

Terrorism: A Marxist Perspective

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By Dave Holmes

I'd like to begin with a juxtaposition of two events — one which took place just four months ago and the other a long time before.

The first event took place on September 11 last year. A right-wing Islamic fundamentalist organisation opposed to the United States hijacked four planes. They were turned into guided missiles and crashed — with all their passengers on board — into the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. In the event, only three planes got through; one failed to reach its target. The aim of the operation was to deal a spectacular blow to the prestige of the United States and inspire the Islamic world to rise up in support of the fundamentalist goals of the hijackers.

As we know, the material damage was spectacular and the loss of life severe. Up to 4000 people were killed. The victims weren't members of the US ruling class or its political-military leaders; they weren't US military forces in action on some battlefield; they were largely ordinary working people. Clearly, for the perpetrators of this atrocity, the victims didn't count; they were simply what their enemies in the Pentagon like to call "collateral damage" — unfortunate and regrettable but of no great consequence compared to the objective of the operation.

The second event I'd like to consider occurred on January 24, 1878, in tsarist Russia. On that day in St. Petersburg a 28-year old woman named Vera Zasulich shot and wounded General Trepov, the notorious chief of the city's police, who was also responsible for all the prisons in the region. In July the previous year he had ordered the flogging of a young political prisoner called Bogolyubov, arrested for participating

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in an unprecedented demonstration and sentenced to 15 years hard labour in the Siberian mines; he died the day after his flogging.

At her trial, Zasluch explained her motives:

I had heard that ... Bogolyubov was flogged until he stopped groaning ... that soldiers broke into the cells and dragged the protesting prisoners into the punishment cells ... Furthermore among those imprisoned at that time in the House of Preliminary Detention many had already been in prison for three or three and a half years, many had become insane or killed themselves ... All this seemed to me to be not punishment but outrage ... it seemed to me that such things should not be suffered to pass without consequences. I decided that even at the price of my own ruin I had to demonstrate that such degradation of human personality should not be allowed to be inflicted with impunity ... I could find no other way of drawing attention to what had happened ... It is a terrible thing to lift a hand against a human being, but I felt I had to do it ... I fired without aiming ... [She had then immediately thrown the revolver down] I was afraid it might go off again ... I did not want this.¹

In the event, the jury freed her. Her acquittal was an absolute sensation in Russia and a big blow to the tsarist regime. Zasluch had to flee abroad.

Both the September 11 attack and Vera Zasluch's shooting of Trepov can be classified as political terrorism. But in their significance they are worlds apart.

One was an act of callous violence, of complete indifference to human suffering, the act of people whose morality is clearly on the same degenerate level as the imperialist superpower they sought to attack. By contrast, Vera Zasluch's courageous action was motivated by indignation against brutality; she abhorred violence but felt compelled to take a stand in defence of human dignity. ■

Different Types of Terrorism

As socialists we fervently aspire to a society without violence. As Trotsky says in his frequently-quoted 1940 testament: “Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence and enjoy it to the full.”² This is our credo — this is what motivates us — but we know that the realisation of this goal requires a hard revolutionary struggle to replace capitalist society with socialism.

How this struggle unfolds — whether it is peaceful or violent — does not fundamentally depend on us but on the ruling class. Will the imperialist bourgeoisie defend its rotten social order to the bitter end? Will it resort to violence and terror to resist the advance of the masses? We are not pacifists: we believe in the right of the people to defend themselves against the violence of their oppressors. All those struggling for a better world are necessarily forced to confront the question of violence — and terrorism — in its various forms.

We can define terrorism as the use of fear-inducing violence by an individual, a political group or a social class to achieve some aim: it may be simply an act of revenge against injustice; an attempt to stimulate the masses to struggle and revolt; or an attempt to intimidate its opponents, to sap their will or ability to resist.

The question of terrorism is inextricably bound up with the class struggle: that’s where it comes from. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels state that ever since the end of primitive communist society, history is essentially the history of the class struggle. And this history is full of violence and terror from above — by the ruling class — and also of terrorist acts from below — by the oppressed masses. Of course, terrorism is not the only form of political struggle but it is one of the most common, today and historically — and necessarily so.

This talk is not a history of terrorism — that would be an impossibly huge task — but a selective look at the question. We can distinguish three broad categories of terrorism which are of particular interest to us, although this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Firstly, there is terror from above, that is, state or government terror against the

masses and their organisations, carried out either directly by the police and military or through the use of extra-legal gangs, death squads, etc.

We could also include here, as a sub-category, terror from rightist groups who are trying to destabilise the political situation and bring to power a more authoritarian regime which they consider can better defend the bourgeois social system. Such groups may have ties to sections of the ruling class or the state apparatus.

(For the sake of completeness, we should also mention here the police-state terror of the various Stalinist-bureaucratic regimes, now consigned to the rubbish bin of history.)

Secondly, there is terrorism from below, that is, so-called individual terrorism. In Marxist terms this means radical groups pursuing a strategy of terrorist acts against the regime, hoping in this way to destabilise it or inspire the masses to rise up against it. This approach is counterposed to the Marxist strategy of mobilising the broad masses in struggle.

Terrorism from below is not restricted to leftist groups — far from it, as we can see by even a cursory look at national struggles around the world. For instance, the conservative Palestinian Islamic group Hamas organises suicide bombers to penetrate Israel and blow themselves up along with anyone around them, usually ordinary civilians in malls, discos, restaurants, etc.

Thirdly, there is the “terrorism” of a revolutionary regime struggling to defeat the armed counterrevolution. This is different in kind to bourgeois state terror. I’ll say more about it shortly.

Bourgeois terror

In normal times, the bourgeoisie in an advanced capitalist country prefers to rule through a democratic system. This is sometimes called rule by consent. The mass of people accept the legitimacy of the system and channel their struggles through legal forms (parliamentary elections, trade union struggles, demonstrations, etc.). If the system can deliver a certain level of material satisfaction to the masses, this system is quite stable.

However, Trotsky frequently made the point that democracy was only possible for the richest capitalist countries, that is, the imperialist countries. And even here, at certain moments of crisis, the system can break down and the fundamental basis of the capitalist social order can be called into question by large numbers of people. Then the ruling class may be forced to turn to naked dictatorship to maintain its power.

This happened in Italy in the early 1920s and Germany in the early 1930s. The bourgeoisie instituted fascist dictatorships which completely annihilated any independent organisations of the masses and ruled through terror. Of course, these

regimes had some social support but fundamentally they were based on terror against the mass of the working class and peasantry.

Marxist theory teaches that the state is fundamentally a machine for repression. Yes, it carries out a host of other functions (welfare, services, trade and diplomatic representation, etc.) but its primary function is to protect the bourgeois social order, especially in those crisis situations when the normal mechanisms of class rule are no longer effective. At such times, the ruling class turns to dictatorship (whether fascist or military-police), and uses the state to repress and intimidate the mass of people. And if the masses rise up and attempt to overthrow the whole system, the bourgeoisie will seek to intimidate them through terroristic violence.

Colonialism & neocolonialism

Under the heading of state terror we should also place the question of the colonialism and imperialism. If a democratic regime is possible in the metropolitan country, this is only because of the wealth the ruling class derives from its exploitation of the Third World.

In previous times, this was achieved mainly through direct colonial rule. Today colonialism has been replaced by neo-colonialism. That is, the Third World countries are formally sovereign and independent but they remain economically enslaved by imperialism, their economies weak and subordinate.

