

Libya, anti-imperialism, and the Socialist Party

By Sean Matgamna

Peter Taaffe of the Socialist Party has now added a second article to the one about AWL's approach to the Libya crisis to which Martin Thomas replied in *Solidarity* 206. (Whole debate: www.workersliberty.org/libya).

This time out, he ranges far and wide, from Northern Ireland in the late 60s to the early history of the AWL tendency and that of this writer. For reasons of space and time, I will not here take up all the many issues he raises or half-raises.

First, I should undo an injustice by Martin Thomas against Peter Taaffe and the Socialist Party (and its predecessor organisation, Militant). It isn't true that Taaffe's effort was their first polemic against us.

Their first public polemic, perhaps. But they have long polemicised against us and others on the left privately and secretly, inside their own organisation.

That way they would not have to face responses. Those they attacked would normally know nothing about it, and thus young people in Militant or SP, or "close to" them, would not be confused by rebuttals and counter-attacks. And Militant/SP leaders could boast that they ignored what they called "the sects". It is one of the traits that endears Taaffe and his close associates to those who know them.

In replying to Taaffe I have a number of problems. The first and politically most important is that it's difficult, and in places nigh impossible, to know exactly what Taaffe is trying to say.

He jumps back and forth from logic to emotional rhetoric, from specifics to sweeping generalisations. He goes from a semblance of reasoned exposition to moralistic denunciation, abuse, and intellectual hooliganism. For responding to what we actually say, he substitutes a response to what he says we say, or we *really* say.

Sometimes he displays a degree of ignorance astonishing in one who has been in politics fifty years. He defines the American Trotskyist Max Shachtman as holding the position that the USSR was "state capitalist". "They" [AWL] "have now adopted Shachtman's position, characterising the Soviet Union in the past as 'state capitalist'." In fact Shachtman held the radically different position that it was "bureaucratic collectivist", a new and unprecedented form of exploitative class society.

He whinges about being misrepresented and "lied" about, while all through his own texts he writes about our "support" for the NATO intervention when all the facts license him to say is that we do not denounce it. Taaffe consistently misrepresents AWL, presenting his own tendentious gloss on what we're saying as what we actually say.

DID TAAFFE EQUATE THE LIBYAN REBELS WITH THE NICARAGUAN CONTRAS?

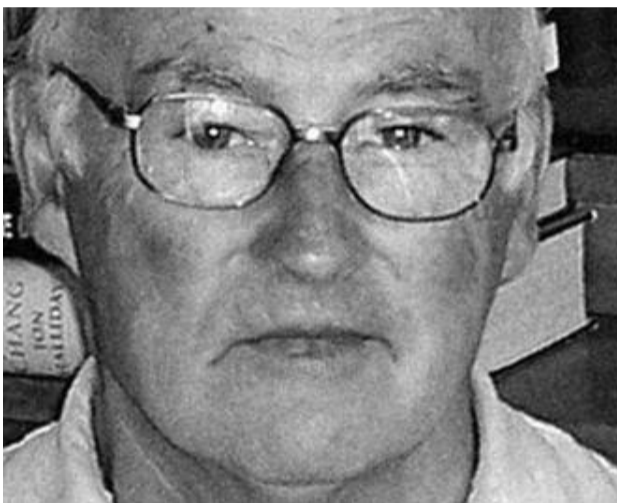
He bitterly denounces Martin Thomas for headlining his reply to Taaffe's first article, "Peter Taaffe equates Libya's rebels with Nicaragua's contras", while himself attributing to us positions he can say we have only by wild extrapolations from what we say.

And, if he is subject to the usual laws that govern the use of language — inside the SP, it seems, he isn't! — he *did* equate the Libyan rebels with the contras.

"When it has been unable to intervene directly, because of domestic opposition for instance, imperialism has not hesitated to use mercenaries to overthrow a regime it did not favour or to stymie a revolution. Such was the policy of Ronald Reagan's administration in using hired thugs, the Contras, against the Nicaraguan revolution. Imperialism has been forced into the latest stand by the fact that Gaddafi appears to be winning or, at least, has sufficient military strength..."

You didn't *mean* to make that equation, comrade Taaffe? Then say that your writing was unclear, or ambiguous, and move on to discuss substantial issues. Don't muddy things further by absolving yourself of bad writing and accuse someone of bad faith when he erred only in thinking that you say what you mean and mean to say what, according to the normal rules of English, you do say.

Instead you wriggle by redefining terms: it was the British and other officers on the ground in Libya whom you were comparing with the contras. But the contras were Nicaraguans, not North Americans! British officers on the ground are "direct intervention", not a case of being "unable to intervene directly"!



Peter Taaffe

Taaffe's manner and style are those of someone used to speaking from the episcopal, or papal, chair; to laying down the law; to playing the oracle. In Taaffe-land what Bishop Taaffe says is interpreted by the bishop too. "Protestants" who use their own understanding of logic, reality, and normal English are "frenzied petty bourgeois" sinning against the bishop and his prerogatives.

ANYTHING OTHER THAN "ABSOLUTE OPPOSITION" MEANS SUPPORT?

The one thing clear in Taaffe's texts is that he is against no-fly zone. He presents this, for all practical purposes, as something axiomatic, as a matter of principle, as a reflex of being against imperialism.

Why it is an axiom, where he is coming from politically, is not clear. In so far as there is an explanation in Taaffe's texts, it is twofold.

That the states intervening from the air against Qaddafi are "imperialist", are "imperialist", are "imperialist"...

And then that only two attitudes to the intervention are possible. Either "absolute opposition". Or full support.

Between those two positions there is no political space at all. In the old Stalinist formula, those who aren't with us are against us. In Taaffe's scheme, those who do not "absolutely oppose" are "attorneys and apologists for France and Britain". If you don't faithfully invert the policies of the bourgeoisie, and produce an exact negative image of what in them is positive, then you are their "apologist".

Taaffe says or implies, again and again, that not to condemn the bombs against Qaddafi is tantamount to supporting not just the bombs but also full-scale invasion, including military occupation.

But he is supposedly analysing AWL's position, which is that there is political space between denouncing the intervention and supporting it; and, specifically, political space within a general anti-imperialism for not denouncing a specific limited action whose immediate consequences have been to stop imminent massacres of the anti-Qaddafi civilian forces in Benghazi and Misrata. He never discusses what we actually say. Instead he discusses what he asserts we are *really* saying.

