

The Collapse of Yugoslavia

In the following three articles, PAUL D'AMATO looks at the breakup of Yugoslavia. He shows how the intervention of Western powers in the region, today and in the past, has always made the crisis worse.

AT THE beginning of 1991, two republics within Yugoslavia, Slovenia and Croatia, declared their independence. This signaled the start of a bloody conflict over the question of how the former country's borders would be redrawn.

Since its beginning, this conflict has often been portrayed as a product of centuries-old ethnic hatreds between the region's peoples. But this explanation ignores the fact that the former Yugoslavia was a multi-ethnic and multi-national state in which people of different ethnic groups lived peacefully. In fact, 25 percent of all marriages in the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) were mixed

marriages between people of different ethnic groups.

The breakup of Yugoslavia and its descent into war has its roots in the economic crisis which gripped the country in the 1980s and the divide-and-conquer tactics used by Yugoslavia's rulers. As the economic crisis spiraled out of control, Communist Party bureaucrats in the country's constituent republics deliberately whipped up ethnic hatred as a way to reestablish their grip on power and to deflect popular working-class anger against years of austerity and collapse. The more each regional ruler turned to nationalist rhetoric, the more it fueled the nationalism of the others, creating a chain reaction that no side could control.

As British socialist Chris Harman wrote,

The economic crisis of the late 1980s, a huge strike wave and the collapse of the other Eastern European regimes threw all the rulers [of the Yugoslav Republics] into a panic. In each republic they set out to divert developing class bitterness into a frenzy of nationalistic agitation which left them secure. Milosevic of Serbia pioneered this strategy, but Slovene, Croatian, Macedonian

and Bosnian Muslim leaders were soon following suit, even if it meant abandoning the old ruling party for new formations led by one-time dissidents.

The nationalism played a reactionary role everywhere. But it was particularly pernicious in the regions where different nationalities lived alongside each other. And in the border regions of Croatia and Bosnia the outcome was civil war. This was not fortuitous or just the result of external meddling by Milosevic. Ethnically-based states can only ever be formed in areas of mixed populations if one group imposes its supremacy on others. And the horrific logic of this is intercommunal civil war and ethnic cleansing—the use of terror to drive members of rival groups from captured areas so as to secure them permanently. Atrocity breeds counter-atrocity as the front line shifts and each side forces out potential opponents...¹



The Balkan region is historically a patchwork quilt of different nationalities. But the region has long been a focal point for imperial rivalries. For centuries, the Balkans were divided between the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman Empires. In the years leading up to the First World War, two regional wars were fought—one by various Balkan states against the Ottoman Empire; the other between the Balkan states

over the division of the spoils. Hovering above all this were the great imperialist powers—France, Russia, Britain and Germany. After each conflict, the international borders were drawn and redrawn under the control of these powers, without any reference to the interests of the local peoples involved.

The secret Treaty of London in 1915, signed by Britain, France and Russia, promised Italy large stretches of the Dalmatian coast (the western part of Croatia), Istria (part of Slovenia), a naval base in Albania and other territories to be taken away from Turkey—in return for Italy joining the Allied war effort. Though Serbia was an ally, it was never told about the content of the treaty. The treaty also promised the southern part of Albania to the Greeks. When the war ended, the areas of Western Macedonia and Kosovo, where the majority of the population is

Albanian, we sliced off and handed to Serbia as “payment” for its support of the Allies in the war.

Yugoslavia was created after the First World War by France and Britain, allowing for Serbian domination of the new country. At the Paris Peace Conference, one observer witnessed Woodrow Wilson and British Prime Minister Lloyd George on their hands and knees pushing maps of the area around on the floor, watched over by Clemenceau, the French leader.

German occupation during the Second World War pulled Yugoslavia apart. The Nazis set up an “independent” Croatian state under the fascist leader Ante Palevic. His regime slaughtered tens of thousands of Serbs, Gypsies and Jews—a fact used by Milosevic to whip up nationalist fears among Serbs living within Croatia regarding the risks that an independent Croatia would pose for them.

Yugoslavia was restored as a multi-ethnic state after the Second World War, thanks chiefly to the multi-ethnic partisan movement led by Joseph Tito. Tito created a one-party state modeled on the Soviet Union. But when it became clear that Yugoslavia would not bow to Stalin’s control, the Soviet Union turned on Tito, cutting off all trade and forcing Yugoslavia into four years of deep economic crisis. Tito turned increasingly to the West for loans and trade in order to build the economy.

The new Yugoslav state consisted of six different republics: Serbia (including the autonomous regions of Vojvodina and Kosovo), Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. But aside from Slovenia in the north, where the population is fairly homogenous, each republic held within its borders a numerically dominant nationality, alongside minority nationalities. Using 1991 figures (now outdated by mass movement of populations due to ethnic cleansing), 15 percent of Croatia’s population was made up of Serbs who had lived there for centuries. In Serbia’s autonomous province of Vojvodina in the north, just over half of the population was Serbian, and 23 percent was Hungarian, along with a large number of smaller groups. In Kosovo in Serbia’s south, Albanian speakers made up almost 90 percent; Serbs 10 percent. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, 31.4 percent were Serbs, 43.7 percent were Muslims and 17.3 percent were Croats.