Here too the ultimate guarantee of subordination is force, violence and terror — and it is far more nakedly employed than in the metropolitan countries. The neo-colonial regimes are armed to the teeth by their masters in order to control their populations and keep the whole mechanism of exploitation working smoothly. And if the puppet regimes can't do the job, imperialism will step in directly with its own armed forces and do what is necessary.

The violence racking Colombia today, for instance, shows how precarious capitalist rule is in the Third World and to what lengths imperialism and the local oligarchy will go in order to maintain itself: the army is engaged permanently in fighting the people, paramilitary death squads murder peasants and trade unionists and through its "Plan Colombia" the US is preparing to massively increase its military support to the regime.

But there is no need to dwell any further on the question of capitalist state terror. It should be clear enough to all of us. I'd like to go on to look at the repression wielded by a victorious popular revolution.

Defending the revolution

Although the proletarian revolution overthrows the capitalist order, it cannot

immediately dispense with the state and measures of repression directed against a section of the population. As Marxists, we know that the state cannot simply be abolished through an act of will by the revolution; it can only wither away as class antagonisms wither away.

In every popular revolution so far, the supporters of the old order have at some stage resisted the new regime arms in hand. This violent opposition must be crushed or the revolution will be overthrown.

The great French bourgeois revolution of the late-18th century faced such a moment. In the year 1793 — the moment of greatest tension in its titanic struggle against the old order — it had to establish a popular dictatorship and carry out extensive repressions against its opponents.

The October 1917 revolutionary overturn in Petrograd was a largely peaceful affair. However, the course of the bloody week-long battle in Moscow provided a foretaste of the atrocious violence the counterrevolutionary forces would later employ.

But the real bloodletting took place in the 1918-20 Civil War. The Soviet regime answered the White Terror of the local counterrevolutionary forces and their imperialist backers with the so-called Red Terror, that is, a series of emergency measures of repression — formation of a special organisation of vigilance and repression (the CHEKA), creation of revolutionary tribunals, restoration of the death penalty and increased resort to executions, the commissar system in the army, taking of hostages, and so on.

Victor Serge's outstanding history, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, contains a whole chapter on the Red Terror ("The Terror and the Will to Victory") discussing its development, its nature, its extent — and its political justification. It is well worth reading. Here I will make only a few basic points.

Firstly, the Russian Revolution did not begin with terror but resorted to it only after several painful experiences with the violence of the counterrevolution.

Secondly, the repressive measures of the Soviet regime were far more limited in scope and nature than those of the Whites — the official figure quoted by Serge gives less than 13,000 people executed by the Reds in the whole Civil War period; the conservative British historian W.H. Chamberlin comes up with an estimate of 50,000.³ But the White terror killed immeasurably more people.

In fact, because the Whites represented only a very small privileged minority in society, they necessarily *had* to carry out massive repression and extensive atrocities in the areas they controlled to intimidate the majority. By contrast, the emergency measures of the revolutionary regime were directed essentially at a minority.

We can see how these realities played out in Finland in 1918. In suppressing the

proletarian revolution there, the Whites killed or sentenced to long prison terms over 100,000 workers — about one-quarter of the entire class.⁴

It would be foolish to deny that atrocities and abuses took place on the Red side in the Russian Civil War. All war is atrocious and civil war is especially atrocious. But the Soviet leaders sought to control and direct the repression and thereby to limit its extent. Fundamentally, the Reds did not emerge victorious because of repression — this played a role, but a secondary one — but because they won the support of the mass of the workers and peasants. The Whites never had this support and therefore had to resort to mass terror and atrocities.

Victor Serge ends his discussion of the Red Terror on a hopeful note:

In 1918, international working-class solidarity was still not strong enough to prevent all foreign intervention from moving in against the revolution. If it had been, revolutionary Russia would easily have been spared four years of civil war. A victorious proletariat which is shielded against foreign invasion by the international solidarity of the workers will need no terror, or else will need it only for a very short time ... Proletarian organisation; class-consciousness; fearless and implacable revolutionary will; active international solidarity: these, we believe, are the factors which, if they are present in a certain degree of strength, may make the Red Terror superfluous in the future.⁵

Certainly the Cuban revolution went through a very different experience and state repression after the seizure of power was much more limited than in Russia. ■



In the neo-colonial Third World, “the ultimate guarantee of subordination is force, violence and terror”. In the early 1950s the United States waged an atrocious counterrevolutionary intervention in Korea to prop up a hated landlord-capitalist regime. Here US troops guard captured North Korean soldiers (Wolmi Island, September 1950).

Russia: Terrorism or Proletarian Revolution?

I now want to look at the question of individual terrorism, which is probably of most interest to us as it involves a discussion of the strategy required to actually make a revolution. As with many things, a good place to start is with the Russian revolutionary movement, which had a long and extensive experience with terrorism.

In the mid 19th century, Russia was ruled by an absolutist regime based on the four institutions of serfdom, a landowning nobility, the Russian Orthodox state church and tsarist autocracy. But even though the revolutionary storms which convulsed Western Europe passed Russia by, it was apparent to the regime that some reform was needed to accommodate capitalist economic development.

In February 1861, Tsar Alexander II issued a decree abolishing serfdom. However, the mass of the peasantry received no real benefit; feudal subjection and labour services were simply replaced by economic slavery. The reform gave the peasants tiny plots of land which were insufficient to provide a living; and while the landlords were immediately compensated by the state, the new peasant owners had to pay for their plots through annual instalments; they also had to pay taxes to the state. And as the rural population increased, the peasant plots became even smaller. The mass of the peasants became hopelessly indebted and subject to periodic famine.

However, while the reform failed to satisfy the mass of the people and generated widespread hostility once the reality sank in, the abolition of serfdom was a boon for the development of capitalism: over the next decade agricultural exports sharply increased as did the supply of labour available for the factories.

The 1860s were a time of increased repression by the regime and the emergence of oppositional currents based on the country's tiny intelligentsia. In his wonderful biography, *The Young Lenin*, Trotsky gives a sketch of this layer, which plays such a prominent role in this period:

The decomposition of the feudal society proceeded at a faster pace than the formation

of the bourgeoisie. The intelligentsia, a product of the decay of the old classes, found neither an adequate demand for its skills nor a sphere for its political influence. It broke with the nobility, the bureaucracy, the clergy, with their stale culture and serf-owning traditions, but it did not effect a rapprochement with the bourgeoisie, which was still too primitive and crude. It felt itself to be socially independent, yet at the same time it was choking in the clutches of tsarism. Thus, after the fall of serfdom, the intelligentsia formed almost the sole nutritive medium for revolutionary ideas — especially its younger generation, the poorest of the intellectual youth, university students, seminarians, high-school boys, a majority of them not above the proletariat in their standard of living and many below it. The state, having need of an intelligentsia, reluctantly created one by means of its schools. The intelligentsia, having need of a reformed regime, became an enemy of the state. The political life of the country thus for a long time assumed the form of a duel between the intelligentsia and the police, with the fundamental classes of society almost entirely passive.⁶

In 1862 the secret revolutionary organisation Land and Freedom was formed. It only lasted a few months before it was suppressed but its name and the moment of its appearance were symptomatic.

On April 4, 1866, a 25-year-old former student named Dimitry Karakozov fired at the tsar. He missed but his attempt touched off an orgy of police terror.

A striking feature of the revolutionary movement of the intelligentsia in this period was the heavy involvement of young women. Typically, in the small oppositional circles and groups there was an intense comradeship and a real equality of the sexes.

