

Rohini Hensman's *Indefensible*: The ISO discovers its muse—the CIA—Part 3

Alex Lantier

17 December 2018

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

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

Endorsing a quarter century of US wars

In the rest of her book, Hensman endorses a series of US wars, launched by Democratic Party presidents after the dissolution of the Soviet Union: in Yugoslavia during the 1990s, and in Libya, Ukraine and Syria under Obama. She markets these wars, waged by the Pentagon in alliance with Islamist terrorist or far-right forces, under the cynical banner of morality and human rights. She asserts that the task today, is “bringing morality and humanity back into politics. Morality requires standing up for the truth, but it also requires something more: taking sides.”

For Hensman, being “moral” means embracing the lies and provocations used to market US wars. She cannot restrain her loathing for opponents of these wars, whom she dismisses as pawns of those regimes Washington is threatening: “Nothing sums up the moral degradation of pseudo-anti-imperialists more than their propensity to take the side of the executioners: Milošević?, Karadžić? and Mladić? in Bosnia; Putin in Russia, Ukraine and Syria; Khomeini and Khamenei in Iran, Iraq and Syria; and Assad in Syria.”

These regimes are no doubt reactionary. However, the task of dealing with Putin, Khamenei, and Assad falls to the Russian, Iranian and Syrian working class. Hensman’s endorsement of imperialist wars targeting these regimes involves her not only in backing the bloodshed caused by the NATO armies, but also the reactionary forces they are supporting in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

After the dissolution of the USSR, the NATO powers swiftly moved to dismember Yugoslavia, provocatively recognizing the independence of its constituent republics, starting in 1992. This led to a series of bitter ethnic wars in Croatia, Bosnia and ultimately Kosovo, which culminated in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia to support Kosovo’s independence. The population was torn apart by rival nationalist factions, as Washington and the NATO powers consistently targeted local Serb forces allied to the central government in Belgrade, in the Serb republic of Yugoslavia.

A socialist policy depends upon uniting the working class against imperialist war. Hensman, however, attacks Washington and its European imperialist allies for not bombing Yugoslavia and attacking the Serbs more aggressively. She laments the “shameful failure of the Western powers to rein in Serb nationalists until they had effectively torn Yugoslavia to shreds.”

Hensman is silent about Operation Storm, the NATO-backed Croatian ethnic cleansing offensive in 1995 that forced all Serbs out of Croatia, and

on Al Qaeda’s ties to Bosnian Islamist fighters. She relies entirely on inflated allegations of Serbian genocide against other ethnicities, made by NATO officials to justify bombing the country. However, after the 1999 NATO war, which was launched based on claims that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbs were killing 100,000 or even 250,000 people, Milosevic was held responsible for 391 deaths.

Hensman also promotes the Al Qaeda-linked Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which Washington formally designated as a terrorist organization, while supporting it in the Yugoslav war. She writes that the KLA “began a guerrilla war targeting Serb security forces, knowing, as KLA leader Hasim Thaçi admitted, that ‘any armed action we undertook would bring retaliation against civilians. We knew we were endangering a great number of civilian lives’. He was right. Serb security forces responded to the guerrilla attacks with indiscriminate massacres of civilians.”

Nonetheless, Hensman enthusiastically comes out for greater imperialist intervention to back the KLA and its allies, and denounces left-wing criticism of the war. She writes:

According to James Petras, former professor emeritus at Binghamton University, ‘Most European and US progressives supported US-backed Bosnian fundamentalists, Croatian neo-fascists and Kosova-Albanian terrorists, leading to ethnic cleansing and the conversion of their once sovereign states into US military bases, client regimes and economic basket cases—totally destroying the multinational Yugoslavian welfare state’ (Petras 2009, 117). The grotesque injustice of designating the Bosnian Muslims targeted for extermination as ‘fundamentalists’ and the Kosovar Albanians being expelled and murdered as ‘terrorists’, along with his deafening silence on the genocidal ethnic cleansing campaigns by Serb nationalists, makes it very clear where Petras stands.

