

Canadian imperialism and the Gaza genocide: The contrived, right-wing furor over a cartoon depicting Netanyahu as a vampire

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The Montreal daily *La Presse* withdrew a cartoon depicting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a vampire last Wednesday, just hours after its publication. This act of self-censorship was prompted by unfounded and thoroughly contrived accusations of antisemitism, first advanced by the pro-Israeli far right, that were then taken up by the entire political establishment.

Responding to the accusations, *La Presse* Editor-in-Chief Stéphanie Grammond issued a public apology. She stated, however, that the newspaper had “never...intended to convey anti-Semitic remarks,” that “the drawing was intended as a criticism of Mr. Netanyahu’s policies” and “was aimed at the Israeli government, not the Jewish people.”

The unanimous establishment condemnation of the *La Presse* cartoon and its subsequent withdrawal are part of a concerted campaign by ruling classes around the world to denounce any form of opposition to Israel’s imperialist-backed genocide against the Palestinians of Gaza as “antisemitism.”

The cartoon was created by cartoonist Serge Chapleau, who reused an image from the silent, German Expressionist film *Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror*.

The image shows the main character, the vampire named Count Orlock, standing on a ship. His posture is imposing and menacing. Netanyahu’s face is superimposed on that of the vampire, and drawn in a typically cartoonish style, without being crude. The caption “Nosferayahu, on his way to Rafah” appears in a red bloody font, the only color in the otherwise black-and-white cartoon.

The image used in the cartoon is taken from a pivotal scene in *Nosferatu*, in which Count Orlock travels by ship from Transylvania to the fictional town of Wisborg, bringing death with him. Count Orlock kills the crew of the ship which carries him and his coffins. He decimates the population of Wisborg as if an epidemic had taken hold of the once peaceful town. The devastation Count Orlock leaves in his wake is reminiscent of the devastation of war.

Chapleau’s cartoon is clearly a denunciation of the Israeli Prime Minister, who is preparing to bring mass death to Rafah, the Gaza enclave’s southernmost city. Over 1.4 million Palestinians, many of whom have had to flee for their lives multiple times since the onslaught began, are now packed into Rafah. The cartoon was published against a backdrop of popular outrage at the scenes of slaughter in Gaza and repeated declarations from Netanyahu and other senior Israeli officials that an invasion of Rafah is imminent. Two days prior to the cartoon’s publication, the social-democratic NDP presented a motion in the House of Commons purporting to call for the recognition of a Palestinian state.

The NDP motion was introduced to contain within the framework of bourgeois politics the opposition to the imperialist-backed genocide, which has found expression in weekly protests across the country

involving tens of thousands. Despite the motion’s transformation, with the NDP’s approval, into a declaration of support for the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, it was unanimously opposed by the Conservative official opposition. Moreover, it sparked consternation among broad sections of the ruling elite, who recognize that public support for Canadian imperialism’s full-throated backing for the suppression and dispossession of the Palestinian people is crumbling, and fear that the debate over the NDP motion, however innocuous, could inadvertently fuel popular opposition.

The contrived controversy surrounding the Netanyahu cartoon was both an attempt to change the subject and a signal from the ruling class that it is ready to resort to authoritarian methods to impose a policy of imperialist aggression that is hated by large sections of the working class and youth.

Israel’s genocidal assault, which has been militarily and politically supported by Washington, Ottawa and the European imperialist powers, has already claimed the lives of over 32,000 Palestinians, the vast majority of them women and children; displaced nearly 2 million; and imposed starvation on almost the entire population of Gaza. It arouses indignation and anger among the majority of the international working class. Rarely, however, does this vast opposition find a reflection, however tame, in the official bourgeois press.

La Presse’s publication of the cartoon clearly exceeded the bounds of officially tolerated criticism. Expressing any disgust at the massacre taking place in the Middle East immediately exposes an artist or writer to the accusation of antisemitism. Indeed, Israel and its Western allies are waging a campaign to malign the reputation of anyone who dares criticize their murderous and inhumane policies, by accusing them of antisemitism.

Many artists have faced fraudulent accusations of antisemitism, including the socially-conscious musician Roger Waters. Cartoons by artist Dwayne Booth in the US, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, have also been denounced for allegedly making references to “the charge of ritual murder.” This claim is based on his use of images of blood, or babies slaughtered by the Israel Defence Forces. Under threat of disciplinary measures and withdrawal of the wealthy donors on which their finances depend, American universities are imposing the strict censorship regime demanded by the Israeli state and the two right-wing parties that exercise a political monopoly in the US.

