him and Bani Sadr, who is busily rebuilding the regular Iranian army for reactionary purposes. We would fight to build independent workers organisations-shoras and

workers militia. But if revolutionary politics consisted merely in the repetition of such truths then life would be simple indeed-so it is the simple life that Socialist Organiser and Socialist Press, with their blissful disregard of the concrete circumstances obviously long for.

Childish in the extreme

Is the Iranian revolution over? We would argue that the fact that Khomeini has not been able to consolidate a reactionary regime and has had to rely on the mobilised strength of the armed masses to defend Iran is precisely the difference, not between Khomeini and Hussein's intentions, but between the countries they rein over. Like Chiang Kai-Shek, who the left opposition and Fourth International tirelessly opposed, the Iranian regime can be forced, because it was installed by an anti-imperialist revolution in which the masses played an overwhelming part, into a role they abhor. We do not support them in any way, but while we cannot take the power ourselves, we will fight alongside them, independently and under our own slogans. We would not, if we had revolutionary deputies in the Majlis, give any vote of confidence to the Islamic government-we would not vote them war credits, or any other aid for their war effort. But, at the front, recognising the war as not simply one of capitalism versus capitalism, which is childish in the extreme, we would engage in a military united front against a common enemy, whilst in no way supporting the people that history has chosen, unfortunately, to put alongside us. As Trotsky explained with regard to Spain during a war between two capitalist governments (the one he was arguing for a military united front which was at the time killing Trotskyists and left centrists of the Proudhon):

??We have not the slightest confidence in the capacity of this government to conduct the war and assure victory. We accuse this government of protecting the rich and starving the poor. This government must be smashed. So long as we are not strong enough to replace it, we are fighting under its command. But on every occasion we express openly our nonconfidence in it; it is the only possible way to mobilize the masses politically against this government and to prepare its overthrow. Any other politics would be a betrayal of the revolution.?? (Trotsky ? Answers to Questions on the Spanish situation)

The Socialist Organiser and Socialist Press are defeatist in more than one sense of that word. They are defeatist with regard to the uncompleted Iranian revolution. Its meandering course has led them to give up on developing precise tactics and a definite strategy in circumstances of war and revolution. In the imperialist Britain they will be punished for this only by polemic. In the battle for Abadan ? objectively a battle to defend the Iranian revolution ? there will be little room for the hollow phrasemongering of the WSL and Socialist Organiser.

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