INTELLECTUAL HOOLIGANISM AND AWL'S "EVASIONS"

Of course, telling someone that you think what he says implies, or may imply, something more or less radically different from what he spells out — that is a perfectly reasonable form of political discussion and argument.

Telling someone that he is actually saying what you, rightly or wrongly, think is the implication of what he is saying — that is a form of attempting to shout him down. It dismisses his concerns and his viewpoint by ecclesiastical ukase, not by way of reason and honest argument.

It is intellectual and political hooliganism, ideological bully-work. If this incoherent mix of emotionalism and moralism is used inside the SP — god help anyone who raises awkward questions there. Does anyone, ever?

Taaffe dismisses as nonsense the question, why "raise a 'demand'... whose likely, calculable, practical consequences we do not

want, which may well bring on a catastrophe that will abort all the possibilities...". He does not deign to say why it is nonsense.

He talks emotively of our position being "evasive", but he doesn't say exactly what we evade. There is heavy moralistic condemnation of an approach which "evades" denouncing and condemning every specific intervention of "imperialism"; but that is a roundabout (moralistic, not political) way of saying that we should denounce "imperialism", in fact, the advanced capitalist world, in every detail of what it does, everywhere and always.

That is what needs to be discussed. That is what he needs to argue for. Instead, he "emotes".

What is it that AWL evades? We evade being pulled by our negative attitude to imperialism into de facto support for the butcherous Qaddafi regime. We evade putting ourselves in the position of denouncing the limited police action of the big powers (which is what it is so far), when that action is intervening from the air to stop the imminent massacre of the rebels.

If you are pulled along by your "logic" into such a thing as support for, or indifference towards, a massacre such as Qaddafi would have carried out without the NATO intervention from the air, then you should at least ask yourself whether there is something wrong with that logic.

If your "political position" leads you, in Trotsky's words, to "pick your nose" while watching men "massacre defenceless people", then somewhere along the line your logic has parted company with your socialist and Marxist starting point. It is right to shy away from such logic — to "evade" political consequences that are unconscionable.

Taaffe cites Trotsky's next paragraph to the one about "objectively picking one's nose" that I used as epigraph in my 23 March article on Libya, implying that there was something wrong in breaking the quotation where I did. Did he pause to read that next paragraph? Trotsky's views on the moral and political advantage of not "picking your nose" because some supposedly "objective" outlook mandates you to be indifferent to massacre says a lot to the left which thinks that "anti-imperialist" principle should compel indifference to slaughter in Benghazi or Misrata.

"A party or the class that rises up against every abominable action wherever it has occurred, as vigorously and unhesitatingly as a living organism reacts to protect its eyes when they are threatened with external injury — such a party or class is sound of heart..."

WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT IN THE SITUATION THAN STOPPING MASSACRE?

Why is it a bad thing that the NATO planes pushed Qaddafi back and averted the massacre? Or was there something else in the situation loomed larger in the calculation, on the negative side? If so, what is that here, concretely?

In large part our position depends on the fact that we don't see any such overriding other factor here. It *might be* that intervention against Qaddafi becomes a pretext for occupying Libya and holding it down. But the difference between a certain type of lunatic and sane people has been neatly summed up as the lunatic not seeing the distinction between what is possible and what is probable or likely. A striking thing in Peter Taaffe's screeds is that he seems unable to tell the difference between what *might be possibilities* in Libya and what are active possibilities and probable developments. (Am I calling Bishop Taaffe a lunatic? No, I am saying he lacks the capacity to think with a sufficient grasp of reality and its likely developments).

Generalities about "imperialism" here are useless, indeed pernicious. There have been and are many forms of imperialism, and different phases in a given imperialism. It is not at all likely that one or another of the NATO powers wants to occupy Libya now. Everything in the political situation speaks against it.

It happens that from his first text one can form an idea of what was going on in Peter Taaffe's mind. It is plain, I think, that Taaffe saw the letter on Libya by Obama, Cameron, and Sarkozy on 15 April as an announcement of a major shift — which, in going for "regime change", it was — and extrapolated too freely from that.

There is nothing necessarily wrong in extrapolating. The problem is that two months later Taaffe is unable to make a balanced judgement.

Bishop Taaffe and imperialism

I can make sense of what Taaffe is saying about Libya only in terms of his having some notion, or unpurged fragment of a notion, that we are in the era of the old colonial empires, or going back to it.

Leave aside for now a precise definition of “imperialism” and what it is now. We can agree that the big powers throw their weight about, and that we should and will oppose that.

Taaffe speaks of “neo-colonialism”, and the prefix neo could be a way of saying that the old colonial imperialism is no more, or, anyway, not what it was. Yet for practical purposes he operates with something like the picture of the old world of colonial empires.

In fact, if there were a drive to make Libya an occupied colony, for the sake of its oil or possible strategic position, then that would go very much against the grain of the evolution of the world since World War Two, which has seen the liquidation of the once-great British, French, Belgian, and Portuguese empires.

Such changes in direction are of course possible. The free-trader and world-marketeer Gladstone, in the mid 19th century, was inclined to see India as a liability to Britain, or an asset whose shedding might be seriously considered. Then came a new surge of British colony-grabbing and a competitive drive by the great powers to carve up the world.

Such shifts of direction are possible again. But to think sensibly that is what is happening today, you would have to have enough observations to justify your conclusion. In Iraq, the drive of the great powers is not to turn it into a colony but to get out. Libya, according to all the evidence, is not a desired colony of any of the powers intervening there.

Most likely, the scope of the mass revolt against Qaddafi and its early successes helped convince Britain, France, Italy, and the others that they could easily kick him into hell. Of course they wanted to influence the new government and gain advantage.

I wrote in *Solidarity* 3/198: “Of course the no-fly zone on Qaddafi might in certain conditions develop into invasion and occupation. Wars escalate, combatants respond to situations they did not foresee”. But that has not happened and, the letter of the three leaders notwithstanding, it is not happening now.

It is only if some sort of re-colonisation is going on that Taaffe’s position on the limited NATO intervention, an international police action, would make any sense. Then, the immediate benefits of the intervention would be inextricably linked to and followed by the greater disadvantages of conquest, occupation, and colonisation. Socialists and anti-imperialists would let that fact shape their attitude.

It simply makes no sense to react to the actual NATO intervention now as we would properly react if it were likely to lead to renewed colonial conquest.