One of these groups which formed in 1869-71 was the circle around Nikolai Chaykovsky (the Chaykovists). In his history of the Bolshevik party, Grigori Zinoviev calls the Chaykovists “the first revolutionary group”. A number of its members, such as Sofia Perovskaya, Peter Kropotkin, Sergei Kravchinsky and Mark Natanson became famous names in Russian revolutionary history.

Populist movement

This is the period of the narodnik or populist movement (after *narod*, the Russian word for people). The populists thought that Russia could avoid capitalism and could move straight to a peasant “socialism” based on the old Russian rural commune; accordingly they saw no special role for the working class; they believed in the obligation of enlightened minorities towards the people. But they were revolutionary in that they wished to destroy tsarist autocracy.

The spring of 1874 in Russia witnessed an amazing phenomenon as thousands of idealistic young radicals, mostly former students, streamed into the countryside to



1881: Execution of condemned People's Will terrorists, following assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

merge with the people.

Singly or in twos and threes [writes Vera Broido in her book *Apostles into Terrorists*], dressed to look like poor folk and sometimes even barefoot, they went from town to town and from village to village seeking work and trying to settle among the people. Many of them were between 16 and 20 years old; those between 20 and 25 were called “the old ones” by the rest ...

The young *felt* strongly about inequality, injustice, and oppression and *felt* that their place was among the unjustly oppressed. They wanted to share the lowly life of the people and its misery as an atonement for what they called their privileges, including that of education. They *felt* that the privileged owed a moral debt to the people, and they were resolved to pay it.⁷

This “chaotic mass pilgrimage of the intelligentsia to the people”,⁸ as Trotsky calls it, was soon crushed by the authorities. There were mass arrests. Eventually only one group went to trial several years later — this was the famous “trial of the 193” in February 1877.

In 1876 Mark Natanson formed the clandestine revolutionary organisation Land and Freedom (named after the earlier short-lived group of 1862). In December of that year an unprecedented demonstration took place in St. Petersburg outside the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan. The red banner of Land and Freedom was unfurled and the 20-year-old Georgi Plekhanov made a speech. The demonstrators were attacked and beaten and savage sentences handed out. The student Bogolyubov, later flogged to death by General Trepov, was one of those protesting.

The repression and trials led to a new stage in the development of the Russian revolutionary movement, exemplified by Vera Zasulich’s shooting of Trepov. 1878 saw a wave of terrorist attacks across Russia as spies, informers and government officials were executed. The concepts of “revolutionary justice” and “a life for a life” became widespread. As the underground journal *Land and Freedom* explained:

As long as the present regime is based on the abuse of power by *individuals*, from the tsar down to the lowest watchman ... we shall continue the most merciless fight against such individuals.⁹

The regime responded with more repression. There were a number of public executions. Although the courage of the condemned prisoners impressed the public and inspired the terrorists, the masses did not move. The terrorists concluded that merely killing the tsar’s underlings would not do; the tsar was the core of the regime and he must be eliminated.

The People's Will

In August 1879, Land and Freedom split over the question of terrorism. The People's Will was formed to avenge the sufferings of the people. Its Executive Committee comprised most of its active forces; among its outstanding figures were Andrei Zhelyabov, Sofia Perovskaya, Nikolai Kibalchich and Vera Figner. As Trotsky explains:

The whole organisation was reconstructed to answer the needs of terrorist struggle. All forces and funds were devoted to the preparation of assassinations ... The People's Will set itself the task of achieving a revolution by terrorist "disorganisation" of the government ... the intelligentsia, isolated from the people and at the same time pushed forward into the historic vanguard by the whole course of events, tried to offset its social weakness by multiplying it with the explosive force of dynamite ... The revolutionary struggle turned into a contest between the Executive Committee and the police.¹⁰

They soon came to focus exclusively on eliminating the tsar: he was formally condemned to death by the Executive Committee. After numerous failed attempts, on March 1, 1881, they finally succeeded in killing Alexander. Perovskaya, Zhelyabov, Kibalchich and two other terrorists were executed; others were jailed in terrible conditions (Vera Figner spent 20 years in solitary confinement in the island fortress-prison of Schlüsselburg). This was really the end of the People's Will. Up to March 1881 its membership had never exceeded 37 people.

There was a last echo of this phase of the terrorist struggle. In March 1887 a group planning an attempt on the life of Tsar Alexander III was broken up. The most important figure in the group was Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's elder brother. He and four other defendants were executed; their ages barely totalled 110 years. Lenin was nine at the time.

There was no revolutionary class behind the People's Will. But the 1880s and 1890s saw a big development of capitalism in Russia. A large industrial proletariat was consolidated. The first attempts at Marxist organisation were made: in 1883 Plekhanov formed the émigré Emancipation of Labour Group in Switzerland; in 1895, in St. Petersburg, Lenin and Martov formed the Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class.

SR Party: the strategy of terrorism

In 1901-02 the Socialist-Revolutionary Party was formed out of various populist groups and circles. Its social base was the peasantry and the provincial intelligentsia. It called itself "socialist" but did not see the class difference between the proletariat and the peasantry and rejected the idea of the leading role of the working class in the revolution;

it glossed over the class differences within the peasantry; it advocated nationalisation of the land and an equalitarian land distribution (which as Lenin stressed, was not in itself a socialist measure); and it advocated terrorism as the main weapon against the autocracy. Among its most prominent figures were Yekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya, Grigori Gershuni, Mikhail Gotz, Victor Chernov and Evno Azef.

In 1902 Gershuni founded the SR Combat Organisation. Its first act was the assassination later that year of Minister of Education Sipyagin by the student Balmashev (who was later executed). The following year the governor of Ufa was also assassinated.

Later it was revealed that Azef was an agent of the Okhrana, the tsarist secret police. In 1903 he had Gershuni arrested and he became head of the Combat Organisation (along with a young man named Boris Savinkov who later plays a certain role in the 1918-20 Civil War). In 1904, the Combat Organisation assassinated the prime minister, von Plehve — that is, the terrorist group led by the police agent Azef killed the head of the tsar's government! Numerous other executions followed. In 1909 Azef's exposure caused a sensation (Trotsky refers to it in his article "The Bankruptcy of Terror"¹¹).

The Social-Democratic movement waged an intense political struggle against the terrorist strategy of the SRs. In a mid-1902 article by Lenin, entitled "Why the Social-Democrats Must Declare a Determined and Relentless War on the Socialist-Revolutionaries", he argues that:

... the Socialist-Revolutionaries, by including terrorism in their program, and advocating it in its present-day form as a means of political struggle, are thereby doing the most serious harm to the movement, destroying the indissoluble ties between socialist work and the mass of the revolutionary class. No verbal assurances and vows can disprove the unquestionable fact that present-day terrorism, as practised and advocated by the Socialist-Revolutionaries, is *not connected in any way* with work among the masses; for the masses, or together with the masses; that the organisation of terroristic acts by the party distracts our very scanty organisational forces from their difficult and by no means completed task of organising a revolutionary *workers'* party; that *in practice* the terrorism of the Socialist-Revolutionaries is nothing else than single combat, a method that has been wholly condemned by the experience of history.¹²

In their underground newspaper *Revolutionary Russia*, the SRs advanced a number of arguments for terrorism: they claimed it "compels people to think politically, even against their will"; "more effectively than months of verbal propaganda it is capable of changing the views ... of thousands of people with regard to the revolutionaries and the meaning of their activity"; and terrorism was capable of "infusing new strength into the waverers, those discouraged and shocked by the sad outcome of many

demonstrations” (that is, which had been broken up by the police). Lenin rejected these claims: they simply sowed illusions which would quickly lead to disappointment among the masses and get in the way of organising a mass challenge to the regime.

