

Leading Pabloite Gilbert Achcar provided counter-insurgency advice to British Army

By Thomas Scripps
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The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has paid London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at least £400,000 since 2016 to provide "cultural advice" for its operations abroad. Lectures were delivered by eleven members of SOAS staff, including Gilbert Achcar, a leading representative of the Pabloite United Secretariat.

According to Freedom of Information requests obtained by SOAS students, the university designed Regional Study Weeks on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Sessions were attended by members of the military's Defence Cultural Specialist Unit (DCSU).

The DCSU is a secretive formation, established in 2010 "in the spirit of counter-insurgency operations," to provide support for British military deployments internationally. A 2013 Doctrine Note issued by the MoD explained the "need to develop and exploit specialists ... who have a deep understanding of the language, customs, values and narratives of that culture" in order "to plan and execute military operations" and "identify threats and opportunities."

By 2016, the DCSU had deployed 90 regular and reserve Cultural Advisors in at least 22 countries, including Chad, Nigeria, Somalia, Uganda, Kenya, Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Cyprus, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Chile. The unit's trained advisors are described as having a "unique position" with a "central contribution" to Britain's military footprint.

The topic of one of the sessions delivered at SOAS this February was "the war in the Sahel," the region of Africa just south of the Sahara Desert. In 2018, Sir Richard Ottaway, former chair of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Select Committee, wrote that he had warned in 2014 of "a 'worrying pattern of unsightedness' on the part of the UK in relation to events in the Sahel region, and called for the urgent expansion of our presence and knowledge about the whole region." He continued, "Most pressing in Africa, the UK must increase its diplomatic and security footprint on the ground ..."

Last July, the British military deployed three helicopters and 120 soldiers to Northern Mali as part of a "pivot to the Sahel" strategic shift in Africa. This February, another 250 troops were deployed to the region.

SOAS's deal with the MoD is further proof of the integration of the armed forces and the academy underway in the world's major imperialist powers. Significant resources in higher education are being put at the service of the military and security apparatus. Above all, this process relies upon the co-option of a layer of academics into direct service to the state. Representatives of the various pseudo-left groups in this privileged petty-bourgeois milieu play a crucial role.

Achcar's response to his exposure is unapologetic. He has defended his actions in an open letter, claiming that the SOAS lectures "are essentially about the history, politics and socio-economics of the region, provided by critical scholars to lower-ranking military personnel." He continues, "it is important to let critical voices be heard, even among the military ...

Should we prefer that the military and security personnel of this country be solely exposed to right-wing education?"

References to "lower-ranking military personnel" and letting "critical voices be heard" are a transparent fraud. Achcar and his fellows are not giving insurgent lectures to privates in the infantry. They are offering advice to a highly specialised unit offering unique support to military operations in crucial geo-strategic theatres. DCSU training includes a course for one- and two-star and brigade headquarters staff. The unit's cultural advisors consult with senior military commanders. The DCSU is identical in all essentials to the US Army's Human Terrain System (2007-2014), criticised by the American Anthropological Association for being an "unacceptable application of anthropological expertise."

The true explanation for Achcar's intimate relationship with the state is rooted in his political tendency's history. The United Secretariat was formed in 1963 following the American Socialist Workers Party's rejection of its Trotskyist traditions and unprincipled re-unification with Pabloite organisations. The Pabloites had broken from Trotskyism in 1953, claiming that the conflict with US imperialism was objectively forcing the Stalinist bureaucracy to pursue a revolutionary course.

A similar process of "self-reform" and unconscious revolutionary orientation was supposedly at work within social democratic and bourgeois nationalist movements, meaning that any struggle for the political independence of the working class and its revolutionary mobilisation under the leadership of the Fourth International must be abandoned. The Pabloite groups and leaders would instead integrate themselves into the "real mass movement" as it existed in each country—as advisers pressuring them to the left. Over the years, the liquidationist politics of the Pabloites saw them become ever more naked apologists for imperialism and its political instruments.

A key marker of the SWP's political degeneration was its response to the publication of *Security and the Fourth International*, an investigation into Trotsky's assassination launched by the ICFI in 1975. The investigation exposed the activities of Stalinist GPU agents within the SWP in the 1930s and 40s, including leading member Joseph Hansen who initiated relations with the Federal Bureau of Investigation as an informant immediately following Trotsky's death.

As detailed in the ICFI's recent publication *Agents: The FBI and GPU Infiltration of the Trotskyist Movement*, after the Second World War the FBI had at least 20 "confidential informants" in high-level positions within the SWP, reporting directly on a regular basis. Under Hansen, 12 out of 13 SWP members who were students at the small conservative midwestern Carleton College ended up on the party's national committee. Below the upper ring of agents was a wider network of informants in local branches of the SWP.

