

# **Terrorism in perspective**

**Its relation to the state and the class struggle from  
a Marxist viewpoint**

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**If asked, most people would say that the major user of terrorist methods today was Islamic fundamentalism. But as a means of political or religious struggle at present terrorism is by no means confined to one religious grouping. The assassination of Rabin by a Jewish fundamentalist and the election of a Hindu fundamentalist prime minister in India are merely an indication of this.**

To get a clearer picture of the rise of fundamentalism and religious forms of terror one must use the Marxist method of analysis by the use of materialist dialectics, and by examining the question in its historical development in an all-sided way, seeking to establish the contradictory forces and tendencies at work in their movement, interconnection and interrelation.

## **Background**

Which brings us to the question of what forms of terror exist, how they are used and where they lead. This article can by no means be regarded as a full answer, simply as a brief statement of our position as a Marxist party, and one which is not at all exclusive to us of the Workers' Party of New Zealand.

Looked at historically the use of terror to enslave and control masses of people goes back to ancient slave society, to a period when powerful tribes expanded their control of territories by force and set up empires based on slave labour, as was the case in ancient Greece and Rome.

Out of this system developed chattel slavery, with individual ownership of slaves, who had no rights whatever and were frequently worked to death. Such societies generated their own downfall through being weakened by numerous slave revolts.

## **Imperialism the cause**

However, the growth of terrorism in the present period is mainly a phenomenon arising from modern imperialism. What began it all? It was the use of terror in the great French revolution of 1789. In countries still living under the rule of an absolute monarch (as in most of Europe) and a powerful landowning aristocracy, the ruling classes were horrified to see what was happening in France.

Here the monarchy was overthrown and aristocrats were hanged from lampposts, to the plaudits of the great mass of the people.

### **The working people in the bourgeois democratic revolution**

But it would be wrong to imagine that the mass movement was initiated and led by the working class. In the first place the modern working class was just in the process of being born. The masses were still unorganised and quite incapable of taking the lead in the crushing of the old feudal order. This task, however, was carried out by the bourgeoisie; the masses formed the latter's tail, though one of its main forces.

### **The English revolutions**

In Britain, matters were different. There the bourgeois (capitalist) social system had been established a century earlier as a result of two bourgeois revolutions, the first in 1648, the second in 1688. The first ended with a civil war and the execution of Charles I. The second wrote 'finis' to an attempt to re-establish the absolute monarchy. Both revolutions were thunderclaps of history, beyond the comprehension of the ruling classes of the time. But they placed the bourgeoisie in power even though with compromises which enabled some of the feudal aristocracy to carry on as part of the government. But the two revolutions overthrew both the economic and political rule of the aristocracy, and cleared the way for the rapid unimpeded advance of capitalism.

The French, as can be seen, were not original in chopping off the heads of reigning monarchs. But again, even though the British working class was closer to its independent formation as a class, it was still at the tail of the bourgeoisie. It was this class which led the overthrow of feudalism and organised the construction of the new, capitalist order.

Revolutionary at the beginning, it was this class which led (and profited from) the overthrow of feudalism in Britain and saw the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, which is still with us.

### **The tory reaction**

But they were less than joyous at the overthrow of the barbarous 'old regime' in France. The chief spokesman for the British landowning tories in Parliament at the time was Edmund Burke. In 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' he wrote apropos of Marie Antoinette, 'I thought ten thousand swords would have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophists, economists, and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.' Was he speaking of the French working class? No, he was speaking of the French bourgeoisie whose characteristics he describes.

In analysing the French Revolution of 1789, the great thinker-revolutionary Karl Marx wrote in his article 'The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-revolution', second article 1848: 'The *whole French terrorism* was nothing but a *plebeian manner* of settling accounts with the *enemies of the*

*bourgeoisie*, with absolutism, feudalism and philistinism.' It could not be otherwise, as Marx pointed out, for as yet the proletariat did not yet constitute an independent class or a subdivision of another class, and so they fought only for the interests of the bourgeoisie, even if not *in the fashion* of the bourgeoisie.