The SRs sought to deflect the arguments of the Social-Democrats against terrorism by claiming that they too stood for work among the masses. But the reality was that terrorism was their central strategy for the struggle against the autocracy. In his August 1902 article “Revolutionary Adventurism”, Lenin quotes from an authoritative SR leaflet:

Every terrorist blow [argued the SRs] ... takes away part of the strength of the autocracy and transfers [!] all this strength [!] to the side of the fighters for freedom ... And if terrorism is practiced systematically [!], it is obvious that the scales of the balance will finally weigh down on our side.

Lenin describes the theory that political assassinations “transfer strength” as “one of the greatest prejudices of the terrorists”. He continues, quoting from the SR leaflet:

“Against the crowd the autocracy has its soldiers; against the revolutionary organisations its secret and uniformed police; but what will save it ...” (what kind of “it” is this? The autocracy? The author has unwittingly identified the autocracy with a target in the person of a minister whom it is easier to strike down!) “... from individuals or small groups that are ceaselessly, and even in ignorance of one another [!], preparing for attack, and are attacking? No force will be of avail against elusiveness. Hence, our task is clear: to remove every one of the autocracy’s brutal oppressors by the only means that has been left [!] us by the autocracy — death”¹³

Against these claims, Lenin argues that, in fact:

... the only “hope” of the revolution is the “crowd”; that only a revolutionary organisation which leads this crowd (in deed and not in word) can fight against the police — all this is ABC. It is shameful to have to prove this. And only people who have forgotten everything and learned absolutely nothing could have decided “the other way about”, arriving at the fabulous, howling stupidity that the autocracy can be “saved” from the crowd by soldiers, and from revolutionary organisations by the police, but that there is *no salvation* from individuals who hunt down ministers!!¹⁴

The SR leaflet again put forward the theory of “excitative terrorism”: “Each time a hero engages in single combat, this arouses in us all a spirit of struggle and courage.” Lenin comments that:

... *only* new forms of the mass movement or the awakening of new sections of the masses to independent struggle really rouses a spirit of struggle *in all*. Single combat however, inasmuch as it remains *single combat* waged by the Balmashovs, has the immediate effect of simply creating a shortlived sensation, while indirectly it even

leads to apathy and passive waiting for the next *bout*.¹⁵

In November 1902, a strike erupted in the provincial city of Rostov-on-Don. It initially involved some thousands of workers and concerned purely economic demands. But it quickly took off from there and led to events without precedent in Russia. Crowds of 20,000-30,000 people held political meetings and discussed Social-Democratic leaflets and ideas. The army units became unreliable and the mass open-air gatherings continued undisturbed for several days. Finally, reliable army units were brought in and the crowd offered desperate resistance. Six demonstrators were killed; the funeral of one was the occasion for another demonstration.

In his December 1902 article “New Events and old Questions”, Lenin contrasted this tremendous popular manifestation with the claims made by the Socialist-Revolutionaries for the strategy of terrorism.

We believe [wrote Lenin] that even a hundred regicides can never produce so stimulating and educational an effect as this participation of tens of thousands of working people in meetings where their vital interests and the links between politics and these interests are discussed, as this participation in a struggle, which really *rouses* ever new and “untapped” sections of the proletariat to greater political consciousness, to a broader revolutionary struggle.¹⁶

Furthermore, against the SR claim that killing ministers “disorganised” the government, Lenin argued that only a rapid development of the mass struggle really disorganised the regime and that all the forces of the revolutionary movement had to be concentrated on providing leadership for such a struggle.

Nature of our opposition to terrorism

The Social-Democrats, Lenin explained, were not opposed to violence and terrorism in principle but supported “such forms of violence as were calculated to bring about the direct participation of the masses and which guaranteed that participation”.¹⁷ Of course, this can only be contemplated when the popular struggle has reached a certain level of intensity and the advance of the people is being resisted by those in power.

James P. Cannon makes a similar point in his polemic with Grandizo Munis in *Socialism on Trial*:

Sabotage, to us, means individual acts of obstruction and destruction, substituted for mass action. That is the way Marxism defines it and, thereby, condemns it. Similarly, individual terrorism. But it is necessary to understand that such actions have one quality when employed as *substitutes* for mass action and another quality when subordinated to and absorbed by mass action. Marxism is opposed to terrorist assassinations, for example, but not to wars of liberation waged by the oppressed

masses, even though wars entail some killing of obnoxious individuals. So, also, with acts of obstruction and destruction as *part of* and *subordinate* to wars waged by the masses, not as substitutes for them. “Terrorism” and “sabotage” are then no longer the same things. Everything changes, including the attitude of Marxists, according to what is *dominant* and what is *subordinate* in the circumstances.¹⁸

In 1905, the first Russian Revolution erupted. Its climax was the December general strike and uprising in Moscow, which was crushed by the army after heavy fighting. But the ferment in the country continued for some time; terrorist actions were very widespread.

Terror from above was supplemented by terror from below [explains Trotsky in his biography of Stalin]. [The fight of] the routed insurrectionists continued convulsively for a long time in the form of scattered local explosions, guerrilla raids, group and individual terrorist acts. The course of the revolution was characterised with remarkable clarity by statistics of the terror. 233 persons were assassinated in 1905; 768 in 1906; 1231 in 1907. The number of wounded showed a somewhat different ratio, since the terrorists were learning to be better shots. The terrorist wave reach its crest in 1907. “There were days”, wrote a liberal observer, “when several big acts of terror were accompanied by as many as scores of minor attempts and assassinations of lower rank officialdom ... Bomb laboratories were established in all cities, the bombs destroying some of their careless makers” ...

On the whole [continues Trotsky], the three-year period from 1905 through 1907 is particularly notable for both terrorist acts and strikes. But what stands out is the divergence between their statistical records: while the number of strikers fell off rapidly from year to year, the number of terrorist acts mounted with equal rapidity. Clearly, individual terrorism increased as the mass movement declined. Yet terrorism could not grow stronger indefinitely. The impetus unleashed by the revolution was bound to spend itself in terrorism as it had spent itself in other spheres. Indeed, while there were 1231 assassinations in 1907, they dropped to 400 in 1908 and to about a hundred in 1909. The growing percentage of the merely wounded indicated, moreover, that now the shooting was being done by untrained amateurs, mostly by callow youngsters.¹⁹

In his September 1906 article, “Guerrilla Warfare”, Lenin grappled with the armed struggle being waged by across the country in that year. In addition to assassinations, this struggle also embraced expropriations — bank holdups and the like — in order to raise funds for the revolutionary movement.

The usual appraisal of the struggle we are describing [Lenin writes] is that it is anarchism, Blanquism, the old terrorism, the acts of individuals isolated from the masses, which demoralise the workers, repel wide strata of the population, disorganise the movement

and injure the revolution.²⁰

However, he gives the example of the struggle in Latvia to suggest that the reality was in fact quite different. The Latvian Social-Democratic newspaper, he reported, had a regular circulation of 30,000 copies.

The announcement columns [he went on] publish lists of spies whom it is the duty of every decent person to exterminate. People who assist the police are proclaimed “enemies of the revolution”, liable to execution and, moreover, to confiscation of property. The public is instructed to give money to the Social-Democratic Party only against signed and stamped receipt.²¹

Furthermore, funds to purchase arms were obtained by expropriations.