Tito attempted to hold the state together by granting a kind of balanced equality between the republics (though the refusal to grant republic status to Kosovo’s Albanian speakers had to be imposed by force). Any manifestation of national separatism was suppressed by force, but wide autonomy was granted to each republic. So long as the Yugoslav economy experienced impressive postwar growth, this arrangement held. In the 1950s, the country’s growth rates averaged around 9 percent, and in the 1960s, around 7 percent.

However, within Yugoslavia, there was massively uneven development between the republics. Slovenia, where living standards are comparable to those in northern Europe, had a per capita income in 1985 seven times that of Kosovo, and almost three times that of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Croatia’s per capita income was almost 4.5 times that of Kosovo’s. Serbia’s fell somewhere in between, with a per capita income about 1.4 times higher than that of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The fact that Yugoslavia’s integration into the world market tended to favor the already more economically advanced sectors of Yugoslavia only exacerbated the economic disparities between the republics.

The beginning of economic crisis in the 1970s brought tensions between the different republics to the surface. The market encouraged economic disintegration of Yugoslavia. Trade be-

tween republics declined throughout the 1980s and 1990s, whereas trade between the richer republics and the West increased.

With the onset of economic crisis, combined with Tito’s death in 1981, stability began to unravel in Yugoslavia. Saddled with declining export revenues and massive debt to the IMF and Western banks, Yugoslavia plunged into a crisis from which its economic planners could find no way out. By 1987, the poorest areas—Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro—declared bankruptcy. Growth rates fell to less than 1 percent in the 1980s, and by the beginning of the 1990s, the country was experiencing negative growth rates—down 23 percent in 1990 alone. Inflation ran rampant.

The scale of the economic crisis faced by Yugoslavia in the 1980s is revealed sharply by one historian:

By 1985-1986 the preconditions of a revolutionary situation were apparent. One million people were officially registered as unemployed. The increasing rate of unemployment was above 20 percent in all republics except Slovenia and Croatia. Inflation was at 50 percent a year and climbing. The household savings of approximately 80 percent of the population were depleted.... Attempts to alleviate the pressures made inflation worse and undermined economic management. This economic polarization led to social polarization. While most people were preoccupied with making ends meet under the austerity program and the dominant mood was that of localism, personalism, scapegoating against minorities... and antipolitics, independent political activity and new civic groups were also bubbling up.²

All of these economic developments fueled political divisions between the republics. The rulers of the richer republics—Slovenia and Croatia—began to argue that they should not be made to pay taxes for the poorer regions. At the same time, however, the crisis—and the rulers’ attempts to make Yugoslav workers pay for it through massive austerity and layoffs—also produced a growing class polarization which resulted in a rise in strikes throughout Yugoslavia. Strikes increased from only 100 in 1983, to 699 in 1985, and 851 in 1986. In 1987, the number of strikes shot up to 1,570, involving 365,000 workers, or one in 10 workers. The following year, the number of strikes went even higher.

Yugoslavia was entering a massive crisis that could go in only one of two directions. One possibility was that Yugoslavia would disintegrate into rival national republics, with the two dominant ones, Serbia and Croatia, fighting over the redrawing of borders. The other possibility lay in the growing class struggle, uniting workers across borders to seek a socialist solution to the crisis. But this road was at least partly blocked by the identification of socialism with the bureaucratic state capitalist regimes which had recently collapsed in Eastern Europe.

The threat of workers’ power in Yugoslavia was clear to the republics’ fragmenting ruling classes. They used increasingly repressive measures to hold onto power. Writes Susan Woodward,

Leaders of large workers’ strikes were harassed. Police activity intensified, often crudely, with the special aim of trying to prevent alliances of intellectuals, workers, or potential leaders across republican lines. It was clear from both government actions and words that the example of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980-81... defined the party leadership’s greatest fears.³

But in the heat of the intensifying class struggle and the widening fault lines between the republics, the republican rulers also began to realize that by seizing on ethnic divisions they could stabilize and even strengthen their own regimes.

The rise of Milosevic and the Descent into War



SLOBODAN MILOSEVIC, a former banker and second party leader in the Communist League of Serbia, was the first to play the nationalist card. Milosevic was not a nationalist by background. He merely saw that he could use nationalism to deflect working-class anger and secure his rise to power within the ruling Serbian party apparatus.

Beginning in 1987, he began a sustained campaign to whip up Serbian chauvinism against the Albanian-speaking majority in Kosovo. Milosevic hammered on the Serbian-nationalist myth that Kosovo is the cradle of Serbian civilization, despite the fact that Serbs make up just 10 percent of Kosovo's population today. He organized a series of mass rallies around Serbia, including one in Kosovo itself. Unemployed young men were paid to attend these rallies to listen to Milosevic's Serbian-nationalist hysteria. His speeches made reference to the Battle of Kosovo Polje—a battle in 1389 in which, according to nationalist mythology, the Serbs martyred themselves in defense of Christendom against the advancing Ottoman Empire. In reality, Serbs and Albanians fought alongside each other in that battle.