If Taaffe wants to be taken seriously, and not as the political equivalent of the paranoid who cannot distinguish between what is theoretically possible and what is realistically probable, he must justify the suspicions and fears he expresses about occupation and colonial conquest in terms of a coherent picture of the world now. And it has to be a coherent picture, not the unpurged shards and fragments of an old view of an older colonial world.

WHAT IS THE “ANTI-IMPERIALIST” PROGRAMME IN TODAY’S WORLD?

One of the worst aspects of post-World-War-Two Trotskyism is that we responded to the freeing of colonies — their gaining of independence, some after colonial wars, some without them — by saying: “But this isn’t real independence”.

As a description of the limited economic weight of most of the ex-colonies in a world market dominated by the big powers, “not real independence” was all right as far as it went. But the description was very often, mostly even, used as a prop for denying that imperialism had ceased to be colonial imperialism. It was used to pretend that nothing had really changed.

In practice, the “not real independence” line led most Trotskyists, in one degree or another, to embrace and support nationalist-populist movements and see them as “progressive” and “anti-imperialist”. In their economic-nationalist programme, those movements were very often reactionary, similar to what Trotsky denounced (in its fascist form) as attempts “to tear the economy away from the worldwide division of labor; to adapt the productive forces to the Procrustean bed of the national state; to constrict production artificially in some branches and to create just as artificially other branches by means of enormous unprofitable expenditures” (1933).

Against colonial imperialism, the democratic and social programme of anti-imperialism is clear: self-determination and independence. Drive out by force the colonial power, dependent on political control and on armies.

But what when ex-colonies become politically independent, while still economically a very great deal less than economically self-determining or “independent”, still very much less than economic equals of the big powers? The programme of driving out the colonial power becomes meaningless in the old sense.

Is there a new sense? There can be: economic nationalism, the drive to become economically self-sufficient, as nearly autarkic as possible. In the 1930s and afterwards that “anti-imperialist” economic nationalism gripped powerful movements. It shaped the economic policies of governments in, for example, Argentina, and the 26 Counties Irish state.

There can be progressive manifestations of “nationalism” in certain economic areas. The nationalisation of industries like oil may be a legitimate expression of a drive for national independence. Trotsky saw the nationalisation of oil in Mexico in the late 1930s in that framework. But as a general proposition, economic nationalism is regressive. Generalised economic autarky would plunge the world backwards; and in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s it did.

In his denunciations of fascism and in his analysis of Stalinism, Trotsky branded the drive for economic self-sufficiency, for cutting away as much as possible from the world market, as thoroughly reactionary. The same idea was there in all his own programmatic ideas for the development of the USSR — for instance, in *Towards Socialism or Capitalism?* (1925) — and in his proposals in the early 1930s that the unemployed movements in the advanced countries should advocate economic development linked to trade with the USSR.

There can be backward-looking as well as forward-looking “anti-imperialisms”, as Lenin showed in his critique, in his pamphlet *Imperialism: The Highest Stage*, of the petty-bourgeois anti-imperialists who wanted to go back to mid-19th century small-scale capitalism and free trade. The idea of seeking the economic equality of countries under capitalism is dealt with in the Communist International’s *Theses on the National and Colonial Question* of 1920, where it is dismissed as the international equivalent of seeking the equality of the millionaire and the worker under capitalism. “An abstract or formal posing of the problem of... national equality... is in the very nature of bourgeois democracy. Under the guise of the equality of the individual in general, bourgeois democracy proclaims the formal or legal equality of the property-owner and the proletarian...”

The only progressive “anti-imperialist” programme in the epoch after colonial imperialism is proletarian international socialism — socialism created on a world scale, on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist world market.

Confusion on this is at the root of much of the would-be left’s confusion in the face of conflicts between, for example, Iran and Iraq in their decade of very bloody war (1980-8), or conflicts between the great powers and former colonies or semi-colonies.

FROM SEMI-COLONY TO REGIONAL POWER

Some former colonies or semi-colonies are now regional or even world powers. Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was a regional imperialist power.

To approach its conflict with the USA and its allies as if it were conflict between a colonial or semi-colonial people and “imperialism”, that is, with your mind on past but now-transformed relationships, is to get lost politically. (The interested reader will find little bits of such old attitudes still clinging to the coverage by AWL of the first Gulf war, in 1991. Though they were peripheral and did not lead us to big political errors, they should not have been there).

Such transformations of the role and relations of countries happened in Europe in the half-century before World War One. In the 1860s the First International proclaimed as one of its principles the unification of Italy — its freedom from oppressive Austrian interference. The Second International (1889-1914) had to come to terms with united Italy’s transformation into an imperialist power.

German unification was a goal of all European democrats in the middle of the 19th century. By the end of the 19th century Germany was a great imperial power.

Of course the regional imperialisms, like Iraq or Iran, are plainly not on the same level as US imperialism. Anyone who would then demand that we behave towards the lesser, regional power, in conflict with the greater imperialism, as we did towards colonial peoples in conflict with colonial empires, should at least raise their position to a coherent view of history. Applied retrospectively, that would involve supporting Japan against the USA and Britain in World War Two. (In Asia, Japan presented itself as a force for liberation against Western imperialism. It was quite widely accepted as that, even by some Black politicians in the USA).

What follows from this in politics is that we examine each situation concretely and in terms of its specifics, and that we approach no situation as if the old colonial imperialism is still here and the programme that properly went with it can be applied automatically.

When old-style colonialism or the threat of it exists, the old anti-colonial programme of national struggle for independence and self-determination shows us what our attitude should be. To approach episodes like the NATO interventions in Kosovo or Libya to stop massacres is — to steal a joke — like trying to find your way around the London Underground with a map of the Moscow sewers.

To do it as Taaffe does it in his polemic, with bits of half-thought-out ideas, the “shouting-down” methods of ideological hooliganism, and hasty impressions derived from too-limited evidence (the letter of the three) — that is to be simply unserious.

TAAFFE’S RECORD AS AN ANTI-IMPERIALIST

The Russian invasion of Afghanistan at Christmas 1979 led for a decade to the last great colonial war of the 20th century. It was a colonial war with the objective of conquering Afghanistan (for its economic, strategic and military advantage), and making it a full-scale, fully-occupied colony of the USSR.