Nobody will be so bold [Lenin continues] as to call these activities of the Lettish [Latvian] Social-Democrats anarchism, Blanquism or terrorism. But why? Because here we have a *clear* connection between the new form of struggle and the uprising which broke out in December and which is again brewing. This connection is not so perceptible in the case of Russia as a whole, but it exists.

Lenin goes on to argue that:

Guerrilla warfare is an inevitable form of struggle at a time when the mass movement has actually reached the point of an uprising and when fairly large intervals occur between the “big engagements” in the civil war.

It is not guerrilla actions which disorganise the movement, but the weakness of the party which is incapable of taking such actions *under its control*.

... It is not guerrilla warfare which demoralises, but *unorganised*, irregular, non-party guerrilla acts.²²

As time went by, and it was clear that there would be no new rise of the mass movement, Lenin’s assessment of the assassinations and expropriations would change. But his 1906 article makes clear that our opposition to such forms of struggle as terrorism is not absolute. What Marxists oppose is the strategy of “individual terrorism” substituted for the strategy of mobilising the masses. If we are in a situation of civil war or incipient civil war and terrorist actions are firmly subordinated to the wider struggle, it is a different question; then it becomes a question of political and military expediency. ■

West Germany: The Red Army Faction

The Russian experience of terrorism can be termed classical, in particular because the social-democratic movement there was formed in fierce political struggle against it and because outstanding Marxists like Lenin and Trotsky wrote so much against it.

But in our own time, in the advanced capitalist world, groups of embittered radicals have also turned to terrorism, believing it to be the only way, or the most effective way, to combat the imperialist system.

In the late 1960s and 1970s in what was then the Federal Republic of Germany — West Germany — the Baader-Meinhof Group — later known as the Red Army Faction — carried out a terrorist campaign against the system. In fact, this campaign continued even after the deaths of its founding leaders in 1977; the RAF continued to carry out violent activities in the later 1970s and through the 1980s, only laying down its weapons in 1993.

The experience of the Baader-Meinhof Group is worth studying because it shows how — under certain historical-political conditions — a small group of courageous, deeply-motivated people can come to believe that the terrorist dead-end is in fact the path which leads toward a socialist society.

In the later 1960s, a strong radical movement developed in West Germany but it was largely confined to the campuses. One factor in its development was opposition to the rightward evolution of the Social-Democratic Party (SPD).

In 1955 the SPD had come out for conscription and rearmament; in 1959 it completely severed all connection with its Marxist past and described itself not as a workers' but a people's party; and it proscribed membership in the left-wing SDS — the Socialist Students Union of Germany. In 1966, in the wake of a serious economic and political crisis, it entered a "grand coalition" with the Christian Democrats. In 1968 it supported the passage of the repressive and wide-ranging "Emergency Laws".

The Nazi past also loomed large in the minds of many young radicals. They were

determined not to stand by — as had so many of their parents' generation during the Nazi period — while a similar phenomenon installed itself in power again. All around them they saw reminders of the past: the Nazi-era judges and officials who still occupied high posts in the state apparatus despite the supposed postwar “de-Nazification” overseen by the Allies, the deeply conservative attitudes of official society, the moves towards a repressive state, etc.

The malign power of the tabloid empire of publisher Axel Springer, with its huge circulation and influence, was also detested by many progressive Germans.

‘We must organise resistance’

June 2, 1967 marked a turning point in the development of the new radical movement. Amid unprecedented security, the bloodstained Shah of Iran arrived in West Berlin during his state visit to the Federal Republic. When he attended the city's Opera House that evening, a protest demonstration took place outside. It was violently attacked, not only by the city police but also by Iranian SAVAK secret police agents acting with complete impunity; even when demonstrators tried to flee they were chased and bloodily beaten. A 26-year-old student, Benno Ohnesorg, was shot and killed by a cop. In his excellent book *The Baader-Meinhof Group*, Stefan Aust explains the radical reaction to this police pogrom:

Beaten, desperate and filled with hatred, many of the demonstrators met that night at the Berlin SDS centre ... There was much agitated discussion of the form reaction to Benno Ohnesorg's death should take. A slim young woman with blonde hair was weeping uncontrollably, crying: “This fascist state means to kill us all. We must organise resistance. Violence is the only way to answer violence. This is the Auschwitz generation, and there's no arguing with them!” Gudrun Ensslin [who went on to become a founder and a key leader of the Red Army Faction] had said exactly what many of them were thinking and feeling.²³

1968 was a turbulent year in world politics. So it was in the Federal Republic too.

On April 11 in West Berlin, a young right-wing fanatic, filled with hate by the reactionary press, attempted to kill Rudi Dutschke, a prominent figure in the SDS. Dutschke survived, but radical opinion was shocked and inflamed. Many blamed the Springer press for inciting the assassination attempt.

Fifty thousand turned out for the May Day demonstration in West Berlin. That same year 60,000 demonstrated in Bonn against the passage of the Emergency Laws; there was also a wave of campus strikes and occupations against the legislation.

Through most of this turbulent year, Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, future founders of the RAF, were in custody. On April 2 they had carried out an arson attack

on a Frankfurt department store. At her trial, Ensslin explained: “We did it in protest against people’s indifference to the murder of the Vietnamese.”²⁴ Solidarity with Third World struggles was a very strong element in the political make-up of the founders of the RAF.

Many years later, jailed former-RAF member Horst Mahler explained this aspect of the group’s outlook:

We thought that the people were not strong enough to liberate themselves. Unable to identify with them, we had found another identity in the Third World. From then on, we no longer felt like Germans, but like a “fifth column” of the Third World in the Western capitals ... The people weren’t moving, we thought, because they were afraid of the state. Therefore, they had to be shown that the state was vulnerable.²⁵

From approximately mid-1970, when Baader was sprung from custody by Ulrike Meinhof and Ensslin, to mid-1972, when the four central RAF leaders were arrested, the RAF was very active and achieved considerable notoriety.

The name Red Army Faction was chosen in 1971; its logo consisted of the letters RAF over a Kalashnikov sub-machine gun.

The RAF members became the object of a sustained police hunt across West Germany. That they eluded the authorities for so long was partly due to a significant pool of sympathy, even from people who did not agree with their views. In fact, a May 1971 public opinion poll found 5% of West Germans were prepared to give shelter to RAF fighters; in north Germany this figure rose to 10%. The same poll recorded that 25% of West Germans under the age of 30 admitted to feeling “a certain sympathy” for the RAF. However, the survey was taken just a week after a shoot-out in Hamburg in which a young woman member of the RAF was shot dead by the police, the first death in the terrorist campaign, and this must surely have made some contribution to the surprising level of sympathy for the terrorists.²⁶

The conservative press whipped up a witch-hunt atmosphere. It was in this climate in January 1972 that SPD Chancellor Willy Brandt and the West German state presidents issued the so-called Radicals Edict. Commonly known as the “Berufsverbot” or jobs ban, this measure barred from public service employment anyone who belonged to an organisation which “pursues aims inimical to the constitution” or who was deemed not to support “the basic principles of free democracy”. It was aimed squarely at the socialist left; it was used, for example, to prevent Ernest Mandel from lecturing in the Federal Republic for many years.

‘Give up, Ulrike!’

In November 1971, the radical journal *konkret* published a dramatic open letter by

Renate Riemeck, herself a radical and Ulrike Meinhof's foster mother whom she had once very much admired. It was headed: "Give up, Ulrike!"

