

# Up on the Malvolian Heights

By Sean Matgamna

I FIND it difficult to accept that Jim Higgins intends his piece as a serious contribution to the discussion. He merely regurgitates and reformulates much that he said earlier, and which I refuted and corrected earlier — on Deir Yassin, for example. Higgins, I fear, confuses track-covering repetition with serious argument, just as he confuses oblique evasiveness with wit, and elephantine orotundity with a praiseworthy style. Up on the oxygen-starved Malvolian heights, Higgins has adopted the late Healy's idea of a powerful argument — saying things twice or, preferably, three times and four times, at increasing length, lacing the polemic with desperate abuse, direct and “stylish”. Like the late Healy, the late Higgins fails to notice that this sort of thing harms no one so much as its author.

Higgins does try to give value for money — politician, literary critic, literary detective, style guru, Jim is all of these and more. Those who can, do, those who can't, try to teach? Jim — no fool he — has twigged that I've read the files of old Workers' Party USA publications. His conclusion that what I say about the Middle East is culled from this treasure house identifies him as someone who left politics in the late '70s, and has no idea of what happened after his demise. What we say about the Middle East and similar questions — and Northern Ireland is, in principle, almost the *same* question — is the result of long — public — discussion in the pages of *Socialist Organiser*. His idea that other people do what Tony Blair and bourgeois politicians do, and change policies in pursuit of “market openings”, accurately describes Tony Cliff's approach — for example, it is what Cliff did when he became a “Luxemburgist” circa 1958 — but not that of the AWL. (By the way, the late Bernard Dix became a Welsh nationalist and joined Plaid Cymru, around 1980!)

The idea that the political identity of a tendency can be put on like clothes found in an attic is worthy of someone who, I understand, has written a book to prove that Jim Higgins is the living embodiment and custodian of “the IS tradition”. It doesn't work that way, Jim. The politics of the AWL are the result of work to develop and clarify what we started with — the politics of the Cannon tendency — in the light of discussion and experience, and work in the class struggle too. As it happens, it is true that we probably are now the nearest approximation in politics to the Workers' Party of the 1940s — though we are not identical with it, and, for myself, though I criticise Cannon, I make no blanket repudiations of him and what he tried to do.

In brief: which is Higgins saying? That I haven't read Cliff's 1946 work? Or that I wouldn't notice without help, not unless Al Glotzer had already noticed it forty years earlier, that it simply has nothing to say about the political issues I spend much time debating? Or is Higgins simply short of something to say? He should have

read the footnote where I link the approach to the Middle East conflict he and Cliff share with a famous discussion in the Marxist movement between Lenin and Bukharin-Piatakov on the so-called “imperialist economism”. He might then have avoided the method Lenin rightly castigates there and dealt seriously with my question: why, from a socialist and consistently democratic point of view, did the Jewish national minority not have national rights? He deconstructs this basic question in a welter of not always accurate detailed “practical” considerations. Who, he asks, was “to afford” national rights to the Jews? In fact, nobody did: they won the right of self-determination in war with the British, the Palestinian Arabs and the surrounding Arab states. I repeat: why, in the world as it was and is, were they not entitled to do this?

Neither before, during, or after the war did “the world” protect the Jews: that is where the often very brutal psychology of the Israeli state, of the heirs of those who survived Hitler's slaughter, and those who died in it, comes from. It is the Palestinian Jews who have the irreducible right of self-determination. As for the rest of the world's Jews if we denounce as racist all those who do not agree to, or advocate, the destruction of Israel then we are comprehensively hostile to most Jews alive. We therefore fall into a form of anti-semitism. Higgins can't seem to take in the idea that to say this is not to say that “left-wing” anti-semites are *racists*. No, you are not racist; yes, you are for practical purposes an anti-semitic — comprehensively hostile to most Jews alive.

This comprehensive hostility does not on the left go back much more than a quarter of a century, though its roots can be traced far into the past, as I explained. Higgins puts the Arab propagandists' picture of European displaced persons' camps emptying of Jews as Middle Eastern displaced persons' camps filled up with Arabs: missing is the fact that almost as many Jews were then ‘displaced’ from Arab countries — to Israel — as Arabs from Palestine. Missing is the element in the situation of the deliberate maintenance for political purposes by Arab regimes of the refugees as refugees. Possibly Jim worked too long for an Arab bourgeois journal to be still able to see such things.

Unteachable, Higgins drops his idiotic — but very revealing — idea that it was “the Zionists” who stopped the benign F D Roosevelt opening the USA to Jewish refugees [WL34], but he goes on blaming “the Zionists” for all the closed doors in “the planet without a visa” for Jewish refugees. I think the Trotskyists were right, in the USA for example, to demand of Zionist organisations that they join in our campaign for open doors. Like the blinkered sectarian he is, underneath the desperate mimicking of urbanity, Higgins still *blames* the Zionists for *everything* that followed. Our old political criticism of Jewish nationalism thus becomes the attribution of



An Orthodox youth fights for Haganah, 1948

moral responsibility to Jewish nationalists for all that was done to millions of Jews! Essentially the demand here is that the Zionists should have ceased to be nationalists, that is Zionists. Nationalists are nationalists, of course. But Jewish nationalists are worse than other nationalists — indeed, on them falls the guilt for what the nationalists, chauvinists and racists of other nations do to their people. In fact, they “bring it on themselves”, don’t they, Jim?

