

International Socialist Organization backs NATO escalation in Syria

By Alex Lantier and David North
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The arguments advanced by the International Socialist Organization (ISO) to support the US-NATO war for regime change in Syria are virtually indistinguishable from the CIA-dictated propaganda published by the *New York Times*. A recent and, to be frank, particularly filthy example of the ISO's propagation of the CIA-Pentagon narrative is an article by Ashley Smith, "Anti-imperialism and the Syrian Revolution," posted August 25 on socialistworker.org, the ISO's website.

As the WSWS has frequently noted, the ISO's campaign for intensified US-NATO intervention in Syria closely tracks the initiatives of the US government. On August 25, the *Times* published provocative pieces by two of its leading columnists, Roger Cohen and Nicholas Kristof. These gentlemen specialize in marketing CIA wars as "humanitarian interventions" to the affluent liberal milieu whose world outlook is greatly influenced by the *Times*. Cohen's essay was titled "America's Retreat and the Agony of Aleppo." Kristof chose an even more provocative headline for his appeal for intensified US bombing: "Anne Frank Today Is a Syrian Girl."

Both Cohen and Kristof employed the cynical gimmick of couching their demand for US military escalation in strident moral terms, invoking the specter of past tragedies. While Kristof exploited the memory of Anne Frank, Cohen waved the bloody shirt of Sarajevo in the 1990s. Both columnists postured as lonely prophets appealing to the conscience of an unfeeling world.

Cohen cried out: "It [Aleppo] is bombarded: What else is new? ... At which dinner parties in London, Paris, Berlin, or Washington is it discussed? Which Western journalists are able to be there to chronicle day after day their outrage at a city's dismemberment? Who recalls that just six years ago, Aleppo was being talked about as the new Marrakesh, a place to buy a vacation home? Aleppo is alone, alone beneath the bombs of Russian and Syrian jets, alone to face the violent whims of President Vladimir Putin and President Bashar al-Assad."

The essay of Ashley Smith, also published on August 25, employed the same propaganda template. He, too, rummaged through the past in search of a historical event that would stir the emotions of a left-leaning audience. He chose to evoke for his pro-imperialist polemic the historic struggles of the coal miners of Harlan County, Kentucky!

Posing as the union songwriter Florence Reese, Ashley Smith declaims: "Which side are you on?" What are the sides? "Do you support the popular struggle against dictatorship and for democracy? Or are you with Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime, his imperial backer Russia, his regional ally Iran and Iran's proxies like Hezbollah from Lebanon? Tragically, too many have failed this test."

For Smith, those who have "failed" the test are those who do not support US-backed Islamist opposition militias in Syria, and oppose starting a broader US war with Russia and Iran. Arguing entirely from the standpoint of the CIA operatives that are supplying Islamist militias with arms, Smith attacks the Obama administration for not giving the opposition enough heavy weapons.

Noting that Obama counted on unnamed "reliable pro-Washington figures associated with the uprising," Smith writes: "His administration has hoped to use figures on the rebel side to provide a new face for Syria's dictatorship. But Assad held on—thanks in no small measure to the fact that the US, while accepting some supplying of the rebels, denied these forces the heavy weaponry they pleaded for to stop the regime's assault."

Smith's brief for war is a pack of lies. It is based on a false dichotomy: in Syria, according to Smith, one either supports a US war for "democracy" or one supports Assad and the Russian regime, to which he tacks on the label "imperialist" to try to make it more hateful.

As for Smith's claim that he is backing a popular war for democracy, this has no credibility, especially as he admits that Washington plans to use the opposition to set up a puppet dictatorship in Syria.

Smith's arguments are transparently absurd, but they serve a political function. The ISO provides a left face for the sections of the foreign policy establishment affiliated with the Democratic Party.

Smith's arguments provide them with a ready-made slander against socialist opposition to war: any opponent of the Democratic Party's wars is equivalent to supporting Chinese and, especially, Russian "imperialism."

The resemblance between this argument and CIA anti-communist propaganda of the Cold War period is not coincidental. It is rooted in the history of the ISO, which descends from Max Shachtman's break with Trotskyism and Marxism in 1939-1940, which in turn led to his subsequent role as an anti-communist theoretician for the AFL-CIO, supporter of the Democratic Party and apologist for US imperialism.

Shachtman (1904-1972) rejected the defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism, and subsequently the Chinese regime that emerged from the 1949 revolution, claiming they were "bureaucratic collectivist" regimes. Based on this variant of "state capitalist" theory, Shachtman ultimately supported the US war in Vietnam.

The Soviet Union no longer exists. It was dissolved in 1991 by the bureaucratic Stalinist regime led by Mikhail Gorbachev. The post-Soviet Russian government—led by Boris Yeltsin, an ex-Stalinist apparatchik—moved brutally and recklessly to reestablish capitalism. The dissolution of the USSR and the reestablishment of capitalism

confirmed the Trotskyist analysis of the bureaucracy as a parasitic caste (not class), which lacked any independent historical function. It also refuted the Shachtmanite and myriad variants of state capitalist theory, which portrayed the Soviet bureaucracy as the protagonists of a new world-historic system of class exploitation.

Prior to 1991, Trotskyists called for a political revolution in the Soviet Union, which would overthrow the bureaucracy while defending the nationalized property relations established in the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution. This was the revolutionary content of its “defense of the Soviet Union.” But after the 1991 dissolution of the USSR, the policies and political conceptions involved in the defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism could not simply be transferred to the new capitalist regime in Russia.

Marxists, however, reject the definition of Russia and China as “imperialist,” a definition which is false from the standpoint of history, economics and politics. We also oppose the massive US-NATO preparations for a war against Russia and China.

The political descendants of Shachtmanism proceeded to transfer the imperialist label from the USSR to capitalist Russia. The underlying reasons had less to do with theory than with political interests. Despite the dissolution of the USSR, the Russian state—by virtue of its geographical presence—obstructs the projection of US power throughout the Middle East and Eurasia. This is the source of continuous tension between the United States and Russia.

In this situation, the ideological legacy of Shachtmanism still pays dividends. The designation of Russia as imperialist serves a vital role for “left” supporters of Washington’s foreign policy, who seek to endorse the American geopolitical conflict with Russia and China as a form of “anti-imperialism.” Moreover, Smith—dredging up the Shachtmanite anti-Marxist smears of the Cold War era—portrays opposition to the CIA’s war in Syria as a form of neo-Stalinism.

How could opponents of U.S. imperialism end up supporting a dictator—one who has been known to collaborate with the U.S. in torturing “war-on-terror” prisoners in the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program?

The answer starts with the Stalinist left’s support of Stalin’s Russia and Mao’s China during the Cold War era. It supported those state capitalist dictatorships not only as opponents of U.S. imperialism, but as positive models of socialism.

Thus, some of the same currents that today support Assad yesterday defended murderous repression of workers’ rebellions and even imperialist invasions in the past.

They stood with Russia’s crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Czechoslovakia’s Prague Spring in 1968 and Poland’s Solidarity in 1981. They supported Mao’s China when the regime wrecked workers and peasants’ lives through the Great Leap Forward and oppressed Tibetans in a decades-long occupation.

There is no legitimate historical and political basis for this slanderous identification of contemporary opposition to US wars for regime change with a pro-Stalinist outlook.

While Smith denounces Russia and China as “imperialist,” he insists that the United States is an increasingly pacifist, even timid power on the world stage. Ignoring Obama’s record of military occupation, armed intervention and drone murder, from Asia and the

Middle East to Africa, he proclaims that US imperialism under Obama abandoned aggressive policies.

Left-wing opponents of the US-backed wars for regime change, he brazenly declares, “are stuck in the past, trying to find evidence to expose a strategy of regime change that the US has abandoned.”

“In reality,” he writes, “the US retreated in general from outright regime change as its strategy in the Middle East after the failure of its invasion and occupation of Iraq. The main priority behind the alternative direction for US imperialism pursued by Barack Obama is that the US should avoid destabilizing regimes for fear of the chaos that ensues in the aftermath.”

Such a statement—after the Obama administration bombed and destroyed the Libyan government in 2011, ousted President Ali Saleh’s regime in Yemen, and spent billions of dollars to arm Islamist militias that have devastated Syria—is a stunning falsehood. There is no slander to which Smith will not stoop to attack anti-war sentiment. He even manages to tack accusations of anti-Arab racism on opponents of a new US military escalation in the Middle East that would lead to the deaths of countless thousands of Arabs.

Though he has admitted that Washington is arming the Syrian opposition in an attempt to set up a dictatorship in Syria, Smith denounces anyone who draws “the conclusion that the US government is pulling the strings in the rebellion in Syria.” He writes, “such arguments display an arrogant dismissal—not unlike *defenders* of imperialism—of the capacity of exploited and oppressed people to fight for liberation. Instead, we get a classic Orientalist trope: Western imperialism manipulating the ignorant and reactionary local tribes for its own purposes.”

Who does Smith think he is kidding? Such cheap appeals to racial politics are just a clumsy trick to try to give a “left” face to his pro-CIA apologetics. It is not socialist opponents of war, but the ISO and Mr. Smith who stand exposed as enemies of working people.

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