We were in full agreement [she said] on the justification for attacking institutions and structures ... You had no illusions about the actual strength of the power machine. It all turned out just as might have been foreseen: when the movement failed to bring about solidarity between the masses who depend on a wage, when revolution conspicuously failed to materialise, disappointment was inevitable.

The Federal Republic is not the place for an urban guerrilla movement in the Latin American style. This country offers, at most, suitable conditions for a gangster drama. Ulrike, you know that you and your friends can expect nothing but bitter enmity from the German public. You also know that you are condemned to play the part of a company of spectres serving the forces of reaction as an excuse for a massive revival of that anti-communist witch-hunt which was perceptibly discouraged by the student movement.

Who — apart from a handful of sympathisers — still understands the political and moral impulse behind your actions? A spirit of sacrifice and the readiness to face death become ends in themselves if one cannot make them understood.²⁷

In May 1972, the US air force mined harbours in North Vietnam. In response, the RAF exploded three pipe bombs in a US army base in Frankfurt; one person was killed and 13 injured. The RAF issued a declaration:

West Germany and West Berlin will no longer be a safe hinterland for the strategists of extermination in Vietnam. They must know that their crimes against the Vietnamese people have made them new and bitter enemies, that there will be nowhere in the world left where they can be safe from the attacks of revolutionary guerrilla units.²⁸

In June, in cities across the country five central RAF leaders were arrested — Jan-Carl Raspe, Holger Meins, Baader, Ensslin and Meinhof. They would spend the remainder of their short lives in prison.

Widespread debate

The apparent destruction of the RAF, the main left terrorist group in the country, touched off an extensive discussion in the German press. The validity of the RAF's strategy was widely debated in the radical movement. The June 1972 issue of *Was Tun*, the newspaper of one of the West German Fourth Internationalist groups, contributed to this debate with a lengthy article on "Armed Struggle or Class Struggle".

The socialist revolution in the capitalist metropolises [argued *Was Tun*] will not be the product of armed action by a small minority, but will grow out of great mass struggles — strikes, in the course of which the workers occupy the factories, form strike committees



Top: Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin in court during 1968 trial for arson attacks on Frankfurt department stores. *Bottom:* Friends and supporters surround the coffins of Baader, Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe, Stuttgart, 1977.

on a local, regional, and national scale, take the means of production into their own hands, and through their control of production eliminate capitalist exploitation. Through this they will create their own organs of self-defence against the armed resistance of the bourgeoisie.

... in an advanced industrial country with a democratic parliamentary regime and where the workers' movement is legal, revolutionary violence must have a defensive and not an offensive appearance. That is, it must consist of the self-defence of the workers' and socialist movement against the armed gangs of capital. The task of the left is not to organise senseless armed commando action, but to mobilise the working masses.

... Mass support is crucial for armed struggle. That is, the ruling class must be at the end of its rope and the masses must recognise the necessity of armed struggle. Ultimately, this can only mean one thing: civil war.²⁹

The terrorist "armed struggle" strategy, *Was Tun* emphasised, could only leave the masses passive onlookers in a one-sided contest between a small group of necessarily isolated radicals and the forces of the state.

Death of Holger Meins

The main RAF prisoners were confined in very harsh conditions. The principal means used by the state to break them down was isolation — variously from each other, from other prisoners, from human contact, from all sound. Over the years, they staged a number of hunger strikes to gain more humane conditions of imprisonment.

On November 9, 1974, Holger Meins died from the effects of his hunger strike and the torture of forced feeding by the authorities. The next day Günter von Drenkmann, Berlin's senior judge, was killed in the course of a kidnap attempt by the June 2 Movement, another terrorist group. Drenkmann had never had any professional connection with terrorist cases or with the conditions of imprisonment of RAF members and was actually quite liberal. The killing showed the complete political bankruptcy of individual terrorism. Holger Meins' death had put the authorities on the back foot over the jail regime of the RAF prisoners. Drenkmann's death was a godsend for the state authorities and enabled them to regain the initiative. As *Was Tun* commented:

The Drenkmann assassination was not *revolutionary* violence. It was also not a simple "tactical error". It was a crime against solidarity with the political prisoners.³⁰

Nevertheless, the RAF prisoners' struggle against their harsh jail conditions won them a far wider sympathy and support than they had ever gained for their political views. Springer's *Bild* reported Holger Meins' funeral with the headline: "Revenge! 2000 shout in Hamburg at the grave of Holger Meins." Rudi Dutschke, himself the victim of

rightist terrorism, who completely opposed the RAF politically, attended the funeral in solidarity and later visited Jan-Carl Raspe in prison. The gutter press, of course, made a real meal of this.

Although most of the sympathy was on the prison issue, a number of people were won over politically and swelled the ranks of the RAF.

1975 saw two major terrorist actions. In February, Peter Lorenz, the CDU mayoral candidate in West Berlin was kidnapped by the June 2 Movement and exchanged for a number of jailed terrorists. And in April RAF sympathisers stormed the West German embassy in Stockholm, demanding the freeing of 26 RAF prisoners in the Federal Republic, including the four principal RAF figures. The government refused to negotiate and the terrorists killed a hostage. In the event, an explosion rocked the embassy leading to the deaths of two hostages and two terrorists and bringing the episode to a close.

The next month the trial of the four RAF leaders began in the Baden-Württemberg town of Stammheim in a super-secure prison-court complex. The presiding judge pretended to regard it as a “normal criminal case” whereas it was clearly a political trial. There were continual clashes as the defendants tried to explain their political motivation.

There was also considerable tension between the defendants and their lawyers. (One of the defence lawyers was Otto Schily, today the interior minister in the SPD-Green government in Bonn — a colleague of that other ex-radical, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer.)

Early in the trial, the defendants contested the official definition of terrorism. Ulrike Meinhof argued that:

Terrorism is the destruction of utilities such as dykes, waterworks, hospitals, power stations. All the targets at which the American bomb attacks in North Vietnam were systematically aimed from 1965 onwards. Terrorism operates amidst fear of the masses. The city guerrilla movement, on the other hand, carries fear to the machinery of the state ... The actions of urban guerrillas are never, never directed against the people. They are always directed against the imperialist machine. The urban guerrilla fights the terrorism of the state.³¹

On May 8, 1976, Ulrike Meinhof was found hanged in her cell at Stammheim. It was officially declared to be suicide although there was some suspicion in radical circles. At her funeral in Berlin 4000 mourners followed her coffin to the cemetery. She was an exceptional person who felt acutely the pain and suffering around her; despairing of the ability of the masses to move, she had come to see terrorism as the only possible option.

The trial continued with the three remaining defendants.

1977: A year of dramatic events

1977 turned out to be a year filled with dramatic events.

On April 7 Federal Prosecutor General Siegfried Buback was assassinated in Karlsruhe by a group calling itself the Ulrike Meinhof Commando; his driver and another passenger were also killed.

Later that month Baader, Ensslin and Raspe were found guilty on various murder charges and sentenced to life imprisonment.

On July 30, the RAF assassinated Jürgen Ponto, the head of the powerful Dresdner Bank.

On September 5, Hanns Martin Schleyer, President of the Employers Association of the Federal Republic, was kidnapped by the RAF; his driver and three bodyguards were killed. The kidnappers demanded the release of 11 RAF prisoners. The government resolved not to give in to the kidnappers' demands, that is, to sacrifice the most prominent business leader in the country.