Outside the US, the campaign of the ruling elites to suppress all dissenting voices is going forward at full throttle in France, Germany and Britain, where governments have banned pro-Palestinian demonstrations and criminalized the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” And it intensified in Canada last week with the hysterical allegations of antisemitism surrounding the Netanyahu vampire cartoon.

An orchestrated campaign of slander

Chapleau's cartoon was first denounced on X by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA), a far-right Zionist organization, shortly after its publication in the morning. Accusing *La Presse* of antisemitism, CIJA claimed that the figure's "hooked fingers" and "big nose" were "antisemitic tropes."

Once the tone was set, the entire political establishment echoed and amplified the accusation of antisemitism. "[T]his kind of anti-Semitic trope is reminiscent of the 1930s," wrote Conservative Senator Leo Housakos on X. Christopher Skeete of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) provincial government, meanwhile, said, "I applaud the fact that it's been removed, but I'll tell you it was in bad taste. It was hurtful."

The NDP's Deputy Leader and lone Quebec MP Alexandre Boulerice said, "To depict the Prime Minister of Israel as a vampire—that's a historical reference that the anti-Semitic far right made in the 1920s and 1930s of the last century—so I think it was inappropriate. I think he could have chosen another monster."

Finally, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared at a press conference on Wednesday that "anti-Semitic content and allusions are always unacceptable. It's rehashing allusions that date back many decades, in a way that is absolutely unacceptable."

These denunciations are both cynical and hypocritical. Those who today claim to be outraged by a supposedly "antisemitic" cartoon are fervent defenders of the alliance between the Ukrainian far right and the Canadian government. They support a war against Russia in Ukraine in which Canada is allied with neo-Nazis, i.e., real antisemites. And they fail to mention the presence in the heart of the Israeli government of hard-core fascists who openly call for genocide and ethnic cleansing in the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

While it is true that the image of the vampire has been associated with antisemitic caricature, notably by the Nazis, it is far from being the monopoly of the extreme right. The image of the vampire has also long been used to symbolize powerful, sinister, murderous figures (such as Netanyahu), without any reference to Jews or Judaism. The vampire has been used to represent all kinds of ruling-class figures, and even to illustrate capital itself.

In his inimitable use of metaphor, Karl Marx wrote: "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks." More recently, Chilean director Pablo Larraín's film *El Conde* (released last year on Netflix), imagines fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet, in the image of Count Orlock, as a sinister, bloodthirsty vampire.

The accusation of antisemitism in the case of Chapleau's cartoon, which targets a head of government, is a politically-motivated amalgam, one that equates Netanyahu and his government with the Jewish people so as to falsely claim it is directed at all Jews. This amalgam depends on the idea that Netanyahu and the Israeli state are the only legitimate representatives of the Jews, and that the policy of the Israeli state is that of the Jewish people, an idea that is itself antisemitic, and deeply offensive to the many Jews who oppose the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

As recently as last fall, the very politicians who now parade their sensitivity to antisemitic "tropes" of the 1930s, including Trudeau himself, gave a standing ovation to a Nazi war criminal. Yaroslav Hunka served in the 14th Grenadier Division of the Waffen-SS, known as the Galicia Division, which consisted of Ukrainian fascists who fought under Hitler's command against the Soviet Union.

The Canadian ruling class has a long history of antisemitism in Quebec and English Canada. Canada systematically excluded refugees fleeing Hitler's regime. Even after the Second World War and all the horrors of the Holocaust, the Deputy Minister of Immigration could declare of

Jewish refugees: "None is too many." In 1930s Quebec, French-Canadian nationalists spearheaded antisemitic incitement.

After the Second World War, Canada became a haven for far-right Ukrainian nationalists who had collaborated with the Nazis in their invasion of the Soviet Union and the Holocaust. At the start of the US-led Cold War, these right-wing extremist forces were seen as potential allies because of their fanatical opposition to communism and any Soviet influence. Immediately after the war, Canada's Liberal government, in collaboration with U.S. and British intelligence services, facilitated the entry of Ukrainians associated with Nazi groups into Canada. This included former members of the Galicia Division.

