

LINGUISTIC TERRORISM

by

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Most political conflicts are accompanied by a battle of words which is important to an understanding of the problem. Both protagonists and commentators have a tendency to distort and exaggerate their expressions according to their attitude towards the conflict. When they go so far in their propaganda as to alter the very meaning of words, they act in an indiscriminate way which is analogous to certain forms of terrorism. In this paper the expression "linguistic terrorism" is defined as the partisan misuse of language in an effort to support an immediate political objective or viewpoint. It should be noted, however, that the same expression has been used elsewhere to refer to the imposition of a particular language policy on one group by another.¹

The problem of linguistic terrorism is not a new one by any means. George Orwell was concerned about this very thing in the 1940's when the word "fascist" was much abused. At one time or another the fascist label (and its associates such as "crypto-fascist" and "fascist-leaning") had been applied to every group from conservatives, to socialists, to catholics, to Social Crediters, to nationalists, and even to Trotskyists. It was Orwell's concern that "fascist" had been reduced to a rather meaningless swearword or, at best, a synonym for "bully".² Indeed it has become a commonplace in the post-war era to use "fascist" as a pejorative to be fired indiscriminately at any political opponent.

The Iranian hostage-taking crisis of 1979-81 provides a recent example of the misuse of the English language in a political conflict. Soon after the American embassy in Tehran was seized by the student-terrorists, President Carter decided to cut off United States oil imports from Iran. This was done in an effort to deprive Iran of the threat of an oil embargo in its conflict with the Americans. In explaining this action, President Carter stated: "No one should underestimate U.S. resolve not to capitulate to blackmail." Echoing these sentiments, Senator Robert Byrd condemned Iran's "dangerous game of international blackmail".³ *Time* magazine carried a bold cover story entitled "Blackmailing the U.S." in mid-November of 1979.⁴ Later in the month President Carter, in an address to labour leaders in Washington, D.C., spoke of the Iranian situation as follows: "The United States of America will not yield to international terrorism or to blackmail." Well might we ask: if the hostage-taking was an act of terrorism, then what did the "blackmail" involve? In December of 1979 Jimmy Carter restated his understanding of the hostage crisis in Iran: "The issue is that American hostages, 50 of them, are being held by kidnapers. They're trying to blackmail this country."⁶

The general American response to the Iranian crisis has been to enlist the word "blackmail" as an ally in the conflict. Some support for their usage can be found in a standard American dictionary which gives the following definition of

the verb “to blackmail”: “to compel to act in a particular way by threats”.⁷ Apparently, according to this rather vague usage, the word “blackmail” is a technical term which could be applied with equal ease to hostage-takings or the threat of an oil embargo. Yet in a political conflict no one admits to blackmail. When, for example, the Americans threatened and then carried out their threat to stay away from the Moscow Olympic Games, they did not refer to their action as an exercise in blackmail. Instead they used the term “boycott” which has a much more legitimate and higher ethical status.⁸ Indeed the intrusion of partisan usages for these two words has reduced the perception of many conflicts to the following: the good guys boycott, while the bad guys blackmail.

A brief note on the history of the word “blackmail” will illustrate its gradual erosion in meaning to its present non-specific usage. This word apparently has its origin in sixteenth century Scotland where it was used to mean protection money or tribute in cattle paid to raiders for immunity from cattle thefts.⁹ The word fell out of common usage until Sir Walter Scott decided to revive it in the early nineteenth century. Indeed the novelist has one of his characters explain the term “blackmail” for the benefit of his readers:

“A sort of protection money that Low-country gentlemen and heritors, lying near the Highlands, pay to some Highland chief, that he may neither do them harm himself, nor suffer it to be done to them by others; and then if your cattle are stolen, you have only to send him word, and he will recover them; or it may be, he will drive cows from some distant place, where he has a quarrel, and give them to you to make up your loss.”¹⁰

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the Americans added another definition of blackmail to the older British one. Webster’s dictionary offers the following alternative: “to extort money or anything of value from by threats esp. of subjecting someone to criminal prosecution or revealing something injurious to his reputation”.¹¹ Clearly neither of these usages apply to the hostage incident in Iran. It is only the current vague use of “blackmail” as a pejorative alternative to the verb “to threaten” which can be applied to a hostage-taking episode. But this involves not only a useless erosion of the meaning of the word, but it also allows for a partisan abuse.