"Six centuries [after the Battle of Kosovo Polje]," Milosevic proclaimed at the Kosovo rally, "we are again engaged in battles and quarrels. They are not armed battles, but this cannot be excluded yet."⁴

Serbian nationalists had long claimed that Serbs in Kosovo were an oppressed, embattled minority. As evidence they pointed to the flight of Serbs from the area. In reality, thousands of people fled from the region on a yearly basis, because it was the poorest region in Europe. Unemployment ran more than 50 percent. In spite of efforts over the years by the Yugoslav government to force Albanian-speaking residents to leave and bring in Serbian colonists, the Serbian population has continued to decline. In any case, the nationalist message hammered over and over again by Milosevic was the idea that if the Yugoslavian state disintegrated, whole sections of the Serbian people—in Croatia, in Bosnia, and in Kosovo—would be left to suffer under the control of other nations. Milosevic based his claims for a greater Serbia on the need to unite all Serbs in Yugoslavia into a single state.

In 1987, Milosevic triumphed in a bitter contest for control of the Serbian party—and thereby won control of the Serbian regime. He used his newly created mass base to take full control of Serbia's autonomous provinces. Milosevic cracked down on the Albanian majority in Kosovo. By law, Albanians were forbidden from buying land. Serb-only factories were built, and Albanians were fired from their jobs. Serb villagers threw out Albanian inhabitants. To the north, in Vojvodina, Milosevic removed local party leaders and replaced them with his own loyal lieutenants.

In Kosovo, Milosevic's 1988 attempt to remove local Albanian party leaders produced a mass response. A quarter of Kosovo's population, about 500,000 people, marched on the capital, Pristina. At Kosovo's largest mining complex, Treпча, 1,700 miners occupied a mineshaft and staged an eight-day hunger strike. In response, Milosevic imposed direct rule on Kosovo, occupying it with Serbian police and paramilitaries.

Franjo Tudjman Mirrors Milosevic

Alarmed by events in Serbia, the leaders of the other republics followed suit. In Croatia, Franjo Tudjman, a former general turned rabid nationalist, was Milosevic's mirror image. His party, the Croatian Democratic Union, won elections in April 1990. He ran a campaign for Croatian independence, which went out of its way to antagonize the Serbian minority. He talked of a "greater Croatia," courted the fascists of the Croatian Party of Rights (HOS) and declared his happiness that his wife was "neither a Jew or a Serb."

In the summer of 1990, Yugoslavia came apart. Slovenia declared independence and held it after a desultory 10-day war in which the Yugoslav National Army (JNA)—soon to be transformed into an army controlled by Belgrade—mobilized a token effort to prevent secession. Croatia declared independence soon after.

The rival nationalisms in Serbia and Croatia reinforced each other. Tudjman demanded that Serbs living in Croatia declare their loyalty to the Croatian state, and began removing Serbs

from jobs and replacing Serb policemen with Croatians. Milošević, in turn, reminded Serbs in Croatia that the last independent Croatian state massacred Serbs and drove them from their homes. Tudjman reinforced Milošević's point by adopting the flag of the Second World War fascist Ustashe regime as a symbol of the new Croatian nation. Incited from Belgrade, Serb nationalists in Croatia formed the Serbian Democratic Party and gained control of Serb majority areas, declaring them independent from Croatia. Fighting began to break out between Croat and Serb nationalists in several towns.

Meanwhile, in Belgrade, Milošević faced struggle from below. Beginning in early 1991, mass demonstrations of students and workers against police brutality and repression, and against censorship, were the order of the day. In April, mass strikes involving 700,000 workers broke out in Serbia. Milošević had to bring in tanks to quell the unrest. Amid the rising struggle, Milošević and Tudjman—the two men who were setting Croatians and Serbs against each other—met secretly in the Serbian town of Karadjorjevo and agreed to divide Bosnia-Herzegovina between Serbia and Croatia.

Milošević was saved by the outbreak of war in Croatia, with Croatian militias battling the JNA—transformed by the breakup of Yugoslavia into a Serbian army. He held onto power by appealing to Serbian unity in defense of Serbs under attack in Croatia.

Here [in Croatia] there was no question of Serbs losing the will to fight as quickly as in Slovenia. In many cases the irregular soldiers [Serb civilians armed by Milošević], charged with nationalism and bigotry as they were, were actually fighting for their own houses and villages. By the middle of September it was clear that, regardless of what schemes either Milošević or Tudjman might have for dividing up the country, they were now locked into a vicious cycle from which there was no easy escape.⁵

By January 1992, Serb nationalists had gained control of



Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević

the Krajina, taking a third of Croatian territory. In six months of bloody fighting, 80,000 people—Serbs and Croats who had lived side by side for decades—were driven from their homes. Alarmed by the spread of war in the heart of Europe, the Western powers intervened. Tudjman—whose military was weaker—agreed hastily to a UN-brokered cease-fire that placed 14,000 “peacekeeping” troops on Croatian soil.

