

No Time for a Cold or Hot War

by Michael Curtis



It's too darn hot, nations prefer the temperature low, but we're having a heat wave because of Russian defiance of international norms. As patrons of fashionable steak restaurants know, for over a year sophisticated chefs for economic and other reasons, have created a standard of undercooking, serving steaks on the rare side. Trendiest steak is served "medium rare plus," just enough to bring out the flavor and retain moisture with juice kept in the meat. If customers complain about overcooked meat, it has to be thrown out. If customers complain about undercooking the steak will simply be cooked a little longer. Overcooking is a sin in the fashionable contemporary culinary world. Recent events and the memory of various anniversaries evoke a parallel in the

political world as political activity is being or has been overcooked.

One overcooking event sparked the racial problem. It is exactly 50 years ago that the passionate British Conservative politician Enoch Powell delivered his "Rivers of Blood" speech to Conservative party members in Birmingham. On the anniversary of the speech, the BBC broadcast the reading by an actor of the text of what many people considered an incitement to racial hatred. Discussing the contemplated government bill on immigration, the Race Relations Bill, which made it illegal to refuse housing or employment to anyone because of ethnic background, he declared, "I am filled with foreboding: like the Roman I see the River Tiber foaming with much blood." He insisted that immigrants be returned to their country of origin.

More blood flowed on banks of U.S. rivers than on the Thames, but Powell's premonition, that the "black man would have the whip hand over the white man," was unfulfilled with the weakening of the system of racial segregation in Western countries. Nevertheless, the continuing existence of discrimination, the increase in antisemitism, and the fact that mass immigration is a key issue in Western countries show the need for undercooking of existing prejudice.

A second anniversary is that of the Hadassah convoy massacre on April 13, 1948. A convoy, escorted by Haganah militia, bringing medical and military supplies to Hadassah hospital on Mount Scopus, outside Jerusalem, was ambushed by Arab troops that had blocked Jewish access to Hadassah hospital and the Hebrew University campus nearby. Seventy eight Jewish doctors, nurses, students, patients, faculty members, and Haganah fighters were murdered.

The tragedy is the continued overcooking of Palestinian violence, by wars, rocket and mortar attacks, underground tunnels, indiscriminate assaults against the State of Israel

and its citizens. Golda Meir once gave the recipe for undercooking, "When will the Palestinians love their children more than they hate their neighbors?"

Connected with overcooking is the fact that memory, especially of details, of the Holocaust is fading. A recent study by Schoen Consulting shows that in the U.S. detailed knowledge of the Holocaust was very low, especially among millennials, 22% of whom are ignorant of the Holocaust. In general, 41% of Americans, 66% of millennials could not name a single concentration camp or ghetto. Similarly, though the number six million has been endlessly restated, 31% and 41% of millennials believe that fewer than two million Jews were killed.

The result of this ignorance or disinterest about the reality of the Holocaust, or eradication of its memory, was displayed in an overcooked demonstration on April 11, 2018 at Columbia University in NYC. While preparations were being made at the University for a memorial to the six million Jews murdered, a group of students torn down all material supporting Israel and called for a Palestine "from the river to the sea...Palestine will be free."

But clearly the most egregious contemporary political overcooking is the behavior of Russia in disregard of international norms, and penchant for lying and spread of misinformation. Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, international treaties, customs, and general principles of law, have contributed to international rules accepted as binding, even if not precise legal texts, on relations between states as well on issues such as slavery, women's suffrage, apartheid, and civil rights.

For centuries there has been an ongoing debate over the justification of military action. Is a "just war," whether the decision to conduct hostilities or the precise conduct of those hostilities, morally justifiable? If there are

differences about this on some issues and events, there are none on the use by a state of some form of poison gas or nerve agent. As a result of revulsion towards the use of poison gas by Germany on April 22, 1915 against French troops at Ypres, Belgium, the Geneva Protocol treaty was signed on June 17, 1925 prohibiting the use of chemical and biological weapons in international armed conflicts. It is true that the agreement has been violated by a number of countries, Japan, Italy, Spain, and by Saddam Hussein in Iraq. But it is the use of chemical weapons in recent days by Syria and Russia that has caused international overheating.

