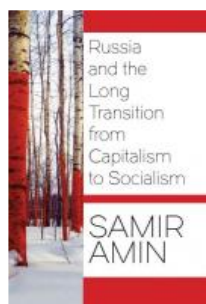


Samir Amin's Russian Campist Anti-Imperialism

Category: From The Archives, World War II
written by Dan La Botz | January 28, 2017



For some time now, many of us have wondered how it is that a number of left-wing writers and some political organizations could support Vladimir Putin and the Russian government's role in international affairs. These groups and individuals have backed Putin in the seizure of Crimea, his stealthy intervention in Ukraine, and his support for the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad (whom they also support). Is this simply the crude politics of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"? Or is there some theoretical justification for their position? And if so, what is it?

Samir Amin, often seen as the leading theoretician of the Global South, has written a short book that answers that question—though the answer he provides is not only unsatisfying but disturbing. Amin's logic places him on the side of undemocratic and aggressive states against "the people," whose uprising, he says, he has always championed.

Amin, who is now 85 years old, was born and raised in Egypt, later studied in France, and has worked and lived in Mali and Senegal; he began his political life in the French Communist Party (PCF) but moved into Maoist circles as early as the late 1950s. He agreed with the Maoist critique of Soviet "revisionism" and more generally with the Bandung Conference notion that the revolutionary movements of the third world (today the Global South) represented the future of progressive politics. He has written thirty-some books informed by these politics, which are also at the root of this latest book.

Russia and the Long Transition, a collection of essays written over the last 25 years, is a broad overview of the history of Russia, of Communism, and of the Eurasian world. At the center of the book is the question "What happened to the Russian and Chinese revolutions, and where are we now?"

This book is written expansively at the geopolitical level, more concerned with nation-states than with their internal politics or their social classes. Looking at the last thousand years, Amin contends that the fate of nations is determined not only by history but also by geography, and he focuses on the way Russia's Eurasian location—more Asian than European—determined its character. Russia's location between Europe, China, and Japan, he argues, tended to make it focus more on its own internal development than on external expansion.

Amin asserts that not only is Russia not imperialist today, it was never imperialist—not in the time of the czars, nor in the time of Stalin and his successors. This is so, he writes, because Russia—unlike the European Great Powers—did not profit from its empire; it always put more into its colonial possessions than it got out of them.

Russia, argues Amin, has almost never been an aggressive power, nearly always content merely to defend its territory—including all of its contiguous colonies—against Europe, Turkey, and later, Japan. While he does not spend much time going into it, he holds the same view of China. Russia and China created autarkic economies that allowed them to largely delink from international trade, at least until recently. For Amin, it is their self-sufficient national character that suggests that both

Russia and China once had and still may have the chance to play a progressive role in world history—that is, if the former can stop supplying petroleum to the West and if the latter can turn from exports to the development of its internal market.

Though they might no longer be able to become socialist societies, Amin believes that Russia and China might yet become “popular democracies” and stand forth as leaders of the world’s peoples in resisting the imperial “triad”: the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. Amin is not uncritical of Putin’s internal regime—its crony capitalism and its autocracy—but he believes that there are groups within the Russian political class that would like to create a more social-democratic society, and he hopes they will prevail upon Putin.

The principal point for Amin, however, is that the resistance of Russia today keeps the triad at bay, keeps it from creating one global capitalist system that would become a cage for the world’s peoples. Amin is an advocate of a multipolar world, which he believes would keep the triad from foreclosing options and would open space for other nations and peoples. His desire is to see a polycentric world with a social-democratic Russia and China able to face down the United States. It is this that makes Amin, and some of the others who share his views, supporters of Putin’s Russia in Crimea and Ukraine and of its relations with Iran and Syria.

History Denied

Amin’s view of Russia ignores or denies much of the reality of czarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet history. Amin suggests that imperialism exists only if profits are flowing to the metropole from the colony. But, of course, imperialism existed long before Lenin wrote *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, and often had *no* profit motive, but was imperialism nonetheless. Russia had no capitalist economy when Moscow’s soldiers incorporated Siberia and reached the Pacific in 1640, and it was still hardly capitalist even later when it conquered Central Asia in two stages (1715-1854 and 1865-1881). Russian imperialism was, like other imperialisms, driven by the desire to control territory and trade routes as well as by competition with other nations; Russia wanted to check Turkey, Britain in India, and later, China from encroaching on its space.¹

Just as with the British, French, Japanese, and Americans, building the Russian empire often meant spending money on the military to take territory, grab resources, seize trade routes, and command markets that might only later prove useful. Under the czars, the Great Russians took political control of a vast region, a continent within a continent, and even when they were content to leave local satraps and landlords in power, they commanded. Dozens of peoples from the Baltic to Siberia were conquered. That’s why Russian socialists (among others) referred to czarist Russia as “the prison house of nations.”