### **The state and its relation to terror**

Revolutions and civil wars inevitably raise the whole question of the state and the role of terror. In Britain, for a start, the French revolution was warmly welcomed as putting an end to the absolute monarchy and feudal despotism, though at bottom many bourgeois welcomed it for the entirely different reason that it undermined the rule of its main economic competitor in Europe. Even today there is a huge literature of popular novels devoted to whitewashing the monstrous tyranny of the feudalists in France while they paint the great French revolutionaries as black villains.

Leading British writers and political theorists - chief of whom was Edmund Burke - spoke with horror of the terror raging in France, conveniently ignoring the example set in Britain by the execution of Charles I but also having an eye to the possibility that the more economically advanced British workers might take the French road, not against the feudalists, who were already well defeated, but against the newly-installed ruling capitalist class. British writers such as Thomas Carlyle frightened generations almost to death with their royalist descriptions of the French revolutionary terror.

Such people were easily able to deceive the public with horror stories, while concealing the criminal ferocity of the French aristocracy in suppressing every outbreak of opposition by the masses to the despotic rule of the monarchy and the aristocracy.

### **The French Revolution and regenerative terror**

The French revolution used terror to regenerate France and indeed Europe, providing (despite Napoleon's counter-revolutionary dictatorship) the model for bourgeois overthrow of feudalism in the revolutionary years of 1848-1851.

Throughout the 19th century the pattern was repeated of popular risings of the masses against the old order, which the monarchs and aristocracy sought to crush by terror. There are many instances of terrorism by the ruling classes against subjugated peoples as in the Balkans, Turkey and Tsarist Russia.

How is it, then, that historians, politicians and other spokesmen of the ruling classes in the major imperialist countries of today's world manage not to notice the role of state terror and concentrate all their attention on the terrorism (if such it may or may not be) of minorities struggling for freedom from imperialist domination?

What is the modern capitalist state machine but an instrument of violence and terror for use against the workers and oppressed peoples who struggle for freedom from exploitation and political independence? In the class and national struggles of today, state terrorism is always

there, if not in a front-line role, then ready to be called in when considered necessary to buttress capitalist rule.

In a disturbed 19th century Europe, Karl Marx - a doctor of philosophy, was frequently referred to by hack capitalist journalists as ‘the red terror doctor’ because he took the side of the working class and toiling masses and made them aware of their exploitation under the capitalist system. But the ‘white terror’ of ruling-class repression was conveniently overlooked.

### **Marxists oppose terror as a means of revolutionary struggle**

Does this mean that Marxist revolutionary parties supported terrorism as a means of political struggle? To the next generation of Marxist revolutionaries, although they did not repudiate terrorism totally, they did so when its direction was as ‘a means of political struggle.’ Its use by the working class, whenever it might happen, was almost invariably a form of defence against the white terror of the ruling capitalist state. We shall return to this question a little further on.

### **The Paris Commune**

A notorious example of state terror can be seen in the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871. At a time when the Franco-Prussian war ended in a Prussian victory crowned with a six-week siege of Paris, the French government fled the capital, and the workers and soldiers of the National Guard formed a new government, the Paris Commune. This, despite shortcomings due to lack of experience, was something entirely different from anything seen before. It was the self-rule of the masses. While it lasted it put an end to crime and a hundred other social abscesses, receiving the utmost support from the Parisian masses. Replying to anarchists who criticised the discipline of proletarian rule, Frederick Engels, Marx’s lifelong friend and collaborator, remarked: ‘Gentlemen, if you want to see the dictatorship of the proletariat, look at the Paris Commune.’

### **Terror against the Communards**

But the Commune was crushed by forces got together by the former government - known as the Versaillese - with the aid of French and British capital and the Prussian army. It ended with the massacre of fifty thousand ‘communards’, along with the arrest and deportation of thousands more. Here was ‘white terror’ with a vengeance.