The Purpose of Western Intervention

From the beginning, European and U.S. intervention in the conflict aimed at preventing the war from spiraling out of control—not out of concern for ordinary Serbian and Croatian victims of the war, but from a shared determination to demonstrate their capacity for common action and resolve. But every step they have taken has only served to encourage ethnic cleansing and to entrench the nationalist bullies in power. After first backing Milošević and the integrity of Yugoslavia's former borders, the U.S. then did an about-face and backed the independence of the new republics. Germany, a traditional ally and trading partner of Croatia, pushed hard and early for international recognition of Croatia, without in the least taking into consideration the concerns of the embattled Serb minority there.

Because [the EC, the UN and the U.S.] ignored the compromises that Yugoslavia represented in guaranteeing nations the right to self-determination in a nationally mixed area, ignored the security guarantee that Yugoslavia had provided for territories of mixed population, and did little to reassure those relegated to minority status that they would be protected, it could not reverse the downward spiral of suspicion and insecurity that was leading to war. It then assumed the role of mediator to obtain cease-fire agreements as rapidly as possible. But that meant talking to leaders who were fighting because they could not agree, while insisting that no agreement achieved by the use of force would be recognized. It could negotiate cease-fires that froze the disputes over borders and national rights, but it could not persuade parties to disarm without providing a constructive alternative to those whose national rights were denied by the international insistence on the republican borders.⁶

As with all subsequent peace agreements in the Balkans imposed by the Western powers, the introduction of “peacekeepers” in Croatia merely froze the fighting temporarily. Quite logically, the opposing sides saw it as legitimating their claims to territories already seized by force. It thereby legitimized and reinforced the need for a military solution to the crisis, i.e. the forced expulsion of people and the further carve up of the region. As the conflict spread to Bosnia, U.S. intervention became even more directly an aid and encouragement to ethnic cleansing. As future events would show, Tudjman was buying time—preparing militarily with help from Washington for a massive military onslaught in 1995 to drive the Serbs out of Croatia.

Given its three-way division between Serb, Croat and Muslim, the outbreak of war in Bosnia, egged on by Milošević and Tudjman, was only months away.

Bosnia: How Western Intervention Fueled the Crisis

BETWEEN 1992 and 1995, war raged in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) between nationalist militias and armies of the three dominant ethnic groups—Muslims, Serbs and Croats. In a country half the size of Virginia, almost two million people were driven from their homes and tens of thousands were killed. The press and politicians portrayed U.S. and NATO intervention then much as they do today: as a way to save the Bosnian Muslims from ethnic cleansing, and to stop rampant Serbian butchery. The course and outcome of that war are therefore instructive in demonstrating the difference between the rhetoric and the reality—and the treacherous role the Western powers played in that tragic fiasco.

Encouraged by the U.S. and Germany, Bosnia-Herzegovina's Assembly declared its independence in October 1991—against the wishes of the Serbian delegates, who walked out. Parties based purely on national affiliation had by then been created and, in the heat of the approaching armed conflict, had risen to prominence among each ethnic group—Serbian (34 percent of the population), Muslim (43 percent), and Croatian (17 percent). When a referendum was held in March 1992 on BiH independence, a third of the population, the majority of the Serb population in BiH, refused to participate.

The final factor provoking war [in BiH] was the international community's approach to recognition. Once Croatia and Slovenia had been granted international recognition, [Muslim president of the Bosnian republic] Izetbegovic had no option but to seek the same, as to remain in a Yugoslavia dominated by Milošević and Belgrade would have been simply unacceptable to all Muslims and Croats in BiH. Izetbegovic was thus forced by German-led EC policy into the same mistake that Tudjman had made voluntarily—he embarked upon secession from Yugoslavia without securing prior agreement from the Serbs.⁷

The U.S. quickly jumped in to support Bosnian independence, without any regard for the fact that a third of the population rejected it. It did so not to prevent violence, but to regain the initiative after resisting Germany's efforts to recognize Croatia. In doing so, the U.S. helped give the green light for war within Bosnia. The cynicism of U.S. actions became clear when then-President George Bush refused to recognize independence for Macedonia in deference to Greece, which opposed it.



More than any other territory in the former Yugoslavia, BiH did not parcel neatly into different ethnic groups. While it is true that Serbs dominated in the countryside and Muslims in the cities, many towns and villages contained a mixture of two or more ethnic groups, sharing the same culture and language, and often joining in mixed marriages and friendships. The carve-up of BiH implied from the start the "cleansing" of ethnic groups from different areas.

The U.S. and other Western media consistently portrayed the Serbs as purely responsible for the fighting. Serbs were consistently demonized as the only side engaging in ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. The Muslims (and to a lesser extent Croats) were portrayed as victims. This was in part backed up by the propaganda of Izetbegovic and the Muslim nationalist leaders themselves, who put forward the idea that, unlike the Serbs and Croats, they were fighting to retain a multi-ethnic Bosnian state.

Atrocities Committed by All Sides

There is no doubt that Serbian paramilitaries—armed by Milošević and aided by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA)—took the initiative, engaging in horrible atrocities in order to drive Muslims from their homes. Serbian paramilitary militias, under the leadership of the notorious Arkan and the Serbian fascist leader Seselj, committed the worst and most numerous atrocities. Moreover, Muslims, though the largest ethnic group, felt the most vulnerable because—unlike Serbs and Croats—they had no "sponsor" state to back them in the fighting. The imbalance was changed later in the war, when the U.S. began to se-

cretly arm and train Bosnian Muslim fighters. But even before that, the gap between rhetoric and reality was widening, as reports came back from the field that Muslim and Croat forces were also engaging in ethnic cleansing in parts of BiH.