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 attempted at first to end the empire and Great Russian domination. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic established in 1917 was made up of sixteen theoretically autonomous republics and more than twenty other autonomous regions. Under Lenin there was an attempt to respect the right of nations to self-determination while also trying to preserve the old boundaries of the Russian empire. Lenin’s criticism of Stalin for his treatment of Georgia shows the former’s sincere desire to respect formerly subject nationalities, even if in the midst of foreign intervention, civil war, and the foundation of a workers’ government this proved quite difficult.²

Under Stalin, all of that changed. The Russians dominated the federation politically and administratively as well as through Russian colonization of the Central Asian regions. As Moshe Lewin argues, Stalin believed in a Russian-led “super-state” that was in essence “a replica of the old Great Russian imperial ideology.”³ All of Stalin’s policies—the forced collectivization of agriculture,

the purges, the Russification of non-Slavic areas—also affected the Central Asian republics, with the same ramifications in human terms.⁴ The modernization of Russia and the consolidation of the Soviet Union, at the cost of millions of lives, made possible the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany and the "liberation of Eastern Europe"—followed within a few years by Eastern Europe's assimilation into the Soviet bloc.

Surprisingly Amin has virtually nothing to say about the Soviet conquest of the Baltic countries and of most of Eastern Europe at the end of World War II (only Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Albania had relatively autonomous movements) as liberation from the Nazis became subjugation to the Soviets, though it should be noted that Amin does pause to praise Stalin for his pact with Hitler, which divided Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Amin implies, without explicitly saying so, that the Soviet absorption of Eastern Europe into its empire was entirely progressive—while also suggesting that all movements against the Communist system and Soviet domination, such as *Solidarność*, were utterly reactionary.

The Soviet Union's collapse, he avers, was a tragedy caused by the Communist bureaucracy and led to autocracy and corruption. Since then, he believes, there has been a struggle within the state bureaucracy, between crony capitalists and social democrats, for the soul of Russia, though he provides no evidence for the existence of such a struggle.

Without much further discussion of the facts, and certainly without any admission of the complexities of the situation, Amin maintains that in Ukraine everything from the Orange Revolution of 2004-2005 to the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014 has simply been a fascist movement backed by the European nations and aimed at attacking Russia. He argues that behind the fascists in Ukraine and elsewhere in central and eastern Europe is the triad. While it is certainly true that the European nations and NATO would like to extend their control over Ukraine and are willing to encourage reactionary forces to do so, Amin's view simply ignores the reality that Russia has its own interests in attempting to regain control over Ukraine and other countries in the region.

The central point that Amin and others like him miss is that imperialism is a struggle among great powers and lesser powers, and that a multipolar or polycentric world inevitably encourages even more imperialist conflict than did the Cold War bipolar world. Neither the bipolar nor the multipolar world is preferable, and the reply to both must be anti-imperialist movements from below.

History and Politics Without Class Struggle

Amin flies at such a high altitude in this book, way up in the stratosphere where the air is thin, that all we see below are nation-states and various actual or potential alliances among them. Amin, while very critical of the post-Stalin Soviet Union—he refers to it as "rotten"—and in particular of the former Communist bureaucrats who tore it apart, has nothing to say about the potential for class struggle in the former Soviet Union or in China. If one read only this book, one would think that Amin believes that we can hope for nothing from the working class and the peasantry of these countries. Everything seems to depend upon struggles among the post-Soviet elites. He merely comments that if Putin or Chinese leaders were to make his longed-for left turn toward social democracy, they would have to have the support of their people.

In the 1950s Amin broke with the PCF because he believed that the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 and the Bandung Conference of 1955, and the debate that they provoked within the world Communist movement, pointed to an alternative Third World peoples' revolution. Ironically, Amin and others who shared his trajectory have ended up supporting reactionary, bureaucratic capitalist states, hoping that their leaders will warm to ideas of social democracy even if socialism currently seems to be impossible to achieve. This thinking leads them to support not only Putin but also the

Chinese Communist Party, the ayatollahs of Iran, al-Assad in Syria, and many other reactionary regimes. In doing so they ignore and deny the real sources of potential progress in the world: the working class and poor peasantry, the exploited world peoples in struggle from below.