The overcooking of chemical weapons and poison gas, and denials of responsibility by Russia has led to a situation which, if not as dramatically menacing as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 or the Berlin crisis of 1961, is serious, and calls for political chefs to lower the temperature. This is unmistakable now that the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed it was highly likely that Russia was responsible for the attack by military grade nerve agent, Novichoks, developed by Russia, used in Salisbury on March 4, 2018. The reckless and indiscriminate attack threatened the lives of innocent people as well as the intended targets, former Russian spy Sergei Skirpal and his daughter Yulia.

What is important is not simply the immoral nature of the nerve agent and gas attacks, but the denial and counterattack by the responsible party. Russian spokespersons provided alternative explanations of the real actors. One emphasis was that British MI6 was directly involved in the Salisbury attack; "irrefutable evidence" that the attacks were staged with help of a foreign secret service.

As usual, British Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn said there was no evidence that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was responsible, and more time was needed to find "incontrovertible" evidence that Assad was behind the use of chemical weapons in the attack on Douma on April 7, 2018 that

killed at least 40 people. However, he did know that the airstrikes on selected Syrian targets by four British Tornado jets were “legally questionable” actions.

The 19th century French diplomat Talleyrand might have had Corbyn in mind when he wrote of the Bourbons, “They had learned nothing and forgotten nothing.” One imagines Corbyn in 1939 calling on the League of Nations to take time to verify the “alleged” Nazi aggression in Poland, and meanwhile for all parties to cease violence. In similar vein, Corbyn’s colleague Diane Abbott was uncertain who was the greatest danger to world peace, the U.S. or Russia.

He did not need help from Corbyn when Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov declared that Russia had “irrefutable” evidence that the attack on Douma on April 7 was staged with the help of a foreign secret service. Some of the evidence may have come from British academics. According to British newspaper reports, Russia may have been helped by some senior British academics, at Edinburgh, Leicester, and Sheffield Universities, who have formed a group called SPM, Syria, Propaganda, and Media, that spreads disinformation that benefits Syria, and conspiracy theories propounded by Russia.

SPM had published a statement that questioned whether Russia had a secret nerve agent program. It then spread the allegation, repeated by the Russian ambassador, that an organization, White Helmets (Syrian Civil Defense) staged the Douma attack. The White Helmets consists of 3,000 volunteers who engage in research and rescue after bombings in Syria.

It is disquieting that some countries, groups, and individuals persist in defending or not criticizing the actions of Assad. His forces had used sarin gas in an attack on August 21, 2013 on Ghouta, Damascus where hundreds were killed. After that, Russia promised to ensure that Syria would abandon all its chemical weapons. But Syria on April 4, 2017 used sarin gas in an attack on Khan Sheikhoun, killing 90 people. In response to

this atrocity Trump on April 6, 2017 ordered U.S. forces to fire 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base.

In spite of Russian denials, the use by Russians of chemical weapons in Salisbury and by the Syrian regime in Douma is clear as are the responses that have taken place. French President Emmanuel Macron called the use of such weapons a "red line." Trump threatened on April 11 there would be a "big price to pay" for the mindless chemical attack, and that Russia and Iran were responsible for backing Assad. The rhetoric was followed by Coalition action, U.S., France, and UK, that French UN Ambassador Francois Delattre called "proportionate and targeted."

At the emergency UN Security Council meeting on April 14, 2018, the Russian resolution to condemn the US was rejected by 8 to 3 (Russia, China, Bolivia) and 4 abstentions. It is welcome that in this case international norms have been upheld. It is now up to the Russians to find its moral compass, to stop their contentious actions and destructive effect on the system of international relations and to consult its political cookbook to concentrate on undercooking its actions.