The word “genocide” provides another example of linguistic terrorism. In this case it is perhaps best to begin with the history of the word before moving on to a discussion of specific abuses. In 1944 the Polish academic, Raphael Lemkin, invented the word “genocide” to describe the policies inflicted on Nazi-occupied Europe. He defined it as follows:

“By genocide we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group. This new word . . . is made from the ancient Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing), thus corresponding in its formation to such words as tyrannicide, homicide, infanticide, etc.”

This is clear enough and immediately conjures up the image of the Nazi extermination policies with regard to the Jews and other groups. But Lemkin was well aware that the Nazis had committed other atrocities and wanted these included in his definition:

“Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a co-ordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity and even the lives of individuals *belonging to such groups*.”¹²

This extension of the definition is still rather rigorous provided that one is aware of the key expression “co-ordinated plan”. There has, however, been a tendency to ignore Professor Lemkin and alter his definition of genocide in various ways. On the one hand there are those who would limit the word “genocide” to a synonym for “mass homicide”. It is then pointed out that since mass homicide is covered by other laws, words and definitions, there is no need to engage in a redundant exercise to define genocide. On the other hand, there are those who would extend Lemkin’s definition to include under the term “genocide” any one of his component “objectives”.¹³ The latter usage falls within the boundaries of what we have here defined as linguistic terrorism. Two examples will illustrate this point.

In July of 1980 Premier Richard Hatfield of New Brunswick addressed the Maritime Constitutional Conference in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Speaking of the rate at which francophone Acadians in New Brunswick are adopting English, he stated: “Assimilation is a nice polite word to describe the genocide of part of the population.”¹⁴ To equate the rather vague pressures on Acadians to “assimilate” with genocide is incorrect if for no other reason than the absence of any co-ordinated plan. There are other problems associated with any attempt to regard assimilation as a synonym for genocide. The “reason” why the Nazis wanted to exterminate certain groups was that they believed that certain “races” or “ethnic groups” could never be assimilated into their new social order. They committed the high crime of genocide precisely because they did not believe that assimilation was possible in certain circumstances. By contrast the advocate of assimilation must proceed with entirely the opposite assumption. He must view people from an ultimate egalitarian perspective, irrespective of his views on the superiority of one culture or language over another.

In a recent book on Scottish working class history we encounter the word “genocide” used once again in an indiscriminate fashion. James Young has asserted that the impact of the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment on the “lower orders” of Scotland in the eighteenth century amounted to “cultural genocide”.¹⁵ One assumes from this usage that all great cultural transformations involve “genocide”. Shall we then reconsider the history of Europe, for example, as a succession of genocidal spasms involving industrialization, the rise and decline of Christianity, the spread of literacy and the growth of socialist ideas? Likewise, we know that there is very little left of the popular culture of pre-industrial Europe, but we do not need the concept of genocide to discuss this

question.¹⁶

There is an ever-present danger that political discussion will lapse into linguistic terrorism. The meaning of words will be modified and we will engage in useless sniping according to the following credo:

Anyone who opposes my policies is a fascist.

Anyone who forces his policies on me is a blackmailer.

Any changes affecting my culture or nationality involves genocide.

To engage in this type of partisan distortion will diminish our powers of analysis in conflict situations. It also runs the risk of exacerbating the essential conflict. To fire off vulgar charges of "genocide" and "blackmail" inevitably results in either a hostile counterblast or a dismissal from political opponents.