Hensman also defends the 2011 NATO war in Libya. Launched on the pretext that NATO wanted to prevent bloodshed in a state crackdown on protesters in Benghazi, it ended six months later in the carpet-bombing of the country and the torture and murder of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Hensman endorses the positions of the NPA and of Gilbert Achcar, who defended the Libyan and Syrian wars.

She writes, “some socialists and antiwar activists, such as Gilbert Achcar, decided not to oppose a NATO-enforced no-fly zone. Justifying this position, Achcar said, ‘In opposing the no-fly zone from day one, you are rejecting a request made by the insurgents themselves, and you hence behave as if you regard the fate of Benghazi’s population as totally secondary to your sacrosanct anti-imperialism.’”

Hensman is in full agreement with Achcar’s denunciation of opposition to imperialism. She compares opponents of the war to “Pavlov’s dogs,”

who “reacted as if they were being fed when they heard a bell ring, regardless of whether any food was actually being served ... Nothing else mattered except that NATO chose to act; what Libyans said, did, thought, and organized was simply not a factor for them. These anti-imperialists airbrushed the Libyans out of their own revolution.”

More than seven years after the rape of Libya, Achcar stands exposed as the propagandist of a great imperialist crime. There was no “democratic revolution” under the auspices of NATO, in Libya any more than in Syria. After the deaths of over 30,000 people in the NATO bombing of Tripoli, Sirte and other cities, the country disintegrated into a civil war between rival Islamist militias that continues to this day. In the meantime, slave markets and EU-funded concentration camps, designed to halt the flow of immigrants to Europe, operate openly in Libyan cities.

Finally, Hensman supports the NATO-backed putsch that toppled pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine, organized around the Maidan protests. Orchestrated by US officials, in alliance with Ukrainian right-wing and neo-fascist parties, and mobilizing sections of the middle class in Kiev and western Ukraine, who supported joining the European Union (EU), the putsch was led by the neo-Nazi Right Sector.

It brought to power a coalition between Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the Fatherland Party, the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms (UDAR, or “punch” in Ukrainian) of professional boxer Vitali Klitschko, and Oleh Tyahnybok of the neo-fascist Svoboda party.

Svoboda was already the subject of a formal condemnation by the European Parliament passed on December 13, 2012. In it, the EU recognizes the “nationalistic sentiment in Ukraine expressed in support for the Svoboda party,” criticizes the “racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic views” of Svoboda, and “appeals to pro-democratic parties ... not to associate with, endorse, or form coalitions with this party.”

Nevertheless, Washington, Berlin and the entire EU hailed the Kiev putsch and supported the Kiev regime as it launched a series of attacks by far-right militias, like the Azov Brigade, on Russian-speaking areas of eastern Ukraine. At the same time, it slashed government spending on coal mining and heavy industry, centered in eastern Ukraine.

This plunged the country into economic depression and civil war. The war, and the referendum by Russian-speaking Crimea to leave Ukraine and attach itself to Russia after the Kiev putsch, served as pretexts for NATO to mount a major military build-up along Russia’s borders in Eastern Europe. The regime also voted pensions to surviving members of the World War II-era fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), who participated in the Nazi Holocaust of Jews in the Soviet Union.

Hensman whitewashes the fascist coup in Kiev, presenting it as a struggle against a fascist regime in Moscow and demonizing Putin. She writes, “According to the neo-Stalinist narrative, this was a fascist uprising, but the evidence proves the opposite. Although far-right nationalists were certainly part of it, and garnered a great deal of publicity, their performance in the 2014 presidential and parliamentary elections was pathetic, with the ultranationalist Svoboda and Right Sector parties getting around 1 per cent each of the votes cast in the May 2014 presidential election.”

Hensman again tries to smear all opponents of the Kiev putsch as tools of the Kremlin. She denounces them, with claims that they “support Putin, who does not even pretend to be a socialist or communist, and openly associates with the far right; their advocacy extends to support for Putin’s efforts to annex or establish subservient regimes in parts of the former Russian empire, like Ukraine.”