It was a colonial war in its methods — napalm-bombing villages and so on — like what the French did in Algeria

The US in Iraq and union freedoms

Taaffe justifies his dismissal of my question about “troops out of Iraq” by exclaiming: “This was under an imperialist occupation that had seen the outlawing of trade unions like the oil workers’ union...”

So... there was an oil workers’ union more or less thriving under Saddam Hussein? Then the US occupation outlawed it? But it would regain its freedom if we successfully pushed “troops out” during Iraq’s sectarian civil war?

In fact the oil workers’ union (today IFOU) was formed only after the US invasion in 2003. Not even small underground unions could survive under Saddam.

The US deserves censure on union rights on Iraq — for not pushing for abolition of the Saddam-era laws which already outlawed unions in the public sector and which now mean that unions like IFOU remain in legal shadow.

Any wing of the hardline-Islamist “resistance”, triumphant, was sure to crush the fragile union movement.

Socialists and the European Union

Taaffe says of the SP’s “No2EU” campaign in 2009: “We fought a campaign with the RMT to oppose the anti-working class laws of the EU summed up in the Lisbon Treaty. But at the same time we argued in separate material for our programme for the position of a socialist Europe”.

Of course socialists counterpose the socialist United States of Europe to the capitalist EU! The problem is that those in and around the labour movement, and in the country at large, who oppose EU integration, counterpose to it an “independent” capitalist Britain. That is all that anyone can counterpose to it now as an immediate alternative. It is what the broad anti-EU forces, from UKIP and some Tories all the way to the CPB on the “left”, counterpose to it.

Internationalist socialists counterpose to the bosses’ European Union working-class unity across Europe, and a common working-class policy across Europe. We explain the case for a socialist Europe as for a socialist Britain. We advocate democratic reform to the EU.

To unravel what the bourgeoisie have done to reduce barriers between countries in Europe — yes, in their own way, which is not ours, and not congenial to us — is a thoroughly reactionary proposal. It amounts to throwing out decades of progress and returning bourgeois Europe to the conditions that bred two World Wars.

Many on the left, including the SP, go along with the “little Britain” opponents of the EU while simultaneously muttering about the socialist United States of Europe. But the socialist United States of Europe is not the available alternative to the EU — an independent capitalist Britain is.

In World War One Trotsky raised the question: what if Germany unites Europe by conquest? What will socialists advocate? That it return to the old conditions?

Trotsky advocated a campaign with a German-united Europe for its transformation into a democratic and voluntary united Europe.

I think he underestimated the extent of national resistance to conquest that would exist in such a Europe. But the approach is clear.

Instead of counterposing internationalism to the nationalists — inside the labour movement and beyond it — the posture of anti-EU left is to go along with them and use “socialist United States of Europe” as a private prayer to the gods of internationalism.

The reason for this is that some of the most unbudging opponents of the EU are labour movement people. Initially the anti-EU position was that of the Communist Party, pursuing the Russian foreign-policy interest in not having a united Western Europe.

The Trotskyist left initially, decades ago, refused to follow the chauvinist and Stalinist opposition to a united Europe, even under bourgeois rule. But then groups like the SP jumped into line on the question so as to keep in step with the chauvinists.

That is what Taaffe advocates. Young SP people may feel they are being very “left wing”, internationalist, and virtuous with their calls for a “socialist United States of Europe”. In fact, in terms of practical politics, they are part of a British-nationalist ideological bloc.

It’s the little boy with the tin whistle standing in front of a clamorous orchestra and telling himself: when they play Rule Britannia, I’ll play the Red Flag. People will hear me, not them.

Except that Taaffe and the others are not little boys: they know what they do here.

(1954-62) and the US in Indochina after 1965. One-third of the population (estimated at 18 million then) were driven over the borders. The Taliban took shape in the refugee camps in Pakistan. Perhaps one and a half million died. And the war lasted a full decade, before the Russians were forced to withdraw.

AWL’s predecessors condemned the Russian invasion and the consequent long war. From the beginning we called on the Russians to withdraw. As it happened, we were the only “orthodox Trotskyist” group in existence to take that position (though there was a big minority in the French LCR with the same view).

And Militant (now the SP)? After a bit of internal fumbling (I formed the impression that Ted Grant was initially against the majority line), they supported the Russian imperialist invaders. They supported Russia in waging a savage colonial war for the ten years before it withdrew, defeated. Then as now the SP substituted great generalisations (about the supposedly progressive nature of the USSR) for specific analysis of the situation. At the time I compared their stance to that of the “socialist” Fabian imperialists of the early 20th century.

People who were avid vicarious imperialists during one of the worst colonial wars of the 20th century have no right to lecture anyone on anti-imperialism. Being denounced by Peter Taaffe for deficiencies in our anti-imperialism is like being screamed at by Jack the Ripper with the accusation that you knocked someone over in the street, causing him to break the skin of his head on the pavement and lose a little blood!

The separation of AWL and the Socialist Party

Peter Taaffe's response to Martin Thomas's observation that the SP/ Militant have not explicitly polemicalised with us in 45 years tells us a lot about Taaffe and the SP leaders. He reacts not by telling the truth of things here — that their polemics were internal poison-pen stuff against others on the left. done in such a way that the others were given no chance to reply and the youth in Militant had no chance to hear other accounts — but thus:

"On the contrary, the AWL, before it was called this, through Sean Matgamma and a few other individuals, was, for a very short period, part of Militant — now the Socialist Party — in the 1960s". (In fact, for 18 months, and in the case of Rachel Lever, perhaps double that).

There you are, Thomas, you foul, frenzied, over-educated petty bourgeois, you! You forget that Taaffe and his friends dealt with us back in the 1960s! How long ago was that, Peter? Not only can Bishop Taaffe not write English or Marxism, he can't add up either. And in fact Militant never, to my knowledge, replied to the indictment of their politics that was the take-off point for what is now AWL.

According to Taaffe: *"They constantly raised criticisms from the first moment that they joined our ranks — in the case of Sean Matgamma, as a refugee from the thuggish Socialist Labour League of Gerry Healy.*

"This culminated in them submitting a document of thousands of words for discussion at our national conference just before it was due to take place. The leadership of Militant said that we were prepared to discuss their ideas but properly and fully with full rank-and-file participation. This would not be possible in the time before the conference or at the conference itself; we could not have produced such a lengthy document or reply in time for Militant supporters to read it and make criticisms and comments. But we gave them an undertaking that we would publish the document and circulate it to the supporters of Militant and a full discussion could then take place on their ideas.