The London *Guardian* reporter Ed Vulliamy—one of the first to report the existence of Serb “concentration camps” where thousands of Muslim men were being held, tortured and randomly executed—also reported detention camps run by Croatian forces. He was also the first to report that over 75,000 Serbs were “ethnically cleansed” from the town of Mostar in Western Herzegovina in 1992 by the Croatian army (HVA), the Croatian fascist militia (HOS) and Muslim paramilitaries, all of which were supplied with German weapons.

The Serbo-Croat partition of Bosnia forced Muslim leaders, in spite of their rhetoric, to create a Muslim state in Bosnia. As the weaker force, they demanded UN and U.S. intervention on their side, and that they be armed. In addition, they continually



Remains of victims of Serb atrocities in Bosnia

formed alliances of convenience with Croat forces—in some cases, Croat fascists—to fight the Serbs, in spite of the fact that Croatia’s war aims were to take over half of Bosnia and annex it.

The war sharpened ethnic divisions throughout the entire population, in many cases forcing even mixed families to take sides. But there were sporadic rejections of this barbaric logic. The Croatian and Muslim communities of Fojnica demanded in 1993 that the UN declare the town a peace zone since they refused to fight in the war. The district president, Mijat Tuka, said, “The danger is that the BiH (mainly Muslim army) and the HVO will have plans for Fojnica.” A week later the town was shelled by the Muslim militia. In the mixed town of Tesanj in central Bosnia the people refused to allow the HVO or the BiH to control their militia and declared that they would defend their town against all sides. Though crushed by all sides,

gestures like these reflected a vague feeling among a significant minority that no side really represented their interests.

Intensifying the Conflict

As in Croatia, Western intervention only served to intensify the conflict. Every proposal for a peace accord provoked accelerated military activity, as each side attempted to improve the “facts on the ground” in its own favor. By the first “peace” conference in Lisbon in March 1992, it was accepted by all parties involved that the “solution” to the crisis in BiH would be some kind of cantonization of the country into three distinct ethnic enclaves. But the very aims of each side in the war were to determine in its own favor the exact nature of that division.

Fearing it might be sucked into a quagmire, yet needing to demonstrate its “leadership” in the crisis, the U.S. was reluctant to commit troops to the region. Instead, the U.S. proposed air strikes on Serbian targets in BiH and the creation of UN-supervised “safe havens” for besieged Muslims. European powers which had already committed troops to the region criticized this policy, fearing that bombing might expose their own forces to attack. The contradiction for the imperialist powers was this: they feared that any escalation could involve them in a quagmire from which they could not extricate themselves. On the other hand, the longer the war went on, the more pressure there was for the U.S., in particular, to prove its ability to police the world. Not to intervene would jeopardize the position of the U.S. as the world’s dominant superpower and undermine the U.S. military alliance in Europe (NATO). That is why then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher called Bosnia “the problem from hell.” For this reason, U.S. military intervention, however halting, became more and more likely as the crisis continued.

Every other permutation of the Bosnian peace plan had the same effect—to encourage further ethnic cleansing. The Vance-Owen plan in 1992 proposed that BiH be divided into 10 ethnic enclaves. That plan was scuttled by the U.S., which criticized it for giving too much to the Serbs. The Vance-Owen plan had allotted eight districts that had an overall majority of Muslims to the Croats. After the plan collapsed, Croatian forces decided to settle Vance-Owen on the ground through a military offensive to drive the Muslims from those areas. In response, the Muslims decided to lay claim to the same areas. After suffering some defeats and terrible atrocities, the Muslims struck back and, in similar fashion, inflicted terrible atrocities to drive Croats out.

Bosnian Muslim Leaders Go for the Carve Up

Arming the Muslims was not a way to ensure the survival of BiH as a multi-ethnic state, but a means for Muslim nationalists to carve a larger piece of Bosnia, using the same military tactics as their adversaries—mass expulsions and atrocities. If there was any doubt, the fighting in central Bosnia showed this clearly.

The Balkans correspondent Misha Glenny reported



Bosnian government soldiers

Wherever they could, the Muslims used the considerable sympathy which they enjoyed in the outside world as a cover to undertake military operations. In December and early January [1993], they launched an intensive offensive from Srebrenica with the aim of regaining control of Bratunac, to the east on the river Drina. The Serbs were caught unawares by the attack and the Muslims moved swiftly through Serbian villages, slaughtering a large number of civilians on the way. Because the atrocities were being perpetrated by the Muslims, they received relatively little attention in the world media. They also provoked a fearsome counter-attack by the Serbs who had soon driven the Muslims back to Srebrenica. Politicians and journalists were quick to condemn the Serbs for this operation but they entirely neglected to point out that it had been provoked by the original Muslim offensive.⁸

The same pattern was also clear in 1993, when Muslim and Croat forces battled for control of central Bosnia, each side engaging in vicious ethnic cleansing. Again Glenny reported on the three-way insanity of the conflict:

When Gornji Vakuf was being contested, a fight between Croats and Muslims was being monitored by a nearby Serb unit. After some hours, the Muslim guns fell silent. The Serb commander radioed his Muslim counterpart. 'Why have you stopped firing?' he asked. 'We've run out of ammunition. Give us some ammunition,' the reply came. Instead, the Serb commander requested the Croat coordinates which the Muslim commander duly supplied. Over the next four hours, the Serb unit pounded the Croats into surrender. The following morning at dawn, the Muslim commander ordered his men to run up the Yugoslav flag instead of the Bosnian ensign in order to thank the Serbs.⁹

In the same area, Croat forces massacred hundreds of Muslim civilians in the town of Ahmici. After shelling the town to force the townspeople to flee, they sprayed them with machine guns set up across an open field through which the people were forced to run.

In order to give the appearance of decisive action without actually making any costly commitments, the UN—under U.S. pressure—imposed debilitating economic sanctions on Serbia

and Montenegro. By demonizing all Serbs for the war in Bosnia, the UN only strengthened the hold of the most rabid Serbian nationalists in the region.

Failure of the So-Called "Safe Havens"

The relief efforts mounted by the UN in Bosnia—in addition to providing a cover for introducing thousands of troops (called the UN Protection Force, or UNPROFOR)—were sustained primarily to ensure that Europe would not be burdened with the arrival of thousands of refugees from the war-torn region. Likewise, the creation of so-called "safe havens"—regions ostensibly created to protect Bosnian Muslims from attack—was motivated by the desire to ensure that the victims of ethnic cleansing stayed in Bosnia. The reality is that these areas were proven to be far from safe. When these "safe havens" in places like Srebrenica and Goradze were finally overrun by Serbian forces, UN "peacekeepers" stood by and allowed it to happen.

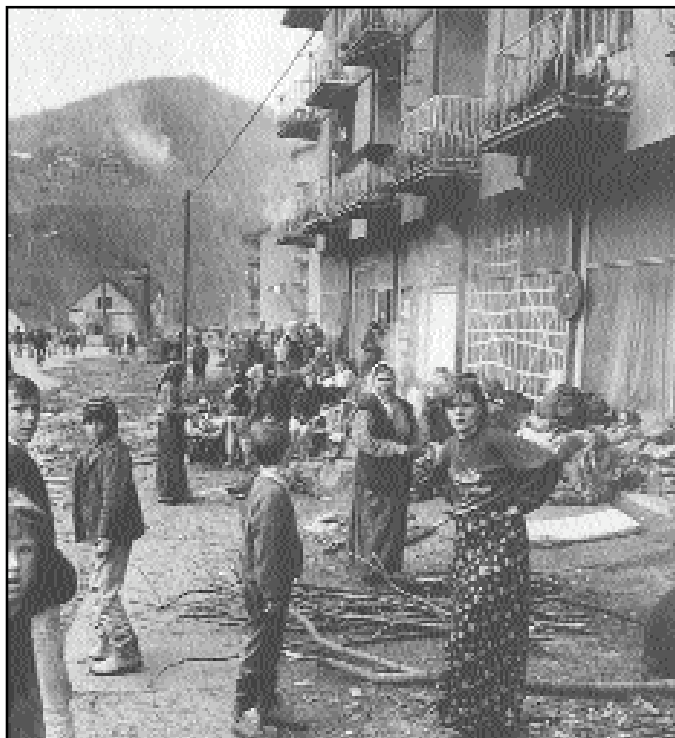
As one historian writes,

An additional tactic of warfare was thus encouraged. The Bosnian government turned the safe areas into bases for rest, recuperation and resupply of troops within "enemy" territory that it hoped to regain and for bases from which to fire out of their enclave into Serb-claimed territory. The aim of the latter was to provoke Serbian artillery fire to invoke the use of air power against the Serbs and to use the media attention and test of UN and NATO credibility that safe areas would attract... to reinforce their propaganda strategy of getting the victims of Serb aggression and deserving of military support.¹⁰

In reality, the "humanitarian intervention" on the part of U.S., UN and NATO in BiH had nothing to do with saving the lives of the war's victims. Ironically, the same governments which claimed to be intervening on behalf of the beleaguered refugees were the same countries whose financial policies in the former Yugoslavia—under the auspices of the IMF—had demanded austerity measures that included increased unemployment, welfare cuts and other market "medicine" against the people of the region in the 1980s.

In 1993 the U.S. was finally able to strong-arm its reluctant European war partners into adopting a new policy—NATO air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs, combined with arming the Bosnian Muslim army. The policy was called "lift and strike."

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Muslim refugees in Srebrenica, 1993

Peter Galbraith, U.S. ambassador to Croatia, brokered a new alliance—after the two sides had been fighting for months in central Bosnia—between Croatia and the Bosnian Muslims. To “level the playing field” further, a group of retired U.S. generals helped Croatia to devise a military plan, with U.S. and German military aid, to overrun the Serb-held Krajina. It was this three-pronged offensive—Croat invasion of Krajina, Muslim attack in central Bosnia and punishing air strikes—that finally brought all sides to the negotiating table in 1995 to sign the Dayton Accords.