### **The epoch of imperialism**

In the period between the Commune and World War I, the character of the capitalist system had begun to change. The growth of monopoly in the big capitalist countries meant that the old ‘free competition’ capital was replaced by imperialism in the last quarter of the 19th century. Capitalism did not disappear but was subordinated to the rule of capitalist monopolies in finance and industry, a system of monopoly capitalism whose basis was finance-capital - the union of industrial and bank capital. In fact from the middle of the 19th century when the French bourgeoisie had defeated an uprising of the proletariat in June, 1848, the French bourgeoisie (in due course followed by other European ruling classes) were compelled to admit that its state was

directed at perpetuating the rule of capital, the slavery of labour, a condition of things which has reached a still higher level in modern times.

In writing of June, 1846, Karl Marx said: 'Having constantly before his eyes the scarred, irreconcilable invincible enemy - invincible because his existence is the condition of its own life - bourgeois rule, freed from all fetters was bound to turn immediately into *bourgeois terrorism*'. It was at this time that the red flag became the symbol of the workers' republic and still is. The terrorism of the bourgeoisie still exists, and strongly, in the epoch of monopoly capitalism, imperialism. What is important to our subject is that imperialism, this new stage of capitalism, was expansionist and stopped at nothing to seize all hitherto 'unoccupied territory' and divided the world between the great powers. In the process one or other of these used terror on a mass scale in their annexation of colonies.

### **Annexations and plunder**

Annexations led to opposition from the relatively backward native peoples, which the imperialists put down and kept down by the blatant use of terror in the form of 'gunboat diplomacy' in order to protect the great stream of wealth flowing into the coffers of monopoly capital from exploitation of the colonies. Literally millions died under the rule of the gun and the whip which constituted the rule of bourgeois, or rather, imperialist, terror. Eight million were killed in the Congo alone. All the big powers were involved, not excluding Japan, which seized both Korea and the Chinese island of Formosa which they turned into Japanese colonies.

### **Who were the terrorists?**

The great colonial (or rather anti-colonial) revolution which spread throughout the colonial world up to and after World War 2 was met by military suppression, not less terroristic because the colonisers' armies involved wore uniforms. If the subjugated peoples began to fight for independence - mainly in spontaneous outbreaks, this, and not the actions of the occupying powers, was declared by the bloody-handed latter, to be 'terrorism'.

But what was the reaction of the advanced powers to such resistance to their exploitation? It was to rely on terroristic methods of suppression! At the same time the great imperialist powers - Britain, France, Germany, Tsarist Russia, Japan, the USA - were engaged in a giant struggle for redivision of the already divided world. When appeals to patriotism by their rulers did not meet their needs for cannon fodder, they conscripted tens of millions of the workers of all countries and forced them to kill off millions of their class brothers for the greater profits of the monopolies.

### **The socialist revolution**

But in one country, imperialist Russia, where capitalist-landlord terror was endemic, under the leadership of the advanced working class headed by the Bolshevik Party, created by Lenin, the masses brought about the downfall of imperialism and imperialist war by overthrowing first Tsarist rule by terror, and then capitalist-landlord rule of the same kind.

Thus began a new epoch, an epoch which saw the October revolution (November, new style) bring to power the working class in alliance with the mass of the peasantry. The October revolution was a socialist revolution, a revolution of the masses, whose aim was not - as had happened in all previous revolutions - to bring to power a new class of exploiters, but to put an end to exploitation altogether, and to build a classless, communist society. To class-conscious workers that day, November 7 (October 25 old style) was the greatest day in world history and remains so.

### **The class struggle within the Party and outside it**

But did Lenin and the Bolsheviks achieve a leadership of the working class and the masses easily? Far from it! They had bitter enemies not only in the ruling classes of capitalists and aristocratic landowners, but also among different strata of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, the main opposition coming from the petty-bourgeois Mensheviks. These carried out constant anti-working class struggles outside the Party, but also such elements were present within Party, which later was renamed the Communist Party.

