

From the Siege of Leningrad to the Siege of Gaza: Colonialist Mentality

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Eighty years ago, on January 27, 1944, people in the street were hugging each other and weeping with joy. They were celebrating the end of a nearly 900 days brutal siege. Soviet forces lifted the siege of Leningrad after ferocious battles. Exactly a year later they liberated Auschwitz. Even today, walking in Saint-Petersburg's main avenue, the Nevsky Prospect, one notices a blue sign painted on a wall during the siege: "Citizens! This side of the street is the most dangerous during artillery shelling".

The siege was enforced by armies and navies which had come from Germany, Finland, Italy, Spain, and Norway. It was part of a war started by a coalition of forces from around Europe led by Nazi Germany on June 22, 1941.

The goal of the war against the Soviet Union was different from the war Germany had waged in Western Europe. On the day of the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler declared that "the empire in the east is ripe for dismemberment". Germany sought new living space (Lebensraum) but did not need the people who lived on it. Most of them were despised as subhuman (Untermenschen) and destined to be killed, starved or enslaved. Their land was to be given to "Aryan" settlers. To make his point in racial terms familiar to the Europeans, Hitler referred to the Soviet population as "Asians".

Indeed, the war against the Soviet Union had aspects of a colonial war: millions of Soviet civilians – Slavs, Jews, Gypsies (Roma) and others – were systematically put to death. This surpassed Germany's genocide in Southwest Africa (today's Namibia) in 1904-1908 when it just as systematically massacred the local tribes of Herero and Namas. True, Germany was not exceptional: this was common practice among European colonial powers.

The intentions of the Nazi invaders were summarized succinctly:

After the defeat of Soviet Russia there can be no interest in the continued existence of this large urban center. [...] Following the city's encirclement, requests for surrender negotiations shall be denied, since the problem of relocating and feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for our very existence, we can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population.

As one of the Nazi commanders enforcing the siege put it, "we shall put the Bolsheviks on a strict diet".

The last rail line linking the city with the rest of the Soviet Union was severed on August 30, 1941, a week later the last road was occupied by the invaders. The city was completely encircled, supplies of food and fuel dried up, and a severe winter set in. The little that the Soviet government succeeded in delivering to Leningrad was rationed. At one time, the daily ration was reduced to 125 grams of bread made as much of sawdust as of flour. Many did not get even that, and people were forced to eat cats, dogs, wallpaper glue, and there were a few cases of cannibalism. Dead bodies littered the streets as people were dying of hunger, disease, cold and bombardment.

Leningrad, a city of 3.4 million people, lost over one third of its population. This was the largest loss of life in a modern city. The former imperial capital famous for its magnificent palaces, elegant gardens and breathtaking vistas was methodically bombed and shelled. Over 10 000 buildings were either destroyed or damaged. This was part of the invaders' drive to demodernize the Soviet Union, to throw it back in time. Leningrad had to be wiped out precisely because it was a major centre of science and engineering, home to writers and ballet dancers, the see of famous universities and art museums. None was to survive in the Nazi plans.

Sadly, neither sieges, nor colonial wars ended in 1945. Britain, France and the Netherlands waged brutal wars of "pacification" in their colonies long after Nazism was defeated. Racism was still official in the United States, another ally in the fight against Nazism. Twelve years after the war, it took the 101st Airborne Division to enable nine black students to attend a school in Little Rock, Arkansas. Today's Western values of tolerance are recent and fragile. Overt racism is no longer acceptable, but its impact is still with us.

Human lives do not have the same value either in our media, or in our foreign policies. The death of an Israeli attracts more media attention than that of a Palestinian. Severe sanctions are imposed on Iran for its civilian nuclear enrichment program while none are imposed on Israel for its military nuclear arsenal. And, of course, Western powers continue to provide arms and political support for the siege of Gaza, where civilian population is not only bombed and shelled, but deliberately starved and let die of disease. The International Court of Justice confirmed "plausible genocide", even though it failed to stop Israel.

Commemoration of the siege of Leningrad should prompt us to put an end to all racism, to stop the siege of Gaza and to prevent such atrocities in the future. Otherwise, the accusation thrown in the face of the European citizen by the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire in 1955 would remain still valid:

.. what he cannot forgive Hitler for is not crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not

the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.”

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