Canadian imperialism, which has welcomed Nazi war criminals, is currently in alliance with neo-Nazi forces in Ukraine. At the same time, it supports Israel's genocide against the Palestinians in the Middle East to the hilt.

The genocide in Gaza and the military operations of the imperialist powers in the Middle East, which are aimed at preparing war on Iran, are just one front in a growing global conflict. Another is NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, which has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. It paves the way for direct conflict with Russia, and ultimately with China. What's more, there's a close link between imperialist war and the turn of ruling elites around the world towards neo-fascist forces, such as Donald Trump in the US and Giorgia Meloni in Italy.

But none of these developments offend the imperialist moralists who cry "antisemitism." On the contrary, they are its main protagonists.

Vampires, antisemitism and *Nosferatu*

The mere fact that Chapleau used the image of a vampire to attack Netanyahu was enough for bourgeois politicians and media to accuse him of antisemitism. But the image of the vampire does not belong exclusively to antisemites. Its use in political caricature has a long history, which is not intrinsically antisemitic.

It wasn't just in the pages of the *Stürmer* that images of vampires were to be found in political cartoons of the first half of the twentieth century. We can, for example, observe the use of an almost identical vampire-bat image in two cartoons, the first of which is a well-known antisemitic cartoon published in the *Stürmer*, while the second appeared in Germany's most important left-wing illustrated newspaper (*Der Wahre Jacob*) and denounced the interwar order without any reference to Jews.

It is precisely because the link between the image of the vampire and antisemitism is so weak and one-sided, that the imperialist propagandists have felt it necessary to present *Nosferatu* as one of the favorite films of the Nazis, and even an explicitly antisemitic work.

David Frum, a leading voice of neo-conservatism, embellished the accusation of antisemitism with details that were repeated without any verification. "The 1922 film *Nosferatu* that inspired the *La Presse* cartoon also inspired Nazi cartoonists of the Third Reich," he wrote on X.

As a source for the claim that *Nosferatu* was associated with the Nazis, Frum provided a blog post published by the ANU (Museum of the Jewish People, a Zionist institution funded by the Israeli state) by an author who is not a historian and who provides no source for assertions that he alone makes. The author, who describes himself as a "storyteller," bluntly asserts that Julius Streicher, publisher of the Nazi newspaper *der Stürmer*, was a great fan of the film *Nosferatu*. Neither the author nor the institution would provide a source when asked.

But *Nosferatu* is not the work of proto-Nazis, nor can it be interpreted as antisemitic without violating the rules of the objective interpretation of art.

Directed in 1921 by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, the film represented the artistic experimentation and innovation of the Weimar era, not the reactionary prejudices and resentments that fueled the Nazi movement.

A considerable number of *Nosferatu*'s creators were themselves Jewish and influenced not by the right, but by the left. The film's screenwriter, Henrik Galeen, was Jewish. Alexander Granach, who played a major character in the drama, Renfield, has been said to be the best-known Jewish actor in Germany at the time. Gustav von Wangenheim, who played Hutter, was of Jewish origin and a member of the German Communist Party. The career of Max Schreck, the film's lead actor, was later associated with such figures as Max Ophüls and Bertolt Brecht.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out in a review of the film:

"Murnau's *Nosferatu* [was shot] only a few years after the slaughter of the First World War. His lover [who was Jewish!] died in the trenches, along with millions of others. Whatever conscious views Murnau may have had about the conflict, and there is no indication that he was a political opponent, this dark, lacerating work is a response, passed through the director's (and screenwriter Galeen's) artistic filters, to the monumental devastation of the war (and the 1918 flu pandemic related to it, which also killed tens of millions)."

The attempt to vandalize *Nosferatu* as an anti-Semitic work depends on a postmodernist analytical framework that is profoundly hostile to culture and historical truth, and which is simply taken up in the current campaign to denigrate any form of opposition to the genocide launched against the Palestinian people.

The ruling establishment's theatrics of moral outrage at the *La Presse* cartoon have nothing to do with opposition to antisemitism. Rather, it serves to legitimize Israel's genocidal policy, supported by Washington and Ottawa, intimidate public opinion and confuse the working class and youth.

The only appropriate response from workers and young people, who have demonstrated by the millions across the world against the descent into capitalist barbarism, is to direct all their energy towards mobilizing the only social force capable of putting an end to the capitalist system that breeds genocide and imperialist war—the international working class.



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