### **Anarchism and terrorism**

Unwilling to face the necessity of creating and building a working-class party and winning over the masses in organised struggle against the Tsarist autocracy and its prop, the Russian bourgeoisie, petty-bourgeois elements such as the anarchists, drawn from the lower middle class, took the line of terrorism against Tsarist officials. They imagined that because earlier working-class revolutions had not succeeded, that the methods of 'single combat', i.e., killing off individual prominent Tsarist figures - would bring down the whole system. They were completely mistaken. Their views stemmed from a 'great man' theory of history, in which 'the heroes' predominated in making history by great deeds. Not only were they unable to see that it was the masses who made history - the Marxist viewpoint - but they rejected the mass struggle and chose the 'heroes' path of assassination to achieve the end of Tsarism. The working class did not figure in all this, only 'great men'. However, the facts of life totally contradicted their 'great man' theory. They succeeded in killing Tsar Alexander II with a bomb. But the result was predictable. Not only was Alexander II replaced without difficulty by Alexander III, but new waves of repression against the rising revolutionary movement among the masses followed.

### **Anarchism and Socialism**

The anarchists' in an earlier time had fought in the International Working Men's Association (founded by Marx) under the leadership of Bakunin, to disrupt the organisation and turn it from the path of mass struggle for socialism. Their actions led Marx and Engels to dissolve the International rather than see it become a tool of anarchism and its methods of terrorism. In certain parts of Europe - Spain, for example, where there was a large petty-bourgeoisie of individual artisans, anarchism had a certain foothold, but it was rejected by the Russian working class, thanks to a consistent fight waged against it by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Eventually they dwindled into insignificance.

## **The fight against colonialism**

But what of the colonies? Here the socialist Revolution in Russia was a tremendous inspiration. Marxism-Leninism at once began to take root as the major current of national liberation and world socialism. In the words of Mao Tse-tung ('On the People's Democratic Dictatorship') 'The salvoes of the October Revolution awakened us to Marxism-Leninism.'

The October Revolution intensified national liberation struggles throughout the colonies. Invariably such movements were described by the colonialists as 'Communist terrorism'. Few indeed were the authors who saw such struggles as fully justified in order to achieve freedom from imperialist rule and exploitation. In this they followed the example of the Nazis in Europe and their equivalent in Japan.

The weakening of monopoly capitalism in Europe brought to the fore the monstrous terroristic regime of Hitler fascism. Hitler was not at all averse to turning the whole of Europe into a German imperialist colony. In fact, that is what he virtually did with his armies of occupation. But, in Mao's words, 'Where there is repression there is resistance'. A powerful resistance movement against German occupation armies grew up, led, in the main, by Communist parties. They carried out partisan armed struggle against the Nazis who, of course took reprisals. Up to that time the record for terror by conquering armies was probably held by Genghis Khan. Hitler and Co. left him in the shade.

## **Terroristic repression by the Nazi forces**

What did Nazi propaganda in Europe constantly call the fighters of the resistance movements? 'Communist terrorists'! They tried by these means to paint a pretty picture of the heroic Nazi forces holding the threatening 'resistance' at bay, and whitewashing themselves to the other imperialists. Their tactics against the leadership of the mass movements by communists were indeed followed by other imperialist powers in Asia, Malaya, and internationally in China, Vietnam and so on. The only reason the imperialist bloc has toned down such propaganda is that the one-time socialist states have restored capitalism. Now the 'enemy' is not so much the communist movement as the religious fundamentalist groups, particularly the Muslim fundamentalists.

## **The aims of fundamentalism**

But is it the latter's aim to destroy capitalism and set up a classless society? Far from it. As the example of Iran shows, Muslim fundamentalism is basically reactionary. Instead of fighting to advance beyond capitalism, they have sought under the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors, to turn the country and its people into a pre-capitalist society, which seeks to place the population of the country in a religious straitjacket and deny even capitalist progress to the people.

The old biblical and Koranic system of laws, the enslavement of women signified by compulsory wearing of the chador (the complete black body covering), and the yashmak [veil] and the utilisation of barbarous punishments under the old 'lex talionis', the ancient system of 'an eye for

an eye, a tooth for a tooth', all these are now current in Iran, and fundamentalist movements in other countries with large populations of Muslims are using terror in an endeavour to utilise religious sentiments to turn the clock back.