The U.S. proved in practice that it had no problem at all with ethnic cleansing, or even the planning of ethnic cleansing, when it suits its own interests. What was ominously dubbed “Operation Storm” drove upwards of 200,000 Krajina Serbs from their homes in the largest single act of ethnic cleansing of the entire Bosnia war. Human rights observers reported burning of homes, looting and massacres of elderly Serbs too old to flee the region. In a matter of days, Serbs were ethnically cleansed from whole swaths of Croatia and Bosnia, against which Milosevic lifted not a finger. Clinton praised Operation Storm, saying that he was “hopeful Croatia’s offensive will turn out to be something that will give us an avenue to a quick diplomatic solution.”¹¹

Two weeks of intensive NATO bombing, combined with the arming of Bosnian Muslim forces, decisively shifted the balance of forces in favor of the Muslim side in the war. As a result, the Croat and Bosnian government offensive took 1,600 square miles of territory and expelled over 60,000 Serbs from their homes. By the time the Accords were signed, the biggest beneficiary in the war turned out to be Croatia. By the fighting’s end, Serbs were the largest group of refugees in the former Yugoslavia.

Dayton—Sanctioning the Partition

Though the Dayton Accords called for a nominally unitary Bosnian state, in practice they merely put the signature on what the war had already accomplished: the carve-up of Bosnia be-

tween the nationalists into ethnically pure enclaves, ruled over as a UN protectorate. The agreement created two statelets: one Serb, the other Croat-Muslim. Sarajevo—the city that stood the longest against ethnic division and hatred, decreed by Dayton an “undivided city”—was divided into nine ethnic zones. The Croat-Muslim alliance began to unravel before the ink was dry on the Accords. Tudjman made it clear that he saw the alliance as one of convenience, which would be tolerated only in order to get U.S. weapons and support. But Croatia had other plans for Bosnia—to annex half of it.

Although the Accords called for the right of refugees to return home, the reality is that refugees were cynically used to populate areas controlled by their own nationalist leaders, regardless of where they lived before. With only a day’s notice, for example, the Bosnian government shipped hundreds of Muslim refugees in October 1995 from Zenica into the town of Kljuc. Forty percent of the refugees were not returnees, but lived elsewhere in Bosnia before they were driven out. The refugees were forced to find shelter in a bombed-out town with no food or water. In the town of Jace, Croat forces sealed off the town and only allowed Croats to return. Thousands have—refugees forced to leave Croatia—but several busloads of Muslims were turned back. In Banja Luka, likewise, Serbs were busily kicking out the remaining Muslims and Croats who still lived in areas under Serb control.

Several years later, Bosnia remains a tense region, policed as a UN protectorate, whose appointed officers have control over all major economic and military decisions. In effect, the area remains under permanent U.S./NATO/UN military occupation, whose mission is to police the bloody borders its own policies have helped to create. The local economy remains mired in economic crisis, unable to attract investment or create jobs. In each enclave, nationalist rulers—many of them hated for the havoc they have wrought—remain in power, backed by Western guns. This is not a “solution” to Bosnia’s crisis. It merely paves the way for future wars, as each side catches its breath and reloads.

In Bosnia, U.S. and European intervention has only fueled the madness and strengthened the region’s nationalist bullies. The only solution to the barbarism in Bosnia is the one workers throughout the former Yugoslavia began to pursue more than a decade ago: class struggle, which unites workers across ethnic lines. That means rejecting the priorities of the region’s rulers and rejecting national chauvinism—while fighting for a democratic, multi-ethnic regional federation. Here in the U.S., the solution to the crisis in the Balkans must begin with demanding that the U.S., the world’s biggest bully, keep its hands off the region. Imperialist bombs are never “humanitarian.”

¹ Quoted in “Bosnia and the Peace Accords,” *International Socialism Bulletin* 1, March 1996.

² Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995), p. 73.

³ Woodward, p. 77.

⁴ Quoted in Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 35.

⁵ Duncan Blackie, “The Road to Hell,” *International Socialism* 53 (December 1991), p. 52.

⁶ Woodward, p. 220.

⁷ Glenny, p. 151.

⁸ Glenny, p. 221.

⁹ Glenny, p. 231.

¹⁰ Woodward pp. 320-321.

¹¹ Quoted in Jason Vest, “Clinton Bombs Again,” *Village Voice*, April 7-13, 1999.

Why Kosovo is not Serbia

By Leonard Klein and Paul D'Amato

IN DEMONSTRATIONS across the world, Serbian nationalists have chanted the slogan “Kosovo is Serbia,” justifying the Serbian military operations in Kosovo as merely a struggle against “terrorism” to protect its national heritage. Clinton’s bombing, touted as an effort to save the Kosovar Albanians from Serbia’s wrath, has merely given cover for a worsening of Serbia’s attacks in Kosovo. It has provided grist for Serbia’s most right-wing nationalists, including people like the fascist leader Vojislav Seselj, who want to “cleanse” Kosovo of all Albanians.

