

The International Socialist Organization and the fall of Aleppo

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On December 13, as Syrian government forces were on the verge of capturing Aleppo, one commentator published an article with an introduction reading: “The Syrian regime and its Russian ally are in the last barbaric stages of an onslaught against Aleppo.”

The article declared, “The combined forces of Bashar-al-Assad’s regime, Russian air power and Iranian-backed Shia death squads are reconquering Eastern Aleppo, according to reports—and with it, the last of the major cities liberated by the Syrian Revolution since 2011.”

These passages could have appeared in the pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* or any one of the myriad bourgeois media outlets that serve as propaganda organs for American imperialism.

In fact, the writer is Ashley Smith, and the publisher is *SocialistWorker.org*, the web site of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). If there is any doubt about the pro-imperialist and pro-war orientation of this pseudo-left organization, an objective reading of Smith’s article will dispel it.

In its tone and content, Smith’s article, “The counterrevolution crushes Aleppo,” merges seamlessly with the rest of the anti-Syrian and anti-Russian articles that have accompanied the fall of Aleppo, reflecting the rage of the US ruling class over the debacle of its five-year war for regime change.

The cry of the 1950s McCarthyites, “Who lost China?” has been replaced by “Who lost Syria?” The ISO does not equivocate in answering this question, declaring that the campaign to oust Assad has thus far not succeeded because of the “failure” of the “left” to “unanimously support the Syrian Revolution.”

This is not for lack of effort on the part of Smith and his colleagues. For more than five years, the ISO has acted as a cheerleader for the bloody US-backed proxy war in Syria. At every stage of the war, the ISO has marched in lock-step with the most rabidly interventionist sections of the American political establishment, peddling its lies at every turn.

The *World Socialist Web Site* defends the actions of neither Moscow nor Damascus. But the presentation of the US media and political establishment, including *SocialistWorker.org*, is utterly hypocritical, one-sided and driven by a political agenda of defending the crimes of the United States in Syria and across the Middle East.

Both the establishment US media and the pseudo-left ISO present a false characterization of the Syrian civil war, in which “democratic” forces are waging a revolutionary struggle against

Assad and his ally Russia. Any facts that contradict this account are ignored.

The reality is that the “rebel” side of the Syrian civil war is dominated by US-backed Islamist militias and would not exist without the billions of dollars expended by the US in an attempt to oust Assad. Washington deems this to be critical not only to its efforts to establish its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East, but also to its drive to isolate, destabilize and ultimately dismember Russia, considered a major obstacle to US imperialist domination of Eurasia. The Assad regime is Russia’s only Arab ally in the Middle East, and Syria is home to its only naval base on the Mediterranean Sea.

The aim of Smith’s piece is to deny these facts through a dishonest account of the Syrian civil war, which he declares to be “a popular, pro-democracy uprising, just as legitimate as the other rebellions against the autocracies throughout the rest of the Middle East and North Africa collectively known as the Arab Spring.”

Smith simply asserts this to be the case, without in any way seeking to prove it. What organizations, statements or programs can he point to as the bearers of this so-called revolution? The only organization Smith names as being in the leadership of this “democratic” revolution is the Free Syrian Army, a US-backed proxy force consisting of former members of Assad’s own military.

Smith quotes Joseph Daher, who is affiliated with the Pabloite International Secretariat, to assert that after Aleppo came under “rebel” control, it became “a symbol of the democratic alternative that could be Syria.”

This is a lie. Eastern Aleppo has been largely controlled by the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front, an organization responsible for multiple atrocities. Al-Nusra has carried out indiscriminate bombing of civilians in government-controlled Western Aleppo and tortured and executed prisoners, including children.

In its most recent report on conditions in “rebel”-held areas, Amnesty International stated that “civilians live in constant fear of being abducted if they criticize the conduct of armed groups in power or fail to abide by the strict rules that some have imposed.”

The report adds, “In Aleppo and Idlib today, armed groups have free rein to commit war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law with impunity. Shockingly, we have also documented armed groups using the same methods of torture that are routinely used by the Syrian government.”

Unable to deny the dominant role of Al Qaeda-linked groups in the opposition, Smith concocts a narrative according to which jihadist dominance over the anti-Assad forces was the result of a plot hatched by... Assad!