It might be thought that because such movements are frequently anti-imperialist that therefore they should be fully supported. But who wishes to go back to the dark ages of terroristic religious dictatorship?

### **Revisionist clears the way**

Yes, it is true that Muslim fundamentalism tends to appear as a force for liberation from imperialism and has mass support on this basis. The question is, how did this situation come about? How did what are fundamentally reactionary movements, religious fundamentalism, come to appear as the main leadership of the anti-imperialist movement of today? We cannot but regard this as a great setback for socialism.

It should be fairly obvious that the decline of the world communist movement cleared the way for the rightist religions of today. Perhaps we can borrow a parallel from history. In his exposition of Marxist revolutionary tactics, 'Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder' Lenin wrote in 1921, chapter IV:

'Anarchism was often a sort of punishment for the opportunist sins of the working-class movement. Both monstrosities mutually supplemented each other ... ' A few paragraphs later, speaking of the petty-bourgeois Socialist Revolutionary party, he writes of the Bolshevik struggle against them, '... This party considered itself to be particularly "revolutionary", or "Left", on account of its recognition of individual terror and attempts at assassination - tactics which we Marxists emphatically rejected. Of course we rejected individual terror only out of considerations of expediency; upon those who "on principle" were capable of condemning the terror of the Great French Revolution, or the terror in general employed by a victorious revolutionary party which is besieged by the bourgeoisie of the whole world - upon such people even Plekhanov in 1900-03, when he was a Marxist and a revolutionary, heaped ridicule and scorn.'

### **'Punishment'**

And we must ask, is not the rise to power of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and its strengthening in many countries, not directly a punishment for the sins of revisionism and opportunism in the world communist movement which have led to its dissolution? To whom indeed are the masses of exploited in third world countries to turn in their struggle for liberation from world imperialism? The anti-imperialist struggle *should have been*, but was not, led by revolutionary communist parties. However, under the influence of Khrushchev's revisionism they were relegated to the background, leaving the door open to fundamentalism.

So when considering the question of terrorism such as Muslim fundamentalism in third world countries today one must recognise its two sides: one, it is progressive in that it is anti-imperialist; however unless new revolutionary socialist parties can be formed and in action be at

the head of the anti-imperialist, national liberation struggle, the end result will be, as in Iran, an oppressive and reactionary regime which is even worse than capitalism in its terroristic oppression of the masses. Such means lead back only to barbarism and the dark ages, even those before feudalism.

### **Opportunist blindness**

Of course, this situation will pass at some time in the future. But the absence of criticism by would-be Marxist parties of terror by fundamentalists in the Middle East and North Africa, leads precisely to the sort of ‘punishment’ we mention above. Without such criticism, the field is left clear to bourgeois cynics who ask ‘who are the fundamentalists’, and ‘what is terrorism’, having in mind yesterday’s ‘terrorists’ may well turn out to be today’s ‘democrats’ at the head of the ruling parliamentary party. This indeed was the case with the former Jewish terrorist Menachim Begin who was hunted for acts of terrorism such as the blowing up of the King David hotel in Jerusalem during the time of the British mandate and later became Prime Minister of Israel, with the blessing of US and British imperialism. Begin always expressed pride in his activities as a terrorist while a member of the illegal ‘Irgun Zvai Leumi’, classified as a terrorist organisation by the British and US.

### **The PLO and Begin**

The British and American imperialists showed what ‘statesmen’ they were with their support of Begin against the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), which Begin was constantly denouncing and refusing to meet with on the grounds that it was a terrorist organisation! But British and American imperialist ‘statesmen’ were primarily concerned with building Israel as a bulwark against the Palestinian’s liberation struggle, and questions were hardly ever asked by them as to Begin’s invidious position as a former terrorist.

