

'The rules-based world order'



by Ralph Berry

Whatever did we do without Hitler? When the commentariat is stuck for a historical analogue—this does not often happen, since an easy solution is at hand—the late dictator is always ready for the call. Today (THE TIMES, 24 December) I read that 'we know what happens when dictators march across Europe'. We know because it happened, in the 1930s. We have less certain knowledge about today. Instead, we have the Messianic warnings of Grant Shapps, Defence Secretary. 'The world is sleepwalking into an autocratic era, and the West cannot afford to lose the war in Ukraine,' I didn't know that Britain was engaged in a war. It has neither been declared or even debated in Parliament. It is simply an extra-mural activity on the say-so of the Government and may help to keep on track the flagging career of Boris Johnson. What makes the Russo-Ukraine war a vital interest of Britain? Our post-war dealings with the Ukrainians in British territory were to hand them over to the Russians. (The Americans behaved better by

maintaining the expulsion order, and then simply allowing the Ukrainians to escape.) 'Sleepwalking into an autocratic era' is pure vapour, which Orwell would have struck out on the spot. British Cabinet members do not read Orwell.

They are however intoxicated by a phrase, 'the right side of history'. They know what 'the right side' is and are determined to be on it. Whatever bungles our side got up to in the past, we were on the right side of them. That is our undying consolation. We rest on Shapps' rousing peroration, which I quote in full:

'The rules-based world order means we have to remain committed to repelling these attacks to protect the free flow of global trade, and I am determined the UK will remain a major player in that.'

Naturally, Shapps wants to keep his job. But that job changes its definition. 'The rules-based world order' is of course a superstition which should not survive a glance at any front page. I confine myself to a single objection.

Britain rightly is proud of the brilliant work of the Bletchley Park code-breakers. They gave Britain an advantage that undoubtedly shortened the war. Russia had however an overwhelming success in penetrating the highest ranks of British society. The full story—or something that hinted at its remarkable dimensions—was revealed after the war, when the traitors in Britain and the US were exposed—some of them.

The rest of the sleepers remained untouched if perhaps suspected.

Today's efforts are not confined to a single coup, like Conan Doyle's story of the Bruce-Partington plans. They involve massive feints in influencing the enemy's beliefs and plans.. What exactly will Russia do to protect her Black Sea interests, to hold what Suvarov won?

These are the questions of the coming future. Hitler can take a rest.

He needs it.