On October 13, a Lufthansa jet was hijacked. The Arab hijackers demanded the release of the 11 RAF prisoners plus two Palestinians jailed in Turkey.

On October 17, a German commando unit stormed the plane at Mogadishu in Somalia, killing four hijackers and badly wounding the fifth.

The following morning, on October 18, Baader, Ensslin and Raspe were found dead in their cells at Stammheim. Baader and Raspe had been shot and Ensslin had been hanged. A fourth RAF member, Irmgard Möller had been stabbed four times in the chest but survived.

On October 19, the body of Schleyer was found in Mulhouse in France; he had been shot.

The official verdict on Stammheim was suicide and attempted suicide. However, there were so many serious problems with the official story that it was widely believed that the RAF prisoners had been executed by the authorities. And this remains the most probable explanation.

As an aside, I'd like to mention the 1981 film by the German director Margarethe von Trotta, *Dark Times* — also known variously as *The Leaden Years* (from its German title, *Die Bleierne Zeit*), *German Sisters* and *Marianne and Juliane*. It was screened several times by SBS TV in the 1980s. It powerfully evokes the political atmosphere of the late 1960s and early '70s and the political psychology of many young German radicals. The story of *Dark Times* was inspired by the experience of Gudrun Ensslin and her sister Christine. In the film Marianne and Juliane are the daughters of a

Protestant pastor. Both are committed to social change but Marianne joins a terrorist organisation whereas her sister is a journalist and a feminist active in the women's movement and the fight for abortion rights. Despite their deep political differences there is a strong bond between them. Marianne is captured and jailed and her sister becomes her link to the outside world. When Marianne is found dead in her isolation cell Juliane becomes completely consumed by her quest to uncover the truth about what really happened to her sister. It is an outstanding political film.

Political balance sheet

The Schleyer killing provided the West German authorities with the excuse for a massive witch-hunt against radicals and nonconformists. Anyone who expressed any doubts or criticism of the system was liable to be smeared as a sympathiser of terrorism. Gudrun Ensslin's father, for instance, expressed doubts that his daughter had committed suicide: he was charged with "slandering the state".³²

In his book, Stefan Aust gives the physical balance sheet of seven years of RAF terrorism in West Germany as 47 people dead: 28 had been killed in RAF attacks or in shooting incidents; 17 urban guerrillas were dead and two wholly innocent people had been accidentally shot by police in the course of their investigations. In addition, of course, numerous other people had been affected — lives had been wrecked by being touched by the violence or by being condemned to long jail terms.

However, the political balance sheet is more important. Perhaps as many as several hundred young people had been diverted into the political blind-alley of individual terrorism. The RAF's "propaganda of the deed" did not stimulate the masses to struggle — exactly the opposite took place. The sole political result of their passion and struggle had been to provide the West German bourgeoisie with the political cover to instigate a witch-hunt against the progressive movement and to intimidate people from fighting against the system. The misguided terrorism of the RAF enabled the real terrorists — the bourgeoisie, its state and its accomplices in the media lie-machine — to fool the mass of the people for a little longer.

But even in this period, while the mass movement was at a relatively low ebb it was not nonexistent. In the late sixties, there were the extensive protests against the emergency laws; the first half of the seventies saw the development of a big movement to legalise abortion and there were several large-scale actions; the fight against political blacklisting was becoming stronger; and even as the drama of Stammheim was unfolding, the antinuclear movement was growing. The RAF's rationale for terrorism — that the masses were not moving — was false. As always, it is necessary to study the situation very carefully and to have an historical perspective.

Conclusion

I had hoped to look at the other striking example of leftist terrorism in an advanced capitalist country — the Red Brigades in Italy in the 1970s and '80s — but there is no time. However, I would like to refer briefly to one chapter in their history.

Many comrades may have seen the recent SBS TV series on political assassinations and, in particular, the episode which dealt with the 1978 kidnapping and killing of former Italian prime minister and Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. The documentary made a persuasive case for the view that elements of military intelligence were manipulating the Red Brigades in order to get rid of Moro, who was the driving force behind moves to bring the Communist Party into mainstream Italian political life (in order to better run the capitalist system).

If this scenario is correct, then the Moro affair becomes a modern version of the Azef incident. It highlights the susceptibility of conspiratorial terrorist work to police penetration and manipulation. The Russian Bolsheviks also had to deal with police penetration of their party — the Malinovsky case, where their parliamentary fraction was headed by a police agent, is the most striking instance — but because of their focus on open political struggle and democratic forms of organisation, the police were never able to control or destroy them.



Finally — left-wing terrorism has no history in this country but could it ever arise here? In the abstract, the answer is yes. If the crimes of the ruling class become so brazen and violent and it seems that they are operating with impunity and the opposition forces appear weak and impotent, some radicals might despair of building a mass movement of opposition and begin to play with the illusory “shortcut” of stimulating the masses by “propaganda of the deed” and so on.

However, the biggest obstacle to such a disastrous development is precisely ourselves. The stronger the Marxist movement, the movement of revolutionary socialism, the less chance there will be of such moods ever getting much support. The more effective we are at building the various movements of resistance and struggle, the more effective we are at building a broad, militant socialist party in this country, the more effective we are at combating both opportunism and ultraleftism, the less chance there is that in the future groups of despairing, embittered radicals will turn towards the political blind-alley of terrorism. ■

Appendix

Socialists Condemn Terrorist Outrage

Statement by the Democratic Socialist Party

Socialists unequivocally condemn the September 11 terror bombings in the United States. The killing of thousands of ordinary working people is absolutely criminal and has nothing whatsoever to do with the struggle for a better world. Indeed, this atrocity will undoubtedly make this struggle more difficult and aid the forces of capitalist reaction.

Popular struggles throughout history have often involved the killing of oppressors, tyrants, police torturers and the like. Such actions may or may not be politically expedient. But the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was of a fundamentally different kind. It was a deliberate act of mass murder. The perpetrators made no political demands, they had no goal except to kill indiscriminately and inflict pain, suffering and devastation. It showed an astonishing callousness and brutality. Our sympathy and solidarity are completely with the innocent victims of these terrorist acts, not with their perpetrators.

Hypocrisy

But our solidarity with the victims should not blind us to the absolutely breathtaking hypocrisy of George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Ariel Sharon and other imperialist spokespeople and their lackeys in the always-accommodating capitalist media. The outrage in the US may be described as the greatest act of terror of all time only with severe reservations. While it is certainly the greatest act of non-state terror, many acts of governmental terror have far surpassed it.

At the end of World War II, for example, the US leaders cold-bloodedly carried

out the nuclear annihilation of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki solely to demonstrate their power and intimidate the Soviet Union; several hundred thousand men, women and children were killed to make this point.

During the long Cold War with the USSR, Washington propped up scores of blood-soaked Third World dictatorships, helped them torture and murder their opponents with impunity and helped cover up their crimes. In 1965, for instance, the US helped aspiring Indonesian dictator Suharto organise a pogrom against the left and progressive forces which massacred at least one million people. The long US intervention in Vietnam against the liberation forces there killed and maimed millions of people and inflicted massive material devastation on the country.

Saddam Hussein's murderous regime was another US client, being particularly favoured during the Iran-Iraq war of the early 1980s. Then the wheel turned and, for various reasons, he became a liability. Since the Gulf War, US- and British-backed sanctions against Iraq have led to the deaths of more than a million Iraqis through starvation and disease and politically strengthened Saddam's hold on power.