Footnotes

1. Premier René Lévesque of Quebec used this expression in the mid-1970's to refer to the hostile anglophone reaction to the Parti Quebecois' legislation to promote the use of French. A recent writer uses the term to describe the imposition of a standard French on the population during the French Revolution. See, Patrice L. R. Higonnet, "The Politics of Linguistic Terrorism and Grammatical Hegemony during the French Revolution", *Social History* (Jan. 1980), pp. 41-69.
2. *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, S. Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970), vol. 3, pp. 135-9.
3. *Evening Times-Globe* (Saint John), 13 Nov. 1979.
4. *Time*, 19 Nov. 1979.
5. *Newsweek*, 26 Nov. 1979, p. 34.
6. *Newsweek*, 17 Dec. 1979, p. 29.
7. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass., 1965), p. 227.
8. On the origin of 'boycott' see, Joyce Marlow, *Captain Boycott and the Irish* (New York, 1973).
9. See George MacDonald Fraser, *The Steel Bonnets* (New York, 1972); Wilfred Funk, *Words Origins and their Romantic Stories* (New York, 1978), p. 56; and *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Murray et. al., eds., (Oxford, 1933-61), vol. 1, pp. 894-5.
10. Walter Scott, *Waverley or 'tis Sixty Years Since* (Boston, 1814-71), pp. 100-101; see also Paul Roberts, "Sir Walter Scott's Contributions to the English Vocabulary", *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 68 (1953), pp. 189-210; and Ernest Weekly, "Walter Scott and the English Language", *Atlantic Monthly*, 148 (Nov. 1931), pp. 595-601. I am indebted to Dr. W. Bogaards for drawing my attention to Scott's contributions in this regard.
11. See also *OED*, op. cit. The word 'blackmail' crops up again and again in political analyses. R. Davis and M. Zannis use it incorrectly to refer to role of nuclear weapons in politics in their book *The Genocide Machine in Canada* (Montreal, 1973), p. 31. By contrast E. P. Thompson uses it correctly to suggest that British security forces have dossiers on certain British M.P.'s and are able to influence their political behaviour. See his essay "A State of Blackmail", in *Writing by Candlelight* (London, 1980), pp. 113-133. More recently Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada has mis-used the term and accused some Western Canadians of "Blackmail" for flirting with separatism. See *Evening Times-Globe* (Saint John), 1 Dec. 1980 which carries the headline: "PM Urges West: Drop 'Blackmail'".
12. R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (New York, 1973), p. 79.
13. For a discussion of this problem and an argument for the extended definition see, Davis and

Zannis, especially chapters 1 to 3.

14. *Evening Times-Globe* (Saint John), 18 July 1980.

15. James D. Young, *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class* (Montreal, 1979), p. 18.

16. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978).

A DEFECTOR'S VIEW OF THE SOVIET UNION¹

Introduction by Maurice Tugwell

The views and opinions of defectors on arrival in their new country have always to be taken with a certain amount of salt. Some may do their honest best to speak the truth, but as no one has access to all the facts or is entirely objective in assessing them, such utterances should be accepted with caution. Others, anxious to ingratiate themselves with their adopted countrymen, may say what they think these people want to hear, thus straying into the realm of speculation. Finally there is the "plant", who is not a true defector at all, but an agent of the old country's secret service passing him or herself off as a fugitive. In this case, we have to be on the lookout for "disinformation"², but as we are unlikely to know which, if any, of a score of defectors belongs to this last category, distinguishing between honest reporting, exaggeration and lies will always be difficult.

The news media have recently published articles on several Soviet defectors. We have accounts of how Miroslav Butynets jumped ship at Halifax, Nova Scotia, "to find liberty from the terrible reality of Soviet life where there is no future for the individual"³, of Galina Orionova's defection from her relatively privileged life as research fellow at the Institute of the United States of America and Canada,⁴ of the dissident writer Vasily Aksyonov who left Moscow last July,⁵ and about the Soviet fighter pilot Viktor Belenko who flew his top-secret MiG-25 "Foxbat" fighter to Japan and has since found asylum in the United States.⁶ David Martin's book, *Wilderness of Mirrors*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue, describes the difficulties facing intelligence analysts when assessing defectors' stories.⁷ In addition, the *London Times* published an interview with Ilya Dzhirkvelov, a former KGB officer and *Tass* correspondent who defected to Britain in April 1980, which is reproduced below. Dzhirkvelov had never been a dissident. Indeed, as a 34-year member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he has recalled with animation how he joined the KGB — at that time the NKVD — in 1944, in the first flush of youthful enthusiasm. Readers may see in Dzhirkvelov's motives for defection some similarity with those of Bill Haydon, the fictional villain of Le carré's novel, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.⁸ Both seem to have been attracted to power, and to have abandoned their former loyalties when they perceived that power was slipping out of the hands of their erstwhile governments. Be that as it may, Dzhirkvelov's observations — taken with the necessary pinch of salt — provide valuable insights into the problems facing the Soviet leadership.