

Rohini Hensman's *Indefensible*: The ISO discovers its muse—the CIA—Part 2

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The following article is the second part of a four-part review of Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism.

[Part one](#) | [Part two](#) | [Part three](#) | [Part four](#)

An anti-Trotskyist rationale for supporting imperialist war

The war for regime change waged in Syria by the NATO powers, in alliance with Al Qaeda, behind the backs of the peoples of America and Europe, is the outcome of three decades of US-led wars across the Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. These crimes of US and European imperialism have not only claimed millions of lives and turned more than 60 million people into refugees. They have exposed the fact that the basic contradictions of capitalism, which led to world war and the October Revolution in the 20th century, remain unresolved.

Despite the deep unpopularity of these bloody wars, which have cost trillions of dollars amid the deepest economic crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, attempts by voters to end or limit them, by voting governments out of office in America and Europe, have failed. Successive governments of all political colorations have, on the contrary, stepped them up, and it is clear that this has become a policy endorsed by an entrenched ruling class. When the Syrian regime invited Moscow to help it fight the NATO-backed opposition militias in 2015, for example, NATO escalated the war into a military standoff with Russia, a nuclear power. A century after the outbreak of World War I and the Russian Revolution, the capitalist system is teetering on the brink of a nuclear conflagration.

This underscores the enduring relevance of the political alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism posed by Leon Trotsky—the co-leader with Vladimir Lenin of the October Revolution, opponent of Stalin, and founder of the Fourth International. Trotsky's critique of Stalinism's nationalist rejection of world socialist revolution, and his unrelenting struggle to establish the political independence of the working class from the capitalist class and its middle-class allies, remain the basis of revolutionary socialist politics today. He showed that the crimes of Stalinism, leading to the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1991, did not reflect Marxism and Bolshevism, but Stalin's destruction of any organized Marxist influence within the Soviet Union. These crimes, however, did not end the era of world socialist revolution and the struggle by the working class to take state power and build socialism, which was opened by the October 1917 Russian Revolution. Masses of workers and youth today can and must turn to this perspective.

By contrast, Hensman and the parties with whom she is working—the ISO, the French NPA and Australian SA, all of whom

take their inspiration from the descendants of various renegades from Trotskyism—have all thrown in their lot with imperialism.

The ISO descends from Max Shachtman, who broke with Trotsky and the Fourth International in 1939–1940, claiming that the Soviet Union was “bureaucratic collectivist.” Like Tony Cliff, who later, in Britain, attacked the Soviet Union as a “state capitalist” society, Shachtman argued that the Soviet Union was not a workers' state that had degenerated, as Trotsky had explained, but a historic abortion that had built a new ruling capitalist class. On this basis, Shachtman oriented to the US trade unions, affiliated to the Democratic Party, and Cliff to the social-democratic Labour Party in Britain.

While Hensman cites Cliff's book *State Capitalism in Russia* as the foundation for her view of the Soviet Union as a regime of “state capitalist primitive accumulation,” she also applauds and cites Pabloites like Achcar and Karadjis. Their parties, France's NPA and Australia's SA, descend from forces that broke with Trotskyism and the ICFI in 1953, claiming that Stalinist parties would serve as revolutionary leaderships of the working class. However wildly divergent their appraisals of the Soviet Union appeared to be, on one issue they were united: they all rejected Trotsky's struggle to maintain the revolutionary continuity of the October Revolution in struggle against Stalinism.

Based on these pessimistic, anti-Trotskyist traditions, Hensman concludes that the only option today is to defend US imperialism and its war drive against Russia. Dismissing the Soviet Union and the 20th century Stalinist states in China and Eastern Europe as “state capitalist,” and denouncing the entire Bolshevik leadership as “Russian imperialists,” she presents a world in which there is no political alternative to capitalism. She writes:

It is true that neoliberal policies in the West—favouring the rule of the market in all spheres, promoting privatisation of just about everything, opposing state expenditure on social security and welfare, and being hostile to trade unions—are inimical to the working class. However, it is equally true that state capitalist or former state capitalist regimes have drastically cut back state expenditure on social security and welfare, clamp down ferociously on workers' unions that attempt to be independent of the state, and are characterised by enormous and increasing inequality between a small rich minority and a vast impoverished majority.