Afghanistan's brutal Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime is a product of the US-backed war of the reactionary *mujaheddin* "freedom fighters" against the Soviet-backed secular, leftist People's Democratic Party government. This was also the origin of the Saudi Islamic fundamentalist Osama bin Laden, Washington's current world "public enemy number one" and suspected organiser of the US attacks.

Ever since the 1959 Cuban Revolution removed Cuba from the US sphere of influence, Washington has organised numerous — terrorist — attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro. Furthermore, the US has imposed a ruinous economic blockade on the island for over 40 years. And right now, the US authorities are resisting Cuban calls for them to extradite the CIA-linked counter-revolutionary terrorist responsible for the 1976 midair bomb-destruction of a Cuban airliner off Barbados in which 73 people died.

And then there is the misery and slow death to which the mass of the world's people have been condemned by Western capitalism's ruthless drive for profit, regardless of the costs to the planet and its people. Each year, for instance, millions of children in the Third World die of absolutely preventable diseases, victims of an implacable and merciless economic regime imposed on their countries by imperialism and its agencies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation.

Who are the major "enemies of civilisation"? If Osama bin Laden is a terrorist we would have to conclude that he is a relatively minor one. If there was any justice in this world, Western capitalist leaders like George Bush senior, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and

Bush junior would be on trial for crimes against humanity. The Saddam Husseins, Suhartos and bin Ladens would feature simply as their junior accomplices.

Roots of terrorism

It is still not clear who organised the terrorist operation in the US. But where would any terror organisation recruit people who were so embittered and without hope of the future that they could contemplate such a pointless atrocity and be willing to sacrifice themselves to implement it? The answer is no great mystery.

The massive misery which Western capitalism — led by the United States, the world's only superpower — has imposed on the majority of the world's people has created the seedbed for the very terrorism which its leaders so piously condemn. Oppression breeds hatred, desperation and despair. In such a climate, when the enemy seems so powerful, carrying out suicide bombings against the population of the oppressor country can seem to some like the only option.

In occupied Palestine, for instance, there is apparently no shortage of young men willing to sacrifice themselves as human bombs against the Israeli population. However, apart from being morally repugnant, such indiscriminate acts are a complete political dead-end. Each suicide bomber who carries out his mission in an Israeli town is actually weakening the Palestinian struggle and helping strengthen the hand of the Israeli regime and its US backers. Each bomb blast against the civilian population drives the Israeli masses towards Sharon and inhibits the development of any internal oppositional forces.

Throughout the history of the modern socialist movement, Marxists have carried out a fierce polemic against the political strategy of “individual terrorism” — that is, the killing of hated figures of an oppressive regime. Our objection to this kind of terrorism is not based on morality but on the grounds that it simply does not work. The ruling class can always replace individuals.

Furthermore and most importantly, employed as a strategy, such terrorist acts actually demobilise the mass movement. Only the struggle of the masses can change society. The combat of a small band of terrorist-avengers relegates the masses to the sidelines and makes them mere spectators of a contest between the terrorists and the regime, rather than participants in their own liberation.

However, the US attacks represent a completely different kind of terrorism: the wanton and indiscriminate killing of civilians is part of the methodology of imperialism and its accomplices, not of the progressive forces fighting for liberation from this inhuman system.

Reactionary agenda

The terror bombings will be used by Bush and the US ruling class to create a more favourable political climate in which to implement their reactionary agenda. This tragedy is a heaven-sent opportunity for them and they will take it with both hands. They will push forward their arms buildup and sabre-rattling foreign policy.

Under the guise of “fighting terrorism”, civil liberties will come under increased pressure at home, there will be a campaign for more cops and increased police powers, and the previously growing movement against the death penalty will operate in a much less favourable environment. The scandal of Bush’s stolen election and the rotten US electoral system will fade away in the glare of the patriotic spotlight.

Xenophobia will be strengthened; anti-Arab racism will become stronger and it will be harder to build a movement of solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Socialists oppose any “war on terrorism”. Military attacks by the US and its imperialist allies on the alleged terrorists and/or states that allegedly harbour them will not end acts of terrorism. To the contrary, such a war will only result in more loss of innocent lives, and deepen the nationalist hatred of Americans that has provided a recruiting ground for the organisers of terrorist acts of the World Trade Center type.

Socialists are struggling for a world that is free of violence, oppression and exploitation. This means struggling against imperialism and capitalism which is raping our planet and condemning the mass of its people to an increasingly miserable and desperate existence and replacing it with a socialist society. The only force which can accomplish this tremendous historic task is the working class and oppressed masses of the world. Terrorism has no part in this struggle; we are fighting against the system which breeds terror and which freely uses it to defend itself. ■

Notes

- 1 Broido, *Apostles Into Terrorists* (Maurice Temple Smith: London, 1978), pp. 146-147.
- 2 Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1939-49)* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1973), p. 159.
- 3 Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (Allen Lane The Penguin Press: London, 1972), p. 405, Note 28.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- 6 Trotsky, *The Young Lenin* (Wren: Melbourne, 1972), pp. 24-25.
- 7 Broido, *Apostles Into Terrorists*, pp. 85, 87.
- 8 Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, p. 30.
- 9 Quoted in Broido, *Apostles Into Terrorists*, p. 178.
- 10 Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, pp. 33-35.
- 11 Trotsky, "The Bankruptcy of Terrorism", *Against Individual Terrorism* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1974).
- 12 Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1961), p. 173.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 278.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 193
- 18 Cannon, "Political Principles and Propaganda Methods", *Socialism on Trial* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 1999), pp. 154-155.
- 19 Trotsky, *Stalin* (MacGibbon & Kee: London, 1968), pp. 95-96.
- 20 Lenin, "Guerrilla Warfare", *Collected Works*, Vol. 11 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1962), pp. 216-217.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 23 Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Group* (The Bodley Head: London, 1987), p. 44.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

- 25 Interview with *Il Manifesto*, November 6, 1977, quoted in “No Future in Terrorism”, *Intercontinental Press*, November 28, 1977, p. 1304.
- 26 Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Group*, p. 154.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- 29 “Bombs or Class Struggle in Germany”, *Intercontinental Press*, July 17, 1972, p. 834.
- 30 “The Assassination of Judge Drenkmann — A Blow to Defence of Political Prisoners”, *Intercontinental Press*, December 16, 1974, p. 1708.
- 31 Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Group*, p. 321.
- 32 “Critics of Bonn Regime Smeared as ‘Terrorist Sympathisers’”, *Intercontinental Press*, November 21, 1977, p. 1271. ■

Terrorism is a concept much-loved by the media and government spokespeople. But they are extremely selective in the instances they choose to designate as terror. This pamphlet presents a Marxist perspective on the question of terrorism.

In the modern world, the wholesale state terror of the major capitalist powers is far more pervasive and on a far more massive scale than any desperate acts by small oppositional groups. Generally employed against the people of the Third World, state terror is also the ultimate guarantee against any serious challenge at home, as the examples of fascism in Italy in the 1920s and in Germany in the 1930s show so clearly.

But what about those radical forces which seek to resist oppression by a strategy of individual terrorist acts against hated officials of the regime? This tradition has a long history but it is a negative one. Marxists have always opposed it on the grounds that it is a costly diversion; only the struggle of the mass of working people can achieve progressive social change.

In this pamphlet Dave Holmes elucidates the fundamental Marxist position by looking at the historical examples of the pre-1917 Russian revolutionary movement and the Red Army Faction in West Germany in the late-1960s and 1970s.

Resistance books