"They departed our ranks and collapsed into the International Socialists (IS) the forerunners of today's SWP. They were incapable of conducting a sustained discussion where ideas were subjected to debate, as was the tradition and still is in our ranks. It was not Militant or its leadership that ran away but Matgamma and his handful of supporters".

This is factually untrue in most of what it says. Phil Semp and I were ex-SLLers. Rachel Lever was a "native" Militant activist, with two or three years membership (in 1966 Taaffe had had four or five years).

Notice Taaffe's attitude to my "criticism". (Initially, it was mine, though to call Lever and Semp my "followers" is to mis-state things). This guy has spent decades at the centre of an authoritarian organisation where "criticism" is met with the sort of moralising and bluster and ideological bully-work that the reader can see in Taaffe's articles. He has got into the authoritarian mindset to such an extent that he thinks it condemnable that four and a half decades ago, someone joining their organisation from a background in a different tendency — and one with which the Militant/ RSL/ Grant tendency had been in conflict for 20 years, first within a common organisation (WIL, RCP) and then (from 1947) as a rival group — should initially have "criticisms".

Taaffe has got so used to his own bluster and the authoritarianism of their organisation that he doesn't notice how odd this is. It is in effect a retrospective demand that his "correctness" on everything and his Bishop of Rome status within the SP be extended backwards — that his present and for decades past inviolability from criticism be read back onto the distant past.

MILITANT IN THE MID 1960S

In the mid 1960s Militant was a very small group that did very little and — I thought this the most significant thing — tried to do little.

Their four-page more-or-less monthly paper *Socialist Fight* had collapsed around 1960 and been replaced by a duplicated monthly format. That collapsed too, and for some years they had no publication at all. From September 1961 they went into a joint youth paper, *Young Guard*, with other groupings, most importantly the precursors of the SWP — and simply had no political presence in its pages, which, dominated by the proto-SWP, were more anarchist than anything else.

In 1964, after they recruited some other "refugees" from the SLL and were forced by the Mandel International, of which they were then the British section, to fuse with another Mandel group, the future IMG, led by Ken Coates and Pat Jordan, they were able to start a monthly paper, *Militant*.

Edited by Roger Protz (future editor of *Socialist Worker*), it was a good-looking eight-pager for the first three or four issues. Taaffe, who was somewhat artificially being "built up", had his name appear as editor, but in fact Protz did the job.

Then Protz and the other "refugees" from the SLL — the future "Red" Ted Knight of Lambeth was one of them — left in disgust with the organisation's leaders for defending and justifying the calling in of police to a Labour Party Young Socialists branch to eject some young Healyites, in Wandsworth YS, who had been expelled from the Labour Party.

Militant became a not-always-monthly four-pager, unbelievably drab and dull and amateurish-looking. My sense of futility and tokenism, and consequent depression, after trying to sell it in the Salford pubs, where we had had a very healthy sale of the SLL paper *Newsletter*, remains in my mind to this day.

Taaffe became a full-timer in London, the "National Secretary", early in 1965, to run the office they hired from the ILP. Things couldn't but get better, and they did, a little bit. Even so, Taaffe would still send out routine circulars on which

would be printed: "Date as postmark".

Plainly only an incorrigible malcontent and a serial practitioner of lèse-majesté would find anything to "criticise" in such an outfit!

They had an "official" history of how things had got to what they were in things Trotskyist in Britain — how, from the 1940s, when the Haston-Grant tendency had led a more-or-less unified British Trotskyist group called the RCP, the Healy group had come to be the all-overshadowing thing it was in the 1960s and the Grant tendency had come to be the broken-backed feeble creature it was.

They had always, they insisted, been right on everything, but events and people had conspired against them. They had a cult of the 1940s British Trotskyist organisation, the RCP (the cradle not only of the SP, but also of what is today the SWP and what was from the 1950s to the 1980s the Healy group, the SLL/ WRP). Everything that had happened since the great days of the RCP had been inevitable because of "the nature of the period" and the malignity of their Trotskyist enemies.

I let Militant (and my hostility to the SLL) convince me for a while that they had not been at fault, or much at fault, in the Wandsworth affair. And I was more than willing to see the faults of the Healy/ Cannon tendency of the 1950s. But I could never accept Militant's general view of the history.

It was living political issues that led us to separate from the Militant (then known to its members as the RSL). Since subsequent history has pronounced on those issues, and not in favour of the Militant/ RSL, it is surprising that Taaffe can write as he does, even given his mindset as incumbent high priest in an authoritarian organisation.

I have written at some length about those issues — www.workersliberty.org/wwwaawwmb — so I will only outline them here.

HOW DID WE COME TO BREAK FROM MILITANT? ANTI-UNION LAWS

Rachel Lever and I came into conflict with Peter Taaffe, Ted Grant, and the other leaders of Militant/ RSL first over the Wilson Labour government's plan to control wages by way of a statutory incomes policy.

This was an attempt to shackle the unions. Compared to what the Tories would put — and New Labour leave — on the statute books, it was a very small thing. Compared to what had gone before, for decades, it was an enormity. A Labour government doing such a thing to the working class and the trade unions was an outrage.

It would become law in mid 1966.

In late 1965 *Militant* carried a strange commentary by Ted Grant on the proposed wage-curb legislation. Instead of trying to raise the anger of the labour movement against the Wilson government and the Labour Party, *Militant* told its readers — who, fortunately, were very few! — that there was not much to worry about. The labour movement, it said, was too strong to be shackled. Anti-union laws would not matter much.

Wasn't it true, what *Militant* said? Yes and no. Of course, the labour movement was very strong. But the statutory incomes policy of July 1966 did for a while dampen down effective working-class militancy. In 1969 the same Labour government tried to bring in full-scale legal curbs on the unions — a first version of the sort of legal framework that the Tories would succeed in installing in the 1980s..

That attempt was defeated — the government was forced to withdraw the legislation — by a tremendous, angry campaign by the labour movement.

That strength in action was not the product of the movement passively contemplating its own might, but was the power deployed in the tremendous demonstrations that developed in 1969 and again, against the Heath Tory government, after 1970.

Thought the article seemed a piece of ineptitude rather than something politically worse, the idea that the role of Marxists was in effect to preach quietism to the labour movement, by way of smug contemplation of its own great strength, outraged Rachel Lever and myself. We protested.

