

New World Order: Same Old Slaughter

The media and the Gulf War

Workers Solidarity Movement

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“It’s a proud day for America and, by God, we kicked the Vietnam syndrome for once and for all” declared Bush. The imperialists’ victory over Iraq was no surprise given their massive technical and military capacity. What is more interesting is the ready help given them by the “free press”. This article focuses on how the media provided a “licence to kill” in the Gulf.

LET’S EXAMINE a few of the myths that were floating around in February 1991. Firstly was this a war aimed only at liberating a small independent country from a pitiless aggressor?

A Kuwaiti “exile” told Maggie O’Kane in the Irish Times of the hardships they had endured due to the invasion, “In my normal life I would have servants to do everything in the house now I am ironing my own clothes and I have only one servant”. “Before the invasion Kuwaiti citizens had the highest standard of living in the world and enjoyed free education, health care and social services. Sounds o.k. but only 15% of the workforce are citizens!

The remaining 85% are “guest workers” and enjoy the most appalling conditions. Since the war ended 300,000 of the 400,000 Palestinian guest workers have been expelled. Only 60,000 propertied Kuwaiti males have the vote — not that there’s been an election in quite a while. The al-Sabah ruling family returned promising democracy and immediately began assassinating Kuwaiti opposition figures. Kuwait was and is little more than a rentier state. The Al-Sababs were installed by Britain in 1961 and still depend totally on the imperialists.

This doesn’t justify Iraq’s expansionism. Saddam, despite playing “the Palestinian card”, was no sort of liberator. However the rush to “save” Kuwait while ignoring Israel’s grabbings over the years shows clearly that the West “defends small nations” only when it suits their geo-political schemes.

Secondly, was Saddam the new Hitler? Saddam Hussein is not a nice guy. In fact he’s a pretty vicious nationalist dictator. He was responsible for the agonising death by (West German made) Cyanide and mustard gas of 5,000 Kurds at Halabja. He killed thousands of Shias during the uprisings in March and continues to rule Iraq with an iron fist.

However, much as he might relish the thought, Saddam was not and certainly is not in the position of Adolf Hitler in 1939. Nazi Germany was the second most powerful industrial nation in the world, almost totally self-sufficient with its own massive arms industry. Iraq is only self-sufficient in oil (which it can’t fully process), dates and some vegetables and was almost \$ 80 billion in debt at the start of the war. Despite the hype they were actually years away from producing nuclear weapons and had almost no native arms technology. Up to August Saddam relied totally on the major powers.

Thirdly Iraqi forces in Kuwait were accused of being a gang of murderers. No war is ever “clean”. In this war, as in all others, there were horrible atrocities on both sides. However given the balance of forces it comes as no surprise that the coalition forces were the ones that reaped the biggest harvest of death and destruction. Only 137 coalition troops were killed (many by “friendly fire”) compared to at least 100,000 Iraqi troops. At least 200,000 Iraqi civilians died in the bombing or as a result of the starvation and disease that followed.

In the hours after the ceasefire north of the Iraqi border, it was impossible to drive on the highway without running over parts of human bodies. I watched wild dogs feasting on Iraqi flesh and camera crews filmed all this. But scarcely a frame reached television viewers. Faced with the reality they supposedly craved, nearly all television editors decided that ‘good taste’

would restrict their reports now that government officials were no longer there to censor them. Having therefore offered viewers war without responsibility, television ended the Gulf conflict by giving them war without death. Robert Fisk, Irish Times, January 19th.

While the press rabbited on about Western hostages, millions of workers from third world countries were not allowed to leave Saudi Arabia and other countries for the duration of the war. Only 1 in 10 Palestinians in the West Bank (were many of the Iraqi scuds eventually landed) had gas masks in case of chemical or biological attack.

The Western media both “tabloid” and “quality” were prepared to exaggerate, lie, accept rumours or just publish any old rubbish that aided the war effort. We were told that babies in Kuwait city had been ripped out of incubators and left to die. Hospital officials dismissed these as absurd – they didn’t have enough incubators to even hold the number supposedly ripped out.

