

The Sixth Newsletter (2018): War and Socialism

Dear Friends,

There is a good reason why our Dossier #3 is called *A Bloody and Unforgiving War*. It is about the conflict in Syria. It could very well be the name of the battering faced by the people of Yemen or even – truly – the ongoing war against the Palestinians. These are conflicts with no easy end and yet with such violent presents.

Wars are ghastly. No doubt about that. Those on the Left are easily united regarding the conflicts in Palestine and Yemen – there is clarity here about the genesis of the occupation and war. With Syria, matters are murky. The origins of this conflict are contested as are the very terms used to define this or that aspect of the war. Is it the Syrian *government* or the Syrian *regime*, a term used to deny legitimacy to the government? Are they *rebels* or are they *extremists* and *ihadis*? There are no innocent choices here.

Our dossier is sensitive to the complexity of the war and the discussions about the war. It does its best to explain the terms of this conflict and to present as clearly as possible the current status of the dispute. To help us, we turned to the Syrian economist Omar Dahi for an extended interview on the possibility of reconciliation and reconstruction. Omar's is a voice of great compassion and clarity. We hope that you will read his words with care and draw your own conclusions about this war. To read our dossier, please go [here](#).

At *Newslick* this week, my Radical Journeys column reflects on my experience reporting on the Syrian war – from its early days till now, from inside Syria to inside the United Nations. It is not a comprehensive look. It is brief – as these columns are brief. But, I have tried to be as honest as possible about how fraught it has been to lay out the narrative of this war. You can read the column [here](#).



Like many of you, I was disgusted to watch the deliberate killing by the Israeli army of eighteen Palestinians and the injuring of almost a thousand Palestinians in Gaza on Land Day. Friends from Gaza circulated videos of the attack. I recognised a few faces amongst those who had gone to protest peacefully at the perimeter with Israel. They were making the case for their Right to Return - established by UN Resolution 194 (1948). Neither was their aim illegal nor their method. Yet, they were met with tear gas and then live fire by the Israeli army.

The coverage by the Western media was appalling. BBC and the Associated Press came out of the box with coverage of 'clashes'. It has long been a theme for the Western media to belittle the grievances of the Palestinians and to paint their protests against the occupation as illegitimate. This was one more episode in that sorry history. I wrote an essay which had as its theme 'how to report on Gaza'. It was published in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*. You can read it [here](#). It appeared in Turkish in *BirGün*, which you can read [here](#).

The rot of the Israeli occupation - on display at the Gaza perimeter fence - has crept into Israeli society. Israel has emerged as one of the major arms dealers into the continent of Africa. The first shots fired in South Sudan's murderous civil war were by an Israeli 'Galaxy', a rifle sold to both sides of the conflict by the Israeli arms industry. When South Sudanese refugees walked across Egypt and into Israel, they were picked up by the Israeli authorities and put into one of the largest detention centres in the world. From there, the Israelis have begun to deport them to Rwanda - a country that has accepted a few asylum seekers as part of another Israeli arms deal.

This is sordid stuff, sadly not ever on the front pages of our newspapers. The reporting by the South African journalist Azad Essa sent me on the trail of the arms deals with Rwanda and elsewhere. A friend in the United Nations alerted me to the arms deals with South Sudan. I will be pursuing this story from every angle. The connection between arms dealers, war, asylum seekers and racism are at its heart. For an early version of this story, please see my column at *Alternet* [here](#).



It was heartening to see the people of Ghana take to the streets to contest the agreement between their government and the United States for the latter to use Ghanaian soil for its military. These are flashes of the anti-imperialist ideals of Ghana's freedom movement and of its first Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah. Could this be the revival of Ghana's Left?

Last week, in Zambia, once the most important state for the continent's decolonisation movement, the Socialist Party held its founding congress. Like many African states, Zambia's independence movement was rooted in socialist ideals and in internationalism. It would have been second nature for the Zambian people to have joined their Ghanaian brothers and sisters in such a demonstration. But no longer. Matters have been grave for almost two generations. This country which exports rich copper has a high illiteracy rate amongst children who live in the copper belt (as I reported on [here](#)). Space for the Left has been limited, with trade unionists and independent journalists in danger of being silenced.

The formation of a Socialist Party in this context would provide motivation for those active in fighting to produce a Zambia for the Zambians and not for the transnational corporations. The launch of the party in Lusaka was well-attended. One of the guests was the Cuban ambassador

to Zambia. After the launch of the party, the Zambian government asked the Cuban government to recall its ambassador. Such is the insecurity of the Zambian government. We send greetings to the Socialist Party of Zambia and hope that they will be a beacon for others in the continent.



In 1957, when Ghana moved closer towards independence, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited the country. He met with Kwame Nkrumah, to whom he said, 'I want you to come visit us down in Alabama where we are seeking the same kind of freedom the Gold Coast is celebrating'. The song of freedom rang on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Both Nkrumah and King were socialists, with clear-headed antipathy to the imperialist system that suffocated popular aspirations.

Less than a decade after the photograph of the two of them was taken, a military coup overthrew the government of Nkrumah. He was in China when the generals moved in 1966. Nkrumah's project - like that of Patrice Lumumba of the Congo - was undone. Two years after the coup - fifty years ago this week - Dr. King was assassinated. Having achieved legislative victories (the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act), King signalled that equality in the United States could not be won without a rearrangement of the economic system and an end to imperialist wars. King's strong statements against the US war on Vietnam introduced his radical side to the public. He was not allowed to remain standing. It is remarkable that Dr. King was only 39 when he was killed. It is worth mentioning that the year before - in 1967 - Che Guevara was also killed at the age of 39.

Both King and Guevara had been aware of the risks that they were taking. As Guevara wrote in

1965, 'Our sacrifice is conscious; it's the price we pay for the freedom we create'.

This year, three crucial elections will take place in Latin America: in Venezuela (May), in Mexico (June) and in Brazil (October). These will be hard fought battles to defend and extend the gains of the Left made during the past two decades. We, at Tricontinental, are hard at work on three dossiers on each of these elections. We hope that these dossiers, enriched by our conversations with key people across the hemisphere, will provide an orientation towards this season of political contests. One should not be blind to the challenges posed in each of these countries or to the errors of the Left. As Che wrote in that same text from 1965, 'Socialism is young and has made mistakes'.

The Brazilian Supreme Court has decided that Lula will have to serve a prison term. It was a close decision (five of the eleven judges were against it). The Workers' Party rightly said that this is a 'tragic day for democracy and Brazil'. It is not clear if the Judge will issue the arrest warrant needed to send him to prison or if the electoral court will prevent him from running in the election in October. If Lula does run and if he does win, it would provide the forces of the people with great confidence across the continent.



The outcome of the Venezuelan election will also have an impact on morale in both Brazil and Mexico, where currently the frontrunner is Andrés Manuel López Obrador – for whom this will be the third attempt at the presidency (it is almost certain that he won on his first attempt in 2006 – a vote stolen by the establishment). Watch out for our dossiers.

For now, the dossier on Syria: we hope you will read it, share it and let us know what you think about it. We hope that the meetings in Istanbul this week will open the space for political reconciliation. We hope.

Finally, this week saw the death of Ma' Winnie, who gave her life for South African liberation. Our Tricontinental coordinator in South Africa - Vashna Jagarnath has a wonderful tribute to the young Winnie Mandela over [here](#). Please do read it. It recalls the story of a much maligned but important African revolutionary.