He writes, "After the revolution broke out in early 2011, Assad released thousands of [Islamist] prisoners in the hopes that they would coalesce as a rival to the mainly secular, pro-democratic uprising." In fact, Assad released political prisoners as a concession to the Syrian opposition, which made the freeing of these forces one of the demands of the initial protests.

The basic aim of Smith's article is to obscure the fact that the Syrian civil war, with all of its death, displacement and carnage, is the product of a regime-change operation led by the United States. He manages to avoid even mentioning the United States until three-quarters of the way into his article, listing it as the last of several "imperialist and regional powers" responsible for the defeat of the "revolution."

Smith lists the parties responsible for the situation in Syria, after the Assad regime, as Iran, Russia (which has "the aim of projecting itself as an imperial power in the region") and "other regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey."

Only then does he get to the United States, which Smith says "also intervened as a counterrevolutionary force."

But Smith's main criticism of the US (and by implication the Obama administration and the CIA, which are never referred to by name) is that it has not gone far enough in arming the "rebels." Smith complains that the US "denied" the anti-Assad militias "crucial anti-aircraft weaponry that would have enabled the rebels to overcome the Assad regime's sole military advantage: airpower."

In fact, according to Smith's contorted narrative, the United States' allocation of billions of dollars to back the "rebels" has been an elaborate charade to disguise the fact that it has all along been in "de facto collaboration with Russia and the Syrian regime." The US, it seems, has been conspiring with Russia to prop up Assad and keep him in power.

The entire article is full of such absurd contradictions. Thus, the US is a force for counterrevolution against the anti-Assad democratic opposition. But the group cited by Smith himself as a pillar of this supposed democratic opposition, the Free Syrian Army, was backed and financed by the United States!

Smith elaborates: "The US did not want regime change in Syria. At best, it aimed for an orderly transition that would get rid of Assad."

There is hardly a better definition of regime change than an "orderly transition" that "gets rid" of a leader the US sees as being hostile to its interests. This is precisely the purpose of Washington's intervention in Syria, which the ISO criticizes only from the standpoint that it has not been carried out aggressively enough.

Now, with the evident collapse of the US regime-change operation, the ISO is responding with bewilderment, anger and disappointment not only at the failure to depose Assad, but at the consequent loss of standing of US imperialism in the Middle East and internationally.

Smith writes, with unconcealed bitterness: "This result has

exposed the US as a weakened power in the Middle East... Meanwhile, Russia's position has gained in strength, while US officials have been able to do little other than propose resolutions for cease-fires in the UN Security Council, which Moscow has vetoed."

These are words that could have been lifted from the angry post-mortems of any one of dozens of CIA-linked Washington think tanks. Smith speaks as a naked proponent of American imperialism. Like his ideological predecessor Max Shachtman, Smith declares Russia to be an "empire" as a justification for supporting US imperialism.

Shachtman's theories were put into practice in the 1950s with the Korean War, where he refused to defend North Korea, in effect siding with the United States in a war in which three million Koreans were killed. Declaring "Neither Washington nor Moscow," Shachtman insisted that the Korean war was between rival "imperialist" powers—the USSR and the US. He went on to support the US war against Vietnam.

Half a century later, the ISO's argument consists of warmed-over Cold War anticommunism in "left" garb, replacing the "Soviet empire" with denunciations of the "Russian empire."

Smith worries about the incoming Trump administration from the same standpoint of those sections of the CIA and the military that backed Clinton: that he will not be sufficiently aggressive in Syria and against Russia. "Now, with the surprise election of Donald Trump, US policy in the Middle East is about to change," he writes. "Trump advocates an explicit alliance with Russia and Assad against ISIS and al-Qaeda."

Over the past eight years, the United States has cloaked its military interventions all over the world, from the fascist-led coup in Ukraine, to the regime-change operations in Libya and Syria, in the garb of human rights, relying on outfits like the ISO to dress these schemes up as "popular revolutions." With the coming to office of a Trump administration, with its lesser emphasis on "humanitarian" justifications for military intervention, Smith fears a loss of status.

He articulates the social outlook that prevails within the affluent upper-middle class constituency of the ISO and other pseudo-left organizations. This social layer has enriched itself through the stock market bubbles of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. As its stock portfolio grew, its politics shifted far to the right. Today, it fervently backs the operations of US imperialism internationally.

In carrying out the urgent task of building an international movement against imperialist war based on the working class and the fight for socialism, an understanding of the right-wing, pro-imperialist politics of groups such as the ISO, and an uncompromising struggle against them, is indispensable.



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