Higgins, like Cliff, confuses what could reasonably be said in a debate with a socialist Zionist in say 1930 with an attitude to the reborn Jewish nation in Palestine; except that the old Marxist criticism by words is replaced with Arab bourgeois and feudal criticism by bomb, gun and poison gas. Israel will not cease to be “Zionist”, in Jim Higgins’ sense, unless it is militarily conquered and over-run. But Jim Higgins says that, though he wants Israel done away with, he would like to see it replaced by socialism. The problem is that Saddam Hussein, etc. will not make socialism, or even accord Jews equal citizenship.

At this point I find myself very impolitely thinking that Jim Higgins is incorrigibly stupid; and then, abundant evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, I remember that he isn’t; and thus I reach the truth: here stupidity, impenetrable, albeit would-be smart and “stylish” stupidity, serves the same purpose as hypocrisy; it is a variant of it. For nobody not born yesterday can think socialism is an immediate Middle Eastern option if only Israel is no more, or not

who is in fact an old-style socialist sectarian of the sort Lenin fought, winds up spouting fine socialist words that have no grip on life and in real politics he finds himself happily in tow to Arab bourgeois realpolitik. So does the SWP.

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I refuted Higgins’ tunnel vision account of things by putting the emergence of Israel in historical context. He repeats it now in terms of the politics of population arithmetic in ’30s Palestine. He sees the calculations of the Zionist demon as all-determining. As if the movements of the Jews to Palestine can be understood apart from Hitler and earlier smaller Hitlers! But I have already covered this in considerable detail.

In fact the Zionists would have accepted

know that Jim Higgins-style anti-Israeli propaganda, including his deceptive talk of socialism — socialism without an agency — serves those who in the world of realpolitik want to destroy Israel in the name of Arab and Muslim vindication and revenge.

Leninists are not vague socialist propaganda mongers: we are always concerned with “realpolitik”. Without realpolitik — as Lenin explained to those socialists, the so-called economists, who wanted to leave the struggle for democratic rights, a bourgeois republic and other non-socialist things to the Russian liberals — your enemies establish their version of realpolitik and use it against your socialist cause. Here Jim Higgins,

the partition proposed by the British Peel Commission in 1937 — and then, under Arab pressure, rejected by the British government. Higgins admits that Arab immigration was important in Palestine in the 20s and 30s; why was that legitimate, and Jewish immigration — the migration of people fleeing for their lives to their own community in Palestine — not?

It is of small consequence, but I never imagined that in Higgins’ 1973 piece he was being anything but Cliff’s hack, on the way out: the piece seemed to me to register a stage in the degeneration of SWP thought on this question.

I said that the Trotskyists in Trotsky’s time believed Jews had a right to go to Palestine. The exceptions to that I know of were the French POI, the group which published *Spark* in South Africa, and, I think, CLR James. Jim responds with speculation that I formed this opinion from Tony Cliff’s 1938-9 pieces in *New Internationalist*. I didn’t, though Cliff’s stuff then is evidence for my case. What I said was derived from the whole history, including Trotsky’s writings. [See the review of Trotsky on the Jewish question in *Workers’ Liberty* No31.]

Thus drooling over Cliff and speculating, Higgins evades the whole broader question! Is my account of the pre-war Trotskyist movement right or wrong?

Higgins is too busy being stylish to be loyal in the discussion: I am concerned for the “security” of Israel against those who advocate its destruction in the name of “anti-imperialism” and “socialism”; but I am for those Israeli socialists, Jewish and Arab, and for those in the Arab world, who want equality and democracy and a free Arab state alongside the Jewish state in Palestine. All nationalists — Irish nationalists for example — see their nation as ‘superior’ and ‘holy’ and ‘elect’ — it is the nature of the thing. [How do I know? Guess.] Calling it racism can sometimes make people think: but you can’t do it to only one nation in a national conflict without lining up on the side of the other no less “racist” nation. Jim Higgins does that, despite his repudiation of realpolitik and talk of socialism, because he is a sleepwalking “socialist” sectarian who has no notion of the Leninist way of combining socialism and *working class* realpolitik.

I like jokes and humour and “style”, Jim, and I’m not invariably unappreciative of an adroit, well filled double negative, in good season. But to tell it to you plain, in old-fashioned English: I don’t give a fuck for any of that if it is counterposed to politics, and I don’t see anything that is not simply pitiable in would-be funny polemic that evades the issues, and cleverisms that tie the author, not his opponent, in knots. The style appropriate to our business — mine anyway — is one that lets you say it truthfully, plainly, and as sharply as necessary for presenting things as they really are. The rest is trimming. If Shachtman is the measure here, Shachtman used humour to throw light on things: in the work that I know he never sacrificed political substance to style, still less to the vain pursuit of it — that way, Comrade Higgins, lies decadence, as you have here once more demonstrated.

*Arabesques, he once turned in Cliff’s rodeo, Who not sits ad absurdum, reductio! See him fret, see him fume, Watch him preen and presume: “God, I’m pleased I was me,” sighs Malvolio.*