### **Neo-colonialism today**

The question facing genuine revolutionary socialist parties today is how to carry on national liberation struggles without handing the leadership of them to fundamentalist parties. Even though the imperialist countries have been forced out of their former position as ‘owners’ of the colonial countries, they have by no means left for good. Most of the former colonies are today neo-colonies, still under the de facto control of the old colonial power. Nowhere can this be seen better than in the former French colonies in Africa. France had 18 such colonies. Most have today achieved nominal independence as a result of armed struggle. But France still retains a grip on them, such as it recently exerted in Rwanda, where it sponsored the Hutu mass slaughter of the Tutsi tribe of a million or more victims. The French did not do the deed themselves, but when the Tutsis organised a defending armed force which conquered the Rwandan Hutus, the French were quick to land troops to form a ‘safe haven’ for the fleeing Hutus.

Where there are armed clashes between different tribes in the former French colonies, the French imperialists - as in Chad, and today Burundi - fly over French troops to take control.

## **Imperialist terror**

Such armed forces are nothing but a branch of French state terror, used to maintain the super-profits of French imperialists wrung out of the poverty-stricken Africans under their control. Indeed, they would like nothing better than to put the clock back to the 19th century days when they were actual owners of French colonies. And there are plenty of British imperialists who would like to do the same thing.

Those days are gone, however, owing to the political awakening of the former subjects of the great powers, who are no longer prepared to live as colonial slaves.

## **Rebuilding**

Back in 1851, Frederick Engels wrote, apropos of the victory of the ruling classes over their opponents ‘Everyone knows nowadays that, wherever there is a revolutionary convulsion, there must be some social want in the background, which is prevented by outworn institutions from satisfying itself. The want may not yet be felt as strongly, as generally, as might insure immediate success, but every attempt at forcible repression will only bring it forth stronger and stronger, until it bursts its fetters. If, then, we have been beaten, we have nothing else to do but to begin again from the beginning.’ (From ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany’).

Is that not the case today? The revolutionary movement of the international working class and the oppressed peoples has suffered severe defeats in the loss of socialism in all the former socialist countries - including those which have basically restored capitalism but still hang out a socialist signboard in countries like Vietnam, China and North Korea. No-one knows how long this process will take. The only way to find out is to follow Engels’ advice and ‘begin again from the beginning’. That is what our Party, the Workers’ Party of New Zealand, has set out to do. Our only advantage is that of hindsight - but it gives us confidence that mistakes can be corrected and, because of the decrepitude of imperialism, a new advance by the toilers worldwide can be made.

## **The mass movement**

The question boils down to one that Lenin always emphasised - the necessity of helping on the development of the mass movement and, to the extent that is possible and achievable, building a new and still more powerful world revolutionary movement. Here is what Lenin wrote in 1910 after the defeat of the 1905 bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia. He was reviewing the revival of revolutionary feeling and actions in 1910:

‘The first beginning of the struggle has shown us again the significance of the *mass* movement. No persecutions, no reprisals can halt the movement once the *masses* have risen, once the millions have begun to bestir themselves. Persecutions only pour oil on the flames, draw ever-new contingents of fighters into the struggle. No terrorist acts can help the oppressed masses, and no power on earth can halt the masses when they have risen in revolt.’

Like Lenin, we do not support the killing of unarmed people, civilians, in liberation struggles. That is terrorism which only too often is counter-productive. But, we support the workers and oppressed peoples when they meet counter-revolutionary terror with revolutionary terror. Then it is fully justified.

### **Who is responsible?**

The reader will note that this article holds the capitalist and imperialist states responsible for the growth of terrorism, not the oppressed people fighting in a just cause. We make our position clear, in answer to the politicians and the monopoly-owned mass media of the imperialist countries, who can only see terrorism in the actions against the oppressors, and manage never to see the terrorism of the state machine in all capitalist countries.

For the thinking worker, the only way forward is that pointed out by Lenin - to build the mass movement for socialism and national liberation. That is the only way to defeat and obviate the use of terrorism as a weapon in the political struggle, and to once again see the socialist cause advanced the world over. □