The anti-socialist politics of the Pabloites, coupled with extensive state infiltration, paved the way to ever-closer integration into the political structures of imperialist rule—including the state apparatus. This process finds consummate expression in Achcar, whose writings on the Middle

East and Africa dovetail perfectly with the strategy of British and US imperialism and who has now been exposed as a paid adviser.

In 2011, Achcar supported UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorising an imperialist war of plunder against Libya, writing, “Here is a case where a population is truly in danger, and where there is no plausible alternative that could protect it ... You can’t in the name of anti-imperialist principles oppose an action that will prevent the massacre of civilians.”

He went on to chide the imperialist powers for not dropping enough bombs on the Libyan population, describing airstrikes which killed tens of thousands as “low-key.” He demanded that more weapons be funneled to the anti-Gaddafi opposition, as “consistently and insistent requested” by them. This US-backed opposition, to which the United Secretariat extended “full solidarity,” was led by a reactionary collection of former government officials and Islamic fundamentalist tribal leaders.

Achcar was equally hawkish in support of imperialist intervention in Syria, participating in a 2011 meeting of the Syrian National Council, a collection of US and French intelligence assets. He advised the Syrian opposition to Bashar al-Assad—led by a collection of CIA-linked Islamic fundamentalist militias—to seek indirect assistance rather than direct intervention from Washington.

In 2013, he described analyses of imperialist interests and involvement in the region as a “kind of conspiracy theory among those that call themselves anti-imperialist and tend to see the hand of imperialism behind everything.” He lyingly claimed that America “refuses to deliver weapons to the insurgency despite insistent requests.”

In March 2018, with the regime-change operation failing, he joined demands for full-scale military intervention by the US and other imperialist powers via an open letter in the *New York Review of Books*, “Why the World Must Act Now on Syria.”

Over the bodies of hundreds of thousands of dead and two destroyed societies, Achcar continues his relentless advocating for imperialist wars. In July 2018, he hosted an “Inconsistent Anti-Imperialism and Selective Solidarity” event at SOAS to launch Rohini Hensman’s, *Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism*. Hensman’s book supports virtually every war or overseas operation launched by the Democratic Party since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It is a vitriolic attack on all serious opponents of imperialism, denouncing journalists John Pilger and Seymour Hersh, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

How closely Achcar’s writings align with the strategy of world imperialism is indicated by his recent prescriptions for Sudan, where he advocates a policy of orientation to the military for protesting workers and youth.

Achcar has claimed, “The main strength of the Sudanese revolutionaries is their great influence over the soldiers and the officials, some of which even used their weapons to defend the demonstrators ... This factor will determine the fate of the Sudanese revolution.”

In an article for *Jacobin* magazine, he writes that the military has been “dissuaded” from “attempting to drown the revolution in blood.” And further, “The troops’ sympathizing with the popular movement was determining in leading the generals to get rid of Bashir. The most important thing now is for the movement to consolidate its support among the rank and file and lower-ranking officers of the armed forces.”

This is a thoroughly anti-Marxist position which seeks to replace the organisation of the working class into an independent revolutionary party with moral appeals to the armed guardians of the capitalist state. Given the experience of workers in Egypt in 2013, it is criminal advice. The same line was advanced by the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) in that country, to whose “Socialist Days” conference in 2011 Achcar was invited. RS helped to hand power to the butcher of the Egyptian revolution, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, even as he massacred protestors

in the streets. Backed by the world’s imperialist powers, General el-Sisi established a bloody dictatorship which routinely executes political opponents.

Britain’s “pivot to the Sahel” will no doubt be accompanied by discussions on an equally bloody military crackdown in Sudan. The greatest obstacle to the predatory ambitions of the UK and the rest of the world’s imperialist powers is Africa’s increasingly militant working class. But as Egypt demonstrated in the negative, this immense social force can only triumph if it acquires and acts upon an international socialist perspective. Achcar works publicly against such a perspective to politically disarm the working class, while discussing with the forces of military repression in closed-door meetings organised by SOAS.

Any genuine socialist or even progressive organisation would have expelled Achcar immediately upon hearing of his dealings with the MoD. But the United Secretariat will not bat an eyelid at his giving paid advice to the military, which simply formalises a longstanding political relationship. Neither will *Jacobin* magazine, associated with the Democratic Socialists of America, and the *Democracy Now!* news show, raise the slightest complaint. They have for years provided Achcar with a platform to strategise on behalf of the US government.

SOAS was founded in 1916 to promote the long-term interests of British imperialism in Africa and Asia by training a cadre of colonial administrators. Alumni include countless heads of state, diplomats and civil servants in the former colonial countries. Today, the same training is provided by leaders of the pseudo-left tendencies who are mortal enemies of the international working class.

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