The anti-Russian campaign and Hensman’s embrace of Ukrainian fascism

At the center of Hensman’s argument for the Kiev putsch is her demonization of Russia and of Vladimir Putin, based on little more than neo-fascist propaganda. Putin is the representative of the reactionary, post-Soviet capitalist kleptocracy that rules Russia, developing alliances with far-right forces across Europe. However, Hensman attacks him from the standpoint, not of working-class opposition to Russia’s parasitic capitalist oligarchy, but of hysterical hatred of the Soviet Union.

Hensman depicts the Soviet Union as hell on earth. She does not criticize the Stalinist regime for its rejection of international revolution and its political genocide of the Marxist internationalists, led by Trotsky inside the Left Opposition and the Fourth International. Rather, she denounces the entire USSR, which she presents as a genocidal fascistic regime. Based on this crude falsification, she makes a spectacularly reactionary argument: that pro-Nazi Ukrainian fascists were fighting for national liberation against Soviet “imperialism.”

Hensman’s picture of the Soviet Union, unsupported by any factual evidence, is nothing more than a crude anti-communist caricature. Not only were Soviet workers’ living conditions, according to Hensman, “those of the misery of workers during the industrial revolution in Britain, but conditions in Russia’s slave labor camps—to which people could be condemned for petty offences like the theft of bread, not to mention political dissidence—were even worse.”

As for the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union, they were, according to Hensman, subjected to unrelenting ethnic cleansing and genocide: “The relationship between Soviet imperialism and its colonies was similar to classical imperialism ... Deportations of indigenous people were combined with settlement of Russians in non-Russian nations, shifting the demographic makeup of these regions. The Muslim nations of the Caucasus and Crimea were especially targeted; between 1943 and 1944 the entire Karachai population, Kalmyks, Chechen and Ingush peoples, Balkars, Crimean Tatars and Meshketian Turks were rounded up and expelled; those who could not be moved were shot, their villages burned to the ground.”

Turning to Ukraine, Hensman writes, it is therefore “entirely understandable that it would have a national liberation movement. This movement succeeded briefly in establishing Ukraine as an independent Soviet Socialist republic from 1920 to 1922, before it was recolonised by Stalin. During World War II, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), a formerly marginal right-wing ethno-nationalist group, grew in importance.”

During World War II, Hensman writes, citing historian Timothy Snyder, the OUN carried out “ethnic cleansing of Poles in 1943, killing at the same time a number of Jews who had been hiding with the Poles,” which she calls “the fascist history of Ukraine Putinist propaganda refers to.” She goes on to argue, however, that this history is essentially irrelevant. She writes that “the vast majority of Ukrainians fought against the Nazis, while a minority collaborated with them—as did Stalin and many Russians.”

This presentation all but obliterates the distinction between ISO anti-communism and fascist propaganda. Above all, it denies the immense progressive impact on world history of the October Revolution, the taking of power by the working class and the emergence of the Soviet Union.

The seizing of power by the working class under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, and the abolition of capitalist property in Russia, made possible a quantum leap in the living standards of the masses, not only in Russia but around the world. In little over a generation, the former Russian empire progressed from a collection of overwhelmingly rural and illiterate countries, to a modern, literate and urban society. Thanks to the vast development of science and industry, 40 years after the fall of the backward czarist monarchy, in 1957, Russia launched Sputnik, Earth’s first man-made satellite.

Notwithstanding Hensman’s hellish fantasies of the Soviet Union as a

land of constant Dickensian poverty and genocide, it led to a surge in living standards and life expectancy in the Soviet Union, where workers of different ethnicities overwhelmingly lived and worked together in peace.

Moreover, the effects of the Russian Revolution went well beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. Hensman's insinuation that the Soviet Union collaborated with Nazi Germany is a reactionary historical lie. The defeat of Nazi Germany, the liquidation of European fascism, and the defeat of Japanese occupation forces in China, in the years prior to the 1949 Chinese Revolution, were all products of the USSR's extraordinary military and industrial effort in World War II—above all, its victory against the war of annihilation waged by Nazi Germany against the Soviet people. This transformed class relations worldwide.