The key difference, therefore, is between democratic states that allow working people to fight back against the forces exploiting and oppressing them, and authoritarian states that block such

struggles in multiple ways ... It is far more useful to characterise as 'left-wing' those who prioritise the struggle to establish the conditions in which oppressed and exploited people can fight back, and as 'right-wing' those who crush such struggles and/or promote authoritarian ideologies and inequality in society.

It is not difficult to see the outcome of Hensman's reactionary analysis. If one falsely treats America and Europe as states where workers can "fight back" within the existing social system, whereas Syria, Iran, China and Russia are "authoritarian states that block such struggles," then the key task is to forcibly impose on these countries conditions like those in America. This provides her with a pretext to hail US wars for regime change, in Syria and beyond, as wars of liberation.

Hensman dismisses, without even a mention, Trotsky's call for a revolutionary struggle of the international working class against both imperialism and the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy. She also flatly repudiates the defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism. She writes, "the notion that being 'right-wing' entails support for private capitalism while being 'left-wing' entails support for state capitalism, or for state-supported oligarchic capitalism, is seriously flawed." She adds, "In retrospect, it is evident that the Cold War was a prolonged period of intense rivalry between US imperialism and Russian imperialism."

Hensman sides with imperialism's threats and intrigues against both the Soviet Union, where capitalist property had been abolished, and the colonial countries, which imperialism sought, and still seeks, to plunder. This underscores the correctness of the ICFI's refutation of the attacks on Russia, Iran and China as imperialist powers, made from within the petty-bourgeois milieu of the ISO:

What political purpose, it must be asked, is served by adding the word "imperialist" to descriptions of China and Russia? In practical political terms, it serves very definite functions. First, it relativizes, and therefore diminishes, the central and decisive global counterrevolutionary role of American, European and Japanese imperialism. This facilitates the pseudo-left's active collaboration with the United States in regime-change operations such as in Syria, where the Assad regime has been backed by Russia. Second, and even more significantly, the designation of China and Russia as imperialist—and thus, by implication, as colonial powers suppressing ethnic, national, linguistic and religious minorities—sanctions the pseudo-left's support for imperialist-backed "national liberation" uprisings and "color revolutions" ...

Whether or not Hensman and the ISO would care to admit it, they stand with both feet firmly in the camp of imperialism and capitalist reaction.

One of the most telling omissions in Hensman's book is her silence on the close links between US-led wars and the Al Qaeda terror network, which carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks. After the Pentagon's 2012 statements, the US-Al Qaeda alliance in Syria is a matter of public record. This alliance, which makes particularly clear the fraudulent character of US imperialism's humanitarian pretensions, stretches, however, back to the Cold War.

After the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took power in 1978, the Pentagon began arming the Islamist opposition to the PDPA. US officials, reeling from their defeat in Vietnam, devised a policy of "sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire" in Afghanistan, as CIA official Robert Gates wrote in his 1996 memoir *From the Shadows*. When the Kremlin invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, in a reactionary attempt to strengthen the PDPA regime in Kabul and stabilize the PDPA's relations with the Afghan rural elites, Washington used Afghanistan as a battleground to bleed the Soviet army.

One of the CIA's main allies in carrying out this policy, recruiting tens of thousands of Islamist fighters worldwide to go and fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, was a young Saudi billionaire, Osama bin Laden, the future leader of Al Qaeda. Hensman endorses the US policy in Afghanistan, while remaining silent on the CIA-Al Qaeda alliance, and presents it as part of a liberation struggle against Soviet imperialism.

She writes, "A PDPA coup in 1978 faced tribal revolts that developed into a full-scale uprising by December 1979, when the Russians invaded and occupied Afghanistan. The military campaign that followed resembled the US campaign in Vietnam in its brutality to civilians ... The war had reached a stalemate in the mid-1980s when Reagan, who was already supporting the mujahideen, agreed to supply them with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. These weapons turned the tide against the Russians..."

Hensman's defense of the US role in the Soviet-Afghan war, and her silence on CIA-backed Islamist terror networks, are reactionary. She hides the bloody character of the CIA-backed Islamist proxy wars, both in 1979–1992 in Afghanistan and in 1979–1982 in Syria. It is the descendants of these same forces, who are fighting today's Syrian war, that Hensman hails as a "democratic revolution."

To be continued

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