It was agreed that we would write a letter, couched as if from casual readers, to the paper. We did. It never got into the paper. But in the next issue there was an article by Ted Grant, conceding various points in the letter without mentioning it, and then essentially repeating the line of the first article. He added to the political mess a bit of philosophical ultra-leftism; union-shackling laws would stimulate rather than quash militancy.

That was to look at the affairs of the labour movement, in which we were supposedly an activist force, as from a great distance — from a philosophical watch-tower far away. Again, it was both true and not entirely true.

Things would not always be favourable to the labour movement and to militancy. The labour movement was roused in 1969, and again, on a larger scale, with Tory anti-union legislation actually on the books, in 1972-4. But there came a time when, with the labour movement weakened by disappointment with the Wilson government which trade union militancy had effectively put into office in 1974, and by mass unemployment, the Thatcher anti-union laws were installed. They have been a powerful force against industrial militancy ever since.

Militant's approach was wrong in principle. Our role should never be to preach complacency to the working class and the labour movement.

The approach seemed to be all of a piece with an all-pervasive "vulgar evolutionism" in the Militant/ RSL. Vulgar evo-

lutionism is a view that society evolves automatically, incrementally, and smoothly, without the revolutionary breaks or changes of direction that in reality are an essential part of real evolution. It is, you might say, evolution without dialectics. On the level of politics, it seemed to me to be plain stupidity, as well as being irresponsible and light-minded.

Rachel Lever and I proposed that the organisation should try to set up a broad labour-movement committee, involving other than Militant members, to campaign in the movement against the statutory incomes policy. This led to three sorts of reaction.

One: from the London office — go ahead and see what you can do in Manchester (where we were).

Two: from the Liverpool branch of Militant, the biggest and oldest one — they wouldn't hear of the idea. That sort of thing was what the Healyites did. "It's against the organisation's perspective, comrade!"

Three: from the London office again — actively undermining what we tried to do in Manchester.

I arranged for Peter Taaffe, on a visit to Manchester, to meet an important mineworker contact, a former SLLer, on whose collaboration or lack of it what we might do in Manchester would greatly depend. Soon after than I learned that with the mineworker Taaffe had dismissed and argued against the idea of starting a labour-movement campaign.

Taaffe did that, so I understand it, because that sort of activism was a mark of the Healyite beast, and he wanted to convert the "contact" to a different mindset.

More than anything else, that two-faced performance by Taaffe — saying one thing to Rachel and me, and another to the "contact" — soured and eventually embittered relations between us and "the office" and those who ran it. Such things, we believed, were impermissible in a healthy Trotskyist organisation.

In fact the argument between the Militant centre and us about launching a broad labour-movement campaign was a continuation of a recurring division in the ranks of the Trotskyists. It had been an issue between the Healyites and Haston-Grant in the 1940s, and again between Grant and what would become the IMG — the Mandelites, Coates, Jordan, etc. (I don't know if Rachel or I knew that then. I'd read some of the RCP archives from the 1940s, in the Militant office, so maybe we did).

WHAT IS A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE?

Rachel and I had come up against a cluster of basic Grantite politics and attitudes. That forced me to think about those attitudes, and about the vulgar evolutionism which pervaded everything and in all important things defined the organisation's politics.

They made a central fetish of what they called their "perspective" — a scenario about the evolution of the British labour movement and the world.

The labour movement was too strong to be defeated. The widespread trade-union commitment to "nationalisation" was a serious socialist consciousness. The labour movement would evolve by way first of the creation of a mass Labour/ trade union left wing, and then that would become a Marxist current organised around themselves.

The world was experiencing a gradual socialist revolution. The first stage of it, driven by the "autonomous movement of the productive forces", was the inexorable spread of Stalinism. As late as the mid-1970s, they looked with enthusiasm at the seemingly likely creation of a Stalinist regime in Portugal.

In those two "perspectives" — of the British labour movement, and the Stalinist-in-the-first-stage world revolution — the role of Marxists was to explain what was already going on, give it "critical support", and predict the future. It was rather, as Rachel and I put it, like catching — and meanwhile waiting for — a train that would eventually come along and continue the journey on pre-set tracks.

Toadying to Bob Crow

Taaffe is indignant with AWL because a member of AWL, on a blog over which we have no control, is less than polite to Bob Crow of the RMT.

This part of Taaffe's article is a piece of toadying to Crow. He tells us, indignantly, that Crow is "perhaps the most militant... trade union leader in Britain". So Crow being a militant trade unionist is all that defines him? Because he is a militant trade unionist, the rest of his politics don't matter?

If that is not what Taaffe is saying, what does he want to say? Bob Crow is, in my opinion, a respect-worthy militant trade unionist. He is one of the best of the trade-union leaders. But politically Crow is a supporter of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain. On things like the European Union he is a reactionary "Little Britisher".

If the contradictory nature of Crow is hard for Peter Taaffe to grasp, what does he think about Arthur Scargill? In 1984-5 Scargill led the greatest strike since the 1926 general strike. In that he was a revolutionary trade unionist.

For our part, we did everything we could, threw everything our organisation had, into backing and helping the miners — while Taaffe and his protégé Derek Hatton, who then controlled Liverpool's Labour council, did a short-term deal with the Tories instead of taking the Liverpool labour movement into battle alongside the miners.

But Scargill was also a typical trade-union bureaucrat, complete with chauffeured car, high wage, and so on. And he was a dyed-in-the-delusions unteachable Stalinist.

In the middle of the miners' strike he set up a federation with the police-state pseudo-unions of Russian and Eastern Europe. Despite wholeheartedly supporting him against the Tories, we criticised him on such questions. By the way: did Taaffe do that?

Libya, anti-imperialism, and the SP

At the same time, they could be refreshingly brutal about the realities of Stalinism, in sharp contrast to, for example, the Mandelites. Stalinism was “totalitarian”, but, so to speak, progressive-totalitarian. It was “working-class Bonapartism”.

The mix was utterly incoherent, but, if you didn’t see that, satisfying. You could call the horrors of Stalinism “totalitarian”. At the same time you could see the spread of “proletarian Bonapartist” regimes as tremendously progressive, the ongoing “world revolution”, and everywhere to be approved and supported. You could glory in the “achievements” of the progressive totalitarianism. As ideology, it was strong. It depended, however, on the believers not knowing much about Marxism. Militant preached, and educated its members to preach, that Marxism was their “perspectives”.