Confronted with a tangible alternative to capitalist rule, the bourgeoisies in America, Europe and beyond felt forced to make vast concessions to the working class and its social and democratic rights. This was particularly the case in the decades following World War II, and the discrediting of European and Japanese capitalism due to the crimes of fascism. Facing the real danger of social revolution, they built up welfare states and parliamentary regimes, and sought to address European anti-Semitism and American racial segregation through legislation and reforms.

The ICFI alone, basing itself on Trotsky's work, asserted that the danger of world war and fascism remained. None of the gains made by the working class were safe so long as world capitalism remained. The Soviet bureaucracy—a privileged layer that murdered the Bolshevik leaders of the October Revolution in the 1930s and 1940s and tried to co-exist with imperialism based on rejecting world socialist revolution—could still restore capitalism, as Trotsky had warned. In 1991, after Trotsky's warnings were realized and the Kremlin restored capitalism in Russia, this posed all the more directly the task of building the ICFI as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

The middle-class forces of the "state capitalist" and Pabloite movements, however, reacted quite differently to capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union. With the disappearance of the Soviet bureaucracy's patronage overseas, and the disintegration of the trade unions' social base among workers, they all reoriented rapidly towards imperialism, austerity and war.

That they have come together around the 2014 Kiev putsch and *Indefensible*, a book that endorses the OUN as a national liberation movement, sounds a warning. Despite their phony "democratic" rhetoric, these forces are moving in a fascistic direction. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the significance of Hensman's arguments about Ukraine today without refuting the lies she tells about the history of the Soviet Union and World War II.

In embracing the OUN to justify supporting the Kiev putsch, Hensman is defending a movement directly involved in the Nazis' bloodiest crimes. Blandly stating that the OUN carried out "ethnic cleansing" of Poles and killed "a number of Jews" is to whitewash the crimes of fascism. In fact, the Ukrainian fascists joined in the Nazi Holocaust of Jews inside the Soviet Union and then carried out their own mass murder of Poles and Jews, the victims numbering in the hundreds of thousands, as the defeated Nazi armies retreated west.

As for Hensman's reference to the Stalinist crimes against Muslim minorities in the Soviet Union, this is the classical political dodge of the ISO's Shachtmanite forebears. Based on the crimes of the Soviet bureaucracy, Hensman equates the fundamentally different socioeconomic foundations and political origins of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. While the latter was Europe's dominant imperialist power, the Soviet Union was a workers' state created by the October Revolution, though it had degenerated under the nationalistic Stalinist bureaucracy.

As millions of workers internationally recognized, the Nazis' war of annihilation against the Soviet Union was a war launched by imperialism against a workers' state. The anti-Marxist, Russian-nationalist Stalinist bureaucracy carried out terrible crimes during the war, like the deportation of the Tatars and the mass killing of Polish officers at Katyn. However, the defense of the Soviet Union against the genocidal onslaught of the Nazi and allied European armies was a critical task.

Based on her Shachtmanite position that the Soviet Union was "state capitalist," Hensman blurs over the Nazis' responsibility for starting the war and for a large majority of the casualties, and presents fascist Nazi collaborationists as national liberation fighters. The purpose of this historical lie is to give a false, progressive veneer to Hensman's alignment with the present-day operations of the CIA and the Ukrainian fascists.

Hensman uses this lie to try and discredit left-wing criticism of the CIA-backed putsch in Kiev, focusing her attack on journalist John Pilger and denouncing him as a tool of Putin:

'Having masterminded the coup in February against the democratically elected government in Kiev, Washington's planned seizure of Russia's historic, legitimate warm-water naval base in Crimea failed,' John Pilger tells us. According to him, the 'Russians defended themselves' against 'threat and invasion from the west' as well as 'fascist forces' launching 'attacks on ethnic Russians in Ukraine' – a curiously uncritical regurgitation of Russian propaganda justifying their invasion of Ukraine from the east.

In fact, Pilger is not regurgitating Russian propaganda. He is reporting the outcome of the fascist-led coup in Kiev and the ensuing civil war and Russia-NATO military stand-off in Ukraine. It is Hensman who is regurgitating Nazi-collaborationist propaganda, provided to her by the CIA-backed regime in Ukraine and its allies in the NATO governments and media.

To be continued



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact