

A Review: Edwy Plenel and the Russian “imperialism of revenge”

Wednesday 12 October 2022, by [Tendence Coatsy](#) (Date first published: 4 October 2022).

“A new imperialism threatens world peace, Russian imperialism” writes Edwy Plenel, a founder of the investigative site Mediapart. “Born out of the wreckage of the Soviet Union” this is an “aggressive synthesis of Stalinist Communism and Great Russian Tsarism.” Its politics are moulded by “the resentment of nations who have lost their leading place in the world”. The author sets the stage on which the adversary is playing, “Putin is “driven by a mission, to defend a conservative and identitarian world-vision, an alternative to Western decadence”. “Russia is also a nuclear power, run by a man and his clan of oligarchs, which has swung from authoritarianism to dictatorship..”.

Review of *L'Épreuve et la Contre-épreuve. De la Yougoslavie à l'Ukraine*, Edwy Plenel. Stock, 2022.

The former *Directeur de la rédaction* of Le Monde, who began his career as a journalist in the 1970s for *Rouge* of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) sees in the rise of Greater Serbian nationalism and the ‘national communism’ of Slobodan Milosevic, in the wake of the break-up of Yugoslavia, a portend. Facing these conflicts, “Internationalism stands on the side of the dominated against their oppressors, whoever they may be, across frontiers.” It is not a demand to back the internal policies of the Ukrainian government, beginning with their labour laws.

Two films, the first essay recalls, had marked Plenel’s generation of the left. Costa-Gavras’ ‘Z’ (1969) and is a lightly fictionalised account of Western manipulation in early sixties Greek politics, which resonates outrage at the Greek Colonels’ Coup at the end of that decade, and *L’Aveu, The Confession* (1970) based on Artur London’s memoir of his experience of the Czech Stalinist anti-semitic purge of Communists, the 1953, [Slánský trial](#). Both taught hostility to dictatorships, from those supported by the USA to Communist regimes backed by the USSR. to including falsehoods from the left.

The target in *L'Épreuve*, is not only the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is “campisme”, a word, more than familiar to left-wing English speakers. “Un “campisme” de gauche, fonctionnant par antiaméricanisme automatique comme s’il était tenu par le membre fantôme du soviétisme disparu.” Left-wing campism, that operates with a knee-jerk anti-americanism, as if it came from a phantom limb of the long-gone Soviet Union.

Interviewed on the present book by *Regards* the author explains that it is “une façon de voir les questions géopolitiques internationales dans des logiques d’États, donc dans des logiques d’alignement sur des puissances ” – a way of seeing geopolitical issues in terms of States and their alliances. [Campisme, internationalisme, attentisme et opposition de gauche au stalinisme](#). The “anti-imperialisme des idiots”, described by Leila al-Shami, and publicly attacked by Syrian democratic intellectuals, had led some to denounce any movement – starting with the anti-Assad uprising – that goes against Russian and Chinese interests as creations of Western interference and imperialist plotting.

One can feel this appeal to campists, “in Moscow’s call to “denazify” Ukraine. Announced by RIA Novosti in April 2022, a call for a “complete cleansing” of “nazis” active, or passive, collaborators in a process of ‘Nazification’ that had swept the land since 1989. Plenel critically approaches a long-list of French politicians who have indulged Vladimir Putin, and those like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who whilst recognising the Russian Head of State’s responsibility for the invasion, have brandished the threat of a world war, and refused to back military aid for Ukraine instead calling for diplomatic negotiations.

If that has paralleled the UK Stop the War Coalition, the reference to ‘Nazis’ recalls the British [“Solidarity with the anti-fascist Resistance in Ukraine”](#) which brought together Lindsey German and Andrew Murray and some people on the fringes of the far left in 2014 against “the far-right regime in Kiev”.

To break with the way of thinking that divides the world into ‘camps’ Plenel engages with his revolutionary anti-Stalinist background and Trotskyism. Trotsky, born in Ukraine, defended towards the end of his life, in 1939, the land’s right to self-determination. “The Ukrainian Question is, in the near future, destined to play an enormous role in the life of Europe” he wrote According to the Media-part journalist he favoured the land’s right to self-determination outside Stalin’s Great Russian colonisation. [1]

L’Opposition de gauche is a dense section of this polemic and the encounter is highly coloured with emotion. Amongst its many insights on the origins of Soviet totalitarianism in the early suppression of democracy Plenel not ignore the voice of Victor Serge who traced the tyranny of the USSR back to “the moment (1918) when the Cheka was given the right of deciding behind closed doors the fate of people”, and that, “the Cheka was in fact given was the right to apply the death penalty on a mass scale and in secret, without hearing the accused, who were unable to defend themselves and whom in most cases their judges did not even see!” ([Secrecy and Revolution A Reply to Trotsky. 1938](#)) There is reference to Trotsky’s criticism of Lenin’s Jacobin ‘party model’ in 1904, “a prescience of Stalinism”, and the fate of the Fourth International post-war, locked in its own ‘campism’ in defence of the USSR.

Plenel ends with Cuba - a totem for the left that Plenel immersed himself in, from the sixties onwards (the successor of the LCR, the Nouveau parti anticapitaliste, NPA, candidate Olivier Besancenot has described himself as ‘Guevarist’: author of *Che Guevara: His Revolutionary Legacy*. 2009). This unqualified admiration and defence, he indicates, can no longer be maintained. In 2022, as the war against Ukraine began, the authorities in Havana tried, behind closed doors, two artists, sentencing them to gaol for a “disrespectful” song, *Patria y vida*. The repression continues as hundreds more have joined them in prison [Cuba: Amnesty International condemns sentences of Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara and Maykel “Osorbo” Castillo](#).

The second half of these “*réflexions parallèles*”, *L’Épreuve*, is about the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the rise of Milosevic in Serbia initially as a form of ‘national communism’ and the slaughters in the region, largely under Serbian instigation.. It commences with the Librarie Maspero, cites Charles Péguy’s immortal *Notre Jeunesse* It is largely in the form of an address to, friend? former comrade? adversary? Régis Debray, and other anti-interventionist and “nationaux-républicain” politicians in France. Alain Badiou, a one-time “Mao-Stal”, is, at thankfully shorter length, a target for his denunciation of the West-led Holy Alliance against Yugoslavia.

This essay will be of interest to all those fascinated by the intricacies of disputes and their rhetoric amongst relatively well known French left of centre intellectuals in 1989. More enduring is the haunting metaphors of a lingering “phantom limb” from the Orthodox Communist Marxist-Leninist past, and the horror of seeing the “astre morts” (dead stars) of Stalinist, and other, totalitarianisms,

come alight again. Yet it is far from obvious that history more widely fits the idea of rehearsals or “repetitions” of these events or structures. With the experience of the genociders of Daesh, and religious dictatorships such as Iran, or China, with its own slower, methodical repressions, we do not only have the history of the USSR and High Stalinism to account for and fight.

Edwy Plenel has written a rousing call to support the Ukrainian people against Russian invaders spurred by an “impérialisme de revanche”. It is written from the heart, with an audience on the left far from completely won to this message.

The historic theme of the book, with the backdrop of so many people killed, tortured, mutilated, forced to become refugees, overshadows, despite their merits as polemical reportage, Plenel’s more recent writings such as *La victoire des vaincus. À propos des gilets jaunes* (2019) on French popular “éruptions volcaniques”. It puts into the shade, *Pour les musulmans*, (2016, Poche), whose well-intentioned criticism of the French “obsessionnelle question du foulard..” (hijab) does not stand up well in the light of the present day revolt in Iran. *L’Épreuve et la Contre-épreuve* has a greater, deeper, and broader, appeal and effect on the reader. It is a canon fired from the left that will resound.

Tendence Coatsy

[Abonnez-vous](#) à la Lettre de nouveautés du site ESSF et recevez par courriel la liste des articles parus, en français ou en anglais.

P.S.

Tendence Coatsy

<https://tendencecoatsy.wordpress.com/2022/10/04/lepreuve-et-la-contre-epreuve-de-la-yougoslavie-a-lukraine-edwy-plenel-a-review-against-the-russian-imperialisme-de-revanche/>

Footnotes

[1] “the independence of a United Ukraine would mean the separation of Soviet Ukraine from the USSR, the “friends” of the Kremlin will exclaim in chorus. What is so terrible about that? – we reply. The fervid worship of state boundaries is alien to us. We do not hold the position of a “united and indivisible” whole. After all, even the constitution of the USSR acknowledges the right of its component federated peoples to self-determination, that is, to separation. Thus, not even the incumbent Kremlin oligarchy dares to deny this principle. To be sure it remains only on paper. The slightest attempt to raise the question of an independent Ukraine openly would mean immediate execution on the charge of treason. But it is precisely this despicable equivocation, it is precisely this ruthless hounding of all free national thought that has led the toiling masses of the Ukraine, to an even greater degree than the masses of Great Russia, to look upon the rule of the Kremlin as monstrously oppressive. In the face of such an internal situation it is naturally impossible even to talk of Western Ukraine Voluntarily joining the USSR as it is at present constituted. Consequently, the unification of the Ukraine presupposes freeing the so-called Soviet Ukraine from the Stalinist boot. In this matter, too, the Bonapartist clique will reap what it has sown.” [Leon Trotsky Problem of the Ukraine](#) (April 1939).