

# The Useful Idiots are Here



by Michael Curtis

He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot. Groucho. Oh, how the ghost of you clings, these foolish things remind me of the clowns.

One of the most delightful scenes in film history is that in *Casablanca* when the corrupt police chief, finding a reason to close Rick's café, says he is shocked to find that gambling is taking place, a moment before he is given his payment for allowing it. It is shocking to learn that in addition to the devotees, aficionados, addicts of worthless or repellant causes, there are some individuals in Western countries who find reasons to tweet messages that can be interpreted as supporting, or not disapproving, the behavior of the war criminal Vladimir Putin.

It is appropriate to characterize these individuals some of whom are political zealots, but others naïve and easily manipulated, supporting a cause or policy without fully understanding the true objectives of that cause or who are

being cynically used, by a derogatory term, as “useful idiots.”

A haunting memory of political idiocy is the debate, King and Country debate, of the Oxford Union on February 9, 1933, ten days after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. The Union voted 275-153 that it would under no circumstances fight for its King and Country. The vote was described by Winston Churchill, not in power at the time, as “abject, squalid, shameless, avowal.” Presumably, when World War II started in 1939, many of those who voted against fighting were in British forces. Yet the abject resolution, the political idiocy, was approved by some intellectuals such as the popular philosopher C.E.M. Joad, maintaining that any invasion of Britain could be defeated by a Gandhi-like campaign of non-violence.

The term “useful idiots” has usually been attributed to Vladimir Lenin but this does not seem to be true. It did appear in the 1940s, usually referring to gullible admirers of communism and of Joseph Stalin in the Western world, who were critical of their own societies and political and social policies, and were prepared to ally with the communists, and were friendly to communist causes. These admirers believed Stalin’s rule, despite its violence and excesses, expressed ideals as a basis for improving internal conditions in their own societies.

The term, and a concomitant term fellow travelers, was applied to those who did not typically become communists but who were attracted by and praiseworthy of the Soviet Union .

This was particularly true of those Western journalists, intellectuals, left wing socialists who travelled to the USSR and sought to promote peace, but who in fact were approving of tyrannies, especially of Stalin. It remains a puzzle why so many intelligent and well-meaning people, concerned as they were to improve their own societies and though some were mollified by flattery they received from Stalin, allowed

themselves to be duped about the reality of the Bolshevik regime. No need to send in the clowns, they are here.

A few examples can illustrate the point. George Bernard Shaw, great playwright and public intellectual, was accustomed to challenging accepted opinion with his unique views of public affairs, including how the English teach their children how to speak. But a nadir was reached with his appraising Stalin, as well as Lenin, as a great leader, and the Soviet Union as the great socialist Utopia. He found Stalin charming, a "Georgian gentleman," not malicious nor gullible and wrote enthusiastically of the soul of the Russian people. After his visit to Moscow Shaw said he was leaving the land of hope to return to the West, the countries of despair.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb, influential British socialists and Fabians, wrote a long volume, *Soviet Communism, a New Civilization* in 1937. They found the USSR is the most "inclusive and equalized democracy" in the world. They did not think the Communist Party was governed by the will of a single person or that Stalin was the sort of person to claim or desire to be such a person. He was a skillful manager facing stupendous problems.

H.G. Wells, the author of *The Invisible Man*, after a three hour interview with Stalin on July 23, 1934, confessed he had never met a man more candid, fair, and honest, and it is to these qualities, to nothing occult and sinister that he owes his tremendous undisputed ascendancy in Russia. No one was afraid of him and everyone trusted him. Wells earlier had met Lenin and found him an "amazing little man, very refreshing."

The past is a different country. It was the political left who were tolerant of or supporters of the behavior of Stalin in the Soviet Union. Today, in the U.S. and Britain it is individuals, largely for reasons of party politics, who from various perspectives, mostly right-wing, have been, at best,

equivocal about the behavior of Putin.

Among them are right-wing supposed defenders of traditional or Christian values, and of the traditional state. Pat Buchanan suggested that Putin “might be one of us,” in connection with the culture war for mankind’s future. The French politician Marine Le Pen once thought Putin was a defender of common values, the values of European civilization. Italian Matteo Salvini, leader of Lega Nord, denounced by Ukrainians as a friend of Putin, heralded the Russian as “one of the best statemen currently on earth.”

Within the U.S., Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene asserted that peace agreements concerning Ukraine had been routinely violated by both sides, and that an independent Ukraine only exists because the Obama administration helped to overthrow the previous regime. She was answered by Liz Cheney, saying only the Kremlin and their friendly useful idiots would call the brutal, unprovoked aggression against Ukraine one for which both sides were equally responsible. Representative Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina called Zelensky a “thug” and the Ukrainian government incredibly evil. More moderately, Senator Mitt Romney wished the U.S. had armed Ukraine more than it had but asserted Putin was responsible for events in Ukraine.

The British Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi on March 125, 2022, announced that the government would attempt to stop “useful idiots” spreading Russian propaganda about the Putin aggression in Ukraine. An investigation had exposed pro-Putin propaganda at some British universities in addition to political comment.

Alex Salmon, former Scottish first minister, has been presenting a TV show produced by RT, Russian state-controlled broadcast station. Though Salmon insisted the show was independently produced and had no pressure from the Kremlin, the show did not criticize Putin. Some stories on the areas

of Ukraine under Russian control showed citizens celebrating and waving Russian flags. The show has been suspended but Salmon will try to continue his chat show.

In Britain , some useful idiots border on the delusional. One is the rapper Lowkey, Kareem Dennis, who has described Israel as a "racist endeavor," and declared that the "Zionist regime" is directly involved in the Ukrainian conflict , the result of the Jewish heritage of Zelensky. David Miller, a sociologist, holds that Ukraine consists of an "army of thugs," deployed across the country to intimidate anyone who seems to be pro-Russian.

Groucho was right. Who are you going to believe, the propaganda of political idiots, or your own eyes? One professor, Ray Bush retired from Leeds University, referred to American chemical warfare installations in Ukraine. Another called the attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol as "fake news." Tim Haywood, at University of Edinburgh, involved in research into global challenges facing the international order, tweeted a post from a Russian government official on March 11, 2022, saying as long as we can hear two sides of the story, we can be aware of exaggerated fears on either side. He explained himself by saying there is a danger of escalation of propaganda and disinformation on both sides. However, he did not disavow the Russian assertion that it was Ukrainian radicals who set up a firing site within the maternity hospital in Mariupol that was destroyed by the Russians.

A lecturer in international relations, Tara McCormack, at University of Leicester, tweeted there was ludicrous disinformation on all sides in relation to Ukraine. She explained her position, truth is the first casualty of war, and are we now not to have opinions on war and conflict approved by our government?

It is sad that some intellectuals and politicians are

questioning the reality of events in Ukraine and are in effect useful idiots for Putin and his false narrative. To counter this is not to infringe on principles of free speech or democratic values, but to suggest that implicitly Western systems are being irrationally attacked, together with the assertion that the West is responsible for the problems of the world.

Aggression in Ukraine is not about imperialism or colonialism or racism or sexism, but about the actions of a man, Vladimir Putin, a war criminal who came to power as a result of a war in Chechnya that killed 50,000 people, who has approved poisonings of former associates, and responsible for shooting down MH17 plane killing 298, and has imprisoned Alexei Navalny.

The mystery is why political idiots are condoning Russian inhumanity.