Militant’s position on the Labour Party was that it was “the workers’ party”, without qualification. When Rachel Lever and I put into circulation Lenin’s description in 1920 of the Labour Party as a *bourgeois* workers’ party, that was dismissed as irrelevant.

The Labour Party was inevitably going to evolve to the left, and continue evolving until “the Marxists” would take over. Just as today the SP sees nothing contradictory in the Labour Party and organisations like it, which they dismiss as having no sliver at all of a working-class dimension, so then also they could see nothing contradictory in what they called “the workers’ parties”. Then as now, a dialectical view of reality was foreign to them.

Their “perspectives” gave their members a stable labour movement routine — and a group routine — and a viewpoint that saw that routine not as what it was, in a politically inadequate labour movement, but something glorious and revolutionary.

Militant’s politics were for practical purposes more a revolutionary than a revolutionary approach. But for sect-building they were ideal — so long as the organisation could thread itself through the trellis-work of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

PEACEFUL REVOLUTION

Around the spindle of their “perspectives”, the Militant leaders spun a whole skein of related positions. For example: there could be a peaceful, parliamentary, road to socialism in Britain.

I learned that they had the position in the following way. I organised for Ted Grant a meeting of, mainly, ex-SLLers in Manchester. Taaffe would travel around with Grant and chair his meetings: he was thus being promoted, the altar-boy to Father Ted, so to speak — being built up and fitted with a set of political Cuban-heeled boots. Grant came out with the peaceful revolution line. It provoked heated responses from a number of people there, but he stuck to his guns.

In 1966 Rachel and I forced that to a discussion on “the Secretariat” (which was effectively both Political Committee and National Committee). Of the five members, the three “senior” comrades — Ted Grant, the trade-union official Arthur Deane, and Ellis Hillman — said yes, they held that Britain could, or would, have a peaceful revolution. Of the two apprentices, Keith Dickinson said he wasn’t sure, and Peter Taaffe said he did not believe in the peaceful revolution. Such independence by Taaffe was very rare; otherwise he would have been removed as Grant’s official acolyte.

Militant also had a general all-purpose excuse for saying and doing what they thought would be organisationally advantageous to them. “The workers wouldn’t understand that, comrade!”

For me in the 1960s, all this took some untangling. As a response to their alarming quietism over statutory incomes policy, I wrote a short piece on what exactly a Marxist perspective was, as distinct from their railway-station waiting-room notion of a perspective. Then I got lost in “reading around” the subject. I didn’t have enough political self-confidence, or political drive, or see the urgent necessity of settling political accounts with them.

The seafarers’ strike of May-June 1966 changed that. Militant responded to a strike being witch-hunted by the Labour government (Prime minister Harold Wilson accused it of being engineered by a “tightly knit group of politically motivated men”), and threatened by statutory incomes policy, with routine articles in support of the strikers’ trade-union demands. Politics was “forgotten”.

When Rachel and I again objected, we were told not to get too excited. The self-excited and habitually profound Peter Taaffe dismissed the strike as only something “ephemeral”. You couldn’t fool little Peter: he knew that a strike didn’t go on for ever.

OUR GENERAL CRITIQUE OF MILITANT’S POLITICS

With help from Rachel Lever and Phil Semp, I set about writing a systematic critique of Militant’s politics (and also a summing-up on the SLL’s politics).

“The office” had urged us — perhaps hypocritically, or jeeringly — to write our views out systematically. We did. We told them that we were writing a long document and that we would type it and copy it, so that (in those pre-computer, pre-photocopier days) nothing was required of the office.

That was the starting point of *What We Are And What We Must Become*. It was a not-so-small book, covering everything from the Labour Party and our policy towards it to the nature of a Marxist perspective, peaceful revolution, and the role of a revolutionary party and its relationship to the labour movement. If we’d had more experience, it could have been pruned and reduced; but essentially it was long because it was comprehensive.

Militant did not have a regular internal discussion bulletin (as Marxist groups often had in those pre-internet days). There was no set length for internal discussion contributions. I cautiously tried to prepare “London” for a “big” document.

There were never any objections. Since we were producing the document, there could be no objections that the organisation could not spare the time and energy required to get it out.

Rachel Lever and I went to London at the start of my annual holiday, 1 August, to produce the document on the stencil-duplicator at the office. (Stencil-duplicators were then the standard way of producing multiple copies for anyone who could not afford full-scale lithographic printing; but they were not cheap or widely available).

Objections to the document came only after the people at the Militant office and Ted Grant had read it. Then everything changed. They tried to confiscate the only hard copy we had, and I had to trick Peter Taaffe into giving it back to me.

Peter especially was upset. The document had recounted his double-dealing on the projected campaign against statutory incomes policy. It was, he said, with characteristic self-effacement, “all about the warts on Peter Taaffe’s face”. The document debunked the mystique of Militant’s “perspectives”, was out of key with maintaining the internal mystique of “the leadership”, and knocked away the political Cuban heels they had been putting under Ted Grant’s acolyte Peter. It was meant to.

“WE CAN’T DISCUSS WHAT GRANT AND TAAFFE CAN’T REPLY TO”

From the point of them reading it onwards, we were given the runaround in London, wasting a week. When we eventually produced 100 hard copies, they refused to let us circulate it.

It surprises me that Taaffe is so self-unaware as publicly to repeat some of their arguments from that time.

It was a “pre-conference period” for Militant — the conference was about three months away — so surely we had a right to circulate the document? No, they replied. “The leadership” would not have time to reply! So, our democratic rights as members could be removed because they could not reply within three months? Exactly.

In fact, the conference had, in the preceding year or so, repeatedly been postponed. Was it now absolutely fixed? Of course it is, comrade! In fact, if my memory is reliable here, it was not held on schedule but was again postponed. It was, I think, held in early 1967, about half a year after the beginning of August.

The mix of day-to-day sluggishness and incapacity, and, now, the deployment of a full panoply of bureaucratic leadership self-defence methods, aroused our (certainly, my) contempt. They could have been mocking or guying themselves. They were, but they didn’t know it.

