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Paris Attacks

Chris Hobson

November 20, 2015

From my point of view, the armed attacks that killed at least 129 people and wounded 352 in Paris on Nov. 13 are not only morally and humanly wrong, but also have nothing in common with revolutionary action. Revolutionaries should condemn the attacks, not feel any solidarity with the attackers, and not defend them against the state—as we would with a wide variety of revolutionary activists whom we might oppose politically. This said, it’s important not to lose sight of the larger truth that the various imperialist powers—the U.S., Russia, Great Britain, Germany, and France itself—remain the main perpetrators of terror and destruction in the Middle East and elsewhere.

While all the evidence isn’t in, it seems likely that the attackers were so-called “radical Islamic” forces, perhaps affiliated with or identifying with the “Islamic State,” as the French government claims. (It’s reported that the “Islamic State” has taken responsibility.) If so, the attacks might seem a continuation or part of a struggle against Western domination over Muslim countries. And in a very general (and superficial) sense they are part of such a struggle. However, even leaving aside that the “Islamic State,” where it has power, is repressive and exceptionally brutal, attacks like those in Paris are a substitution

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Retrieved on 10th August 2021 from utopianmag.com

Published in *The Utopian* Vol. 14.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

for and a deterrent to revolutionary struggle. Conspiratorial terrorism against civilians—as was also true of the September 2001 attacks in the United States, for example—is an attempt to substitute for a mass movement of the people, and/or it is an action against the mass of the people. These actions were aimed at French people as enemies, rather than as potential allies in a struggle against imperialism. They were also a substitution for—and really a deterrent to—mass action by Muslims and Arabs against imperialism, including mass action by French Muslims and Arabs against French anti-Islamic legislation and social and economic oppression. And, always and everywhere, the effect of conspiratorial terrorism against civilians is to drive ordinary people into the arms of the government, since they want and need to be protected against murder by unseen forces. So, the effect of these actions is to strengthen rather than weaken oppressive governments.

I see a distinction between these acts and such actions as the recent wave of Palestinian stabbing attacks against Israeli citizens in Israel and the occupied West Bank. I don't see the latter as a road forward but I do see them as part of a mass anger and desperation. The attacks on Israelis are negative in some of the same ways as the Paris attacks—they mostly target ordinary people rather than the military or police, and they increase support for Israel's government, at least in the short term. But they are an outgrowth of a long prior struggle including the two preceding intifada movements, and they take place when the Israeli government has undermined all efforts at negotiating with Palestinians and has continued to support colonization and partial annexation of the West Bank. I think it probable that tactics of mass civil disobedience would gain more for Palestinians; but nonetheless, I am in sympathy with those struggling against Israel and defend them against the state.

In the Paris attacks, in contrast, those killed and wounded are not occupiers, they are ordinary people attending sports

events and concerts. Those who treat them as enemies have the wrong goals, not just the wrong strategy or tactics. They view the issue as a clash of civilizations or ways of life rather than a struggle against imperialism and oppression.

Finally, let's remember the overriding shape of modern history as a history of imperialism—in its second phase, after about 1960, imperialisms often acting through local clients and oppressors. (The very term “Middle East,” used above for convenience, is part of the imperial vocabulary—“east” from whose point of view?) One such particularly horrible and destructive set of imperial actions is going on in and around Syria and Iraq. A popular uprising in Syria, stalemated since 2011, tepidly supported by the U.S. which won't provide real help, has been beaten back by the Syrian government, now aided by Russia seeking to regain power and influence in the region. Iraq and its successive corrupt and unrepresentative governments have been seen as “up for grabs” since the U.S. withdrew most of its troops. The “Islamic State” and other “Islamic” terrorist forces, with their regressive theocratic ideology and hatred of what they see as a “decadent” West, arose out of the failures of secular “socialist” nationalisms in the last century to throw off Western domination. Out of this mix has come the “Islamic State's” push to power in Iraq and Syria. This in turn has created what Europe sees as a “refugee crisis,” that is, hundreds of thousands of human beings fleeing for their lives, hoping for a safe place where they can live normally, who appear as a “crisis” for countries and cultures that still conceive themselves as distinct from the other countries and cultures they have overrun and exploited for centuries. (It was to the great credit of many Europeans, earlier this year, particularly Germans mindful of their own country's dark night of destruction, that they mobilized to welcome refugees and ease their way so far as possible—and in so doing pushed their own governments to greater humanity

than otherwise. But with a boost from the Nov. 13 attacks, the European pendulum has now swung back to exclusion.)

In this situation, the governments of the U.S., Russia, France, England, and others—acting directly with air strikes and drone attacks, indirectly through proxy powers, or by inaction—kill far more than 129 people each day, wound far more than 352, as innocent people are bombed, gassed, or lost at sea in a desperate losing gamble for life. Only, these people “don’t count.” They aren’t (or aren’t seen as) white, they aren’t European, and many have the bad taste to believe in Islam, one of the world’s great monotheistic religions that is seen as exotic and morally questionable by many in the West. In news clips, they tug distantly at Western heartstrings; French victims tug viscerally for most in the West. But let’s not forget the overlying situation and the major perpetrators of direct and indirect terror in the world today. The Paris attacks are horrible. But the word “barbaric,” used over and over by world leaders in the last few days—presidents Hollande and Obama among others—is peculiarly acid and hypocritical in the mouths of the masters of imperial barbarism.

(My thanks to Ron Tabor for comments on an earlier draft.)