An icerink in the city was said to hold thousands of bodies – none were found. Up to 40,000 Kuwaitis were alleged to be held hostage – they weren’t. Airmen who appeared in Iraqi TV were supposed to have been beaten black and blue by the Iraqis but sustained their injuries ejecting from their planes had high speeds.

COLLATORAL DAMAGE

The Iraqis couldn’t, even if they wanted to, have come close to the imperialist tallies. The Iraqi army of young and mostly untrained recruits was annihilated in Kuwait. Iraq itself was bombed back into the stone-age. It wasn’t so much a war as a turkey shoot.

Between Kuwait and Basra a fleeing and deserting army in every conceivable vehicle was exterminated. They were attacked by British and American tanks and from the air with rocket and cluster bombs. Tens of thousands were wiped out and it didn’t merit a headline in many papers. They called it “the mother of all easy target areas”.

A few journalists were revolted by what they saw. Some did not to a lesser or greater extent take part in the sanitised and censored coverage. They refused to be involved in the censored military press briefings or to be photographed in camouflage at the front “with our boys”. One British group, Media Workers Against the War, had 800 people at their founding meeting. They produced their own “War Report” which contained much good factual reporting.

Breaking the consensus carried its risks which tended to increase nearer the front. DJ Miles Patterson of Jazz FM in London played a few mildly anti-war tracks and was fired. Bob Fisk who tried to prevent Kuwaitis beating up Palestinians in Kuwait city was told by an American soldier “You have a big mouth, this is marshall law boy. Fuck off!” All things considered he probably got off fairly lightly.

KURDISH WORKERS’ COUNCILS

One possible reason for the massacre between Kuwait city and Basra could have been the rebellious feelings of many of the fleeing conscripts. Though the West wanted rid of Saddam it would much prefer a palace coup within the Ba’athists then a popular uprising. It was possibly, also, for this reason that his elite imperial guards were left fairly intact. On the 29th of March one of the

first tanks back into Basra destroyed a poster of Saddam. A generalised uprising soon gripped the area.

The rising in the South was portrayed by the media as exclusively Shia Muslim in character. However this area of Iraq has always been strongly secular. Basra, Nasariah and Hilah were traditional center of the Iraqi Communist Party (effectively wiped out in the sixties). Had the rebellion lasted longer there might have been some appearance of socialist ideas on the agenda.

In the North according to some sources¹ quoting participants in the Kurdish uprising there may have been up to 100 'shoras' or workers councils. These were active in the fight against the Ba'athists. They also came into conflict with the nationalists of the Kurdish Front (KF) and the Stalinists of the 'March of Communism' (RAWT) group.

The nationalist forces seem to have been extremely unpopular in some areas. One witness said that Jalai Talabani (who later signed a treaty with Saddam) was not let into the town of Sulaymaniyah. Massoud Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party had two body guards killed by the people of Chamcharni.

Shoras called for self-determination, bread, work and freedom including freedom to strike, for a "shoras government", for womens' equality and that people should control their own economic and political destiny. It would appear that a revolution which began as a nationalist one was being taken further by workers fighting for a social revolution. According to one activist "a large part of the shoras movement didn't acknowledge the KF's social authority".

Of course the KF have since brokered an agreement with Saddam which recognises his authority in return for an autonomous region. The lessons of the Gulf massacre and the Kurdish uprising seems to be that nationalists have no answers. Neither Saddam, Yasser Arafat, the KF or any bourgeois outfit have anything to offer workers fighting imperialism in the Gulf region.

All nationalists eventually find themselves in collaboration with the imperialists and only step out of line to pursue their own interests (as in Saddam's case). The working class must assert it's interests. They must break with nationalism and boot out all the Emirs, Sheiks, petty dictators and imperialist stooges.

Only in a revolutionary war against the imperialists and their own rulers can the really defeat imperialism as a force. Only through fighting for real socialism can they take revenge for the crimes of the imperialists.

¹ The Kurdish Uprising and Kurdistan's nationalist shopfront and it's negotiations with the Ba'athist/Fascist regime

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