We started to campaign in the organisation for our right to raise our criticisms of the leaders’ politics. We found — in London, for example — solid and seemingly unquestioning support for whatever the leadership said or did. The story circulated by Taaffe and Grant that we were or were “probably” Healyite agents contributed to that, but fundamentally it was a matter of the nature of the organisation. The members were people recruited to and educated in the group’s “perspective”, not in general Marxist politics. They had been given a vulgar-evolutionary scenario of the future, and

something to do now: that was the extent of the political education.

A proposed “compromise” was finally suggested — that the document be circulated to “the National Committee”, which would decide if it should be circulated to the membership. An obviously sensible “democratic centralist” approach? No.

The National Committee was three quarters fiction. It never met separately. National Committees were always “extended National Committees”, that is, “teach-ins” with as many non-NC members as could be mustered. We said that the “National Committee” was little more than a form of differential franchise should anything need to be voted on at the “Extended National Committees”. Anyway, the NC was certain to back “the Secretariat”.

Unless the document were circulated so that everyone could read it, any discussion would be dominated by claims that what we said was “all about the warts on Peter Taaffe’s face”. They wanted a “discussion” in which most of those taking part would be deprived of the right to read the document under discussion! We rejected the proposal for circulation only to the NC.

I remember the point at the October 1966 extended National Committee at which I decided I wasn’t going to remain a member of Militant. It was the justification that the members accepted from Peter Taaffe for some particular bit of clumsy bureaucratic blocking by the centre. “This is exactly how it is done in the broad labour movement. It is perfectly democratic”.

In the bureaucratised, routinised, ideas-unfriendly “broad labour movement”? I aspired to something better. On the second day of the Extended National Committee, I made a formal statement, and we left.

PRETENSION

Taaffe’s two pieces which Martin Thomas and I have analysed highlight a prime source of the bureaucratisation in so many of the would-be Trotskyist organisations. The mixture of demagogic attempts at shouting down and moralistic bullying which Taaffe has publicly displayed tells you what the internal life of the SP is like.

If Taaffe, self-satisfied in his political clumsiness, political illiteracy, and plain illiteracy, existed in an organisation where people had the habit of thinking for themselves, and could exercise the right of taking what he says not as the oracular voice from the bishop’s chair, but critically, as the voice of an ordinary mortal, a comrade among comrades, then he would quickly deflate.

If they could mock his pretences without calling on their heads a chorus of full-timers and loyal cultists in the vein that Taaffe displays, then he could scarcely hope to maintain influence, let alone a position of supreme bishop and giver of the law.

Finally, Peter: when are you going to deal with the truth about what you did in Liverpool in 1984-6? Derek Hatton has said on TV, in response to it being put to him that you had claimed that you knew nothing about the council issuing mass redundancy notices in September 1985, that this idea was “news to him”.

It would make very interesting to read if you were to abandon the lies and the bluster about “the city that fought” and attempt an honest account of it.

www.workersliberty.org/files/illusions.pdf

Ireland: why socialists must have a democratic programme

Taaffe defends his “united workers’ defence squad” scheme for Northern Ireland, which, incidentally, was raised first (for a short while) by the Communist Party of Northern Ireland (there were then two Irish CPs), then by the Maoist British and Irish Communist Organisation, then by Militant.

In fact, during the prolonged crisis of 1969, Militant had no supporters in Northern Ireland. They gained some supporters in Derry only afterwards.

There is a lot of mystery in what Taaffe writes. In the mid 90s, soon after the IRA ceasefire, the Socialist Party came out in favour of some sort of federal united Ireland (apparently a 26/six county federation).

Though the idea seems since to have disappeared from the SP press, that was a recognition, some 25 years after the Troubles started, that the Irish situation could not be dealt with just by the typical Militant generality: “socialism is the only answer”. By then, the SP leaders would have had to be completely, as distinct from partly, brain-dead not to recognise that the all-shaping fact in Ireland is that there are two distinct peoples, with different national identities, on the island.

(The distinction is not the same as the six/26 county division. There is a very big Catholic-nationalist minority in the Six Counties, who are the majority in a large part of its land area, in Derry City for example).

The political issues that have split the Irish working class and convulsed Irish political life concern the relationship of those two peoples to each other.

The Protestant-Unionists do not want to be, and greatly fear being, a minority in a Catholic-majority state, and positively want to become part of the UK; traditional nationalism demands that they should become a minority in a Catholic Ireland.

Faced with that conflict, socialists can either pretend that this complex of issues will go away if ignored — it hasn’t, in 150 years — or, as socialists, seek a way out that could make sense to the mass of the people, Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and nationalist.

There is, after all — and someone should remind Bishop Taaffe of it — within the socialist programme a comprehensive democratic programme, with which we relate to such questions. Our anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism is part of it.

On all socialist precedent, where there is a situation like that in Ireland, we advocate federation, local self-rule, and so on. We counterpose to the chauvinisms thrown up by such conflicts a benign democratic rearrangement of affairs, and working-class unity on the basis of agreement to wage a common fight in both conflicting communities against any oppression of minorities.

While fighting for a socialist revolution, and after they had made it, in a Tsarist Empire with many nationalities, the Bolsheviks made great use of their *democratic* approach. “Socialism is the only answer” politics, without any democratic programme, are irrelevant and sectarian. In so far as they implicitly say to those afflicted by the “constitutional” issues, “forget it”, they are ultra-left.

Throughout the Troubles, Militant had no policy for Ireland. “Socialism” in the abstract, especially Militant’s “socialism equals nationalisation” version of it, was not a policy. A socialist sect can be built on such indifference to the political questions, but not a Marxist organisation.

Militant’s mid-90s conversion to a (very inadequate) version of a “federal united Ireland” policy suggests they eventually caught on to that, or some of them did. In fact it is one of the great lessons of the lead-up to the 1968/9 crisis and the aftermath.

In the late 60s, “everyone” in dissident Irish politics was socialist. The official Republicans were (in fact they were Stalinists). The People’s Democracy movement in the North was. Eamonn McCann and the Derry Young Socialists were. The Guevarist Saor Eire guerrilla organisation was.

But soon the socialists — that is, the sectarians and the ultra-left socialists — were pushed to the sidelines because they had no answers on the “constitutional” question. The national question, the “constitutional” question, emerged not in a benign democratic and working-class way, but in the chauvinism of the Provisionals and, on the other side, of the Protestant-Unionist ultras. Eamonn McCann, standing on a class and socialist policy in the 1970 general election, got 7,565 votes. He did not shape subsequent events. The different chauvinist forces did.