For Serbian nationalists, Kosovo is considered the “cradle” of the Serb nation. They stake a cultural claim on the territory of Kosovo by referring to the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje, when Serb soldiers made a stand against the expanding Ottoman empire. Never mind that in this battle Serbs and Albanians fought side by side against the Ottoman Empire. The myth is just that—a myth designed to stir up irrational passions.

The reality is that Kosovar Albanians—who constitute 90 percent of the population of Kosovo—have long been an oppressed minority within Serbia. Police repression and attempts to deny Albanian speakers national rights have driven Kosovars toward demands for independence from Serbia.

Imperialists Drew the Borders, Dividing the Albanians

The source of tensions in Kosovo—and the Balkans as a whole—is the imperialist carve-up of the region. There were two Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913, the First World War and the Second World War, which all saw the redrawing of boundaries to fit the needs of imperialism, not the desires of the peoples of the region.

At the end of the two Balkan Wars, the leading powers sat down and dictated a peace agreement dividing the areas populated by Albanians—handing Kosovo to Serbia—an arrangement that was reconfirmed after the First World War. More than half the Albanian-speaking population was left out of the new Albanian state.

“The fairness or otherwise,” writes one historian, “of the allocation of Albania’s frontiers can be judged by a speech made by Sir Edward Grey to the House of Commons on 12 August, 1913, in which he openly stated that the basic objective of the agreement on the borders was to satisfy the Great Powers.” One observer called Albania’s division “an ulcer poisoning the

European system.”¹

In 1921, the Kosovars, seeking a peaceful road to independence from Serbia, petitioned the League of Nations, the United Nations of its day. They begged for reunion with Albania. The League refused.

The postwar Serb-dominated Yugoslav state sought to repress any attempt by the Kosovar Albanians to resist their forcible retention within the borders of Serbia. It denied Albanians the right to use their own language in official circles or in cultural activities. All schooling was conducted in Serbo-Croat. In the interwar years, Serbia sent thousands of loyal Serb colonists to Kosovo in order to secure its borders, often settling them on land expropriated from Albanians who, lacking paper titles, could not prove ownership. At the same time, the Yugoslav government officially encouraged Albanians to emigrate. In the mid-1930s, Yugoslavia negotiated a deal to ship 200,000 Albanians to Turkey. To promote the exodus, Belgrade legally restricted Albanians in some counties of Kosovo to landholdings too small to survive on.

After the Second World War, Josip Broz Tito’s victorious partisan movement established a new Yugoslavia, this time not Serb dominated. Tito built the new state on the basis of a series of checks and balances between the various republics, ruled from above by a tightly centralized bureaucracy which did not allow one republic to dominate another. But there was one exception to this policy: In order to prevent a “greater Serbian” domination of the new state, Tito’s ruling Communist Party created new republics that contained either Serb majorities or



Demonstration in Pristina, 1990

large Serbian minorities—Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. In order to win Serbian acceptance of the new arrangement, Kosovo was given the status of a province of Serbia with only limited regional autonomy. During the resistance, Tito had promised the Kosovar Albanians the right to rejoin Albania as part of a proposed federation of Balkan states. After the war's end, he reneged on his promise.

Kosovar Albanians—and in particular the upper strata of bureaucrats and managers—saw Serbia's tutelage over Kosovo as denying the province of its rightful status as a federal republic like the others. They reasoned that Kosovo, with an Albanian majority that constituted 90 percent of the population, deserved that status as much as Bosnia or Macedonia, whose populations were even more mixed between different national groups. But Belgrade ruthlessly suppressed any discussion about Kosovo's status.

The Move Toward Kosovo Autonomy Under Tito

In 1974, Tito promulgated a new constitution that granted greater autonomy to the republics. Partly in response to the growth of student unrest in Kosovo in the late 1960s, the constitution granted Kosovo the rights of a full republic in all but one respect: Albanians were defined as a “national minority” in Yugoslavia, but not as a nation. Therefore they did not have, like the other republics (at least theoretically), the right to secession. Nevertheless, the change created an awakening of national life among Kosovar Albanians. With fuller local control, the provincial leadership established a kind of affirmative action policy in Kosovo that “Albanianized” the province by promoting Albanian culture. Provincial leaders built a new university in Pristina, and a whole new stratum of Albanian state and party officials, industrial managers, teachers, policemen and radio and television personalities appeared. The number of people in higher education mushroomed, in part to soak up the large numbers of unemployed young people in what was the poorest region of Yugoslavia. The state also designated Kosovo as an underdeveloped region, allotting the region's leaders additional investment funds and easy credit.

One result of these changes was the mass migration of peasants from rural areas and the creation for the first time of a sizable working class in Kosovo.

Mass student demonstrations, initially over poor living conditions, spilled over into a province-wide demonstration demanding republican status in 1981. The Yugoslav army immediately declared marshal law and repressed the revolt with tanks and armored personnel carriers. This marked the beginning of the end of Kosovar autonomy—and the resurgence of Serbian nationalism.

The changes in the fortunes of Kosovar Albanians after 1974 created a sense of unease among the minority Serb population in Kosovo, who constituted a declining 17 percent of the population, and had enjoyed for many years a dominant status in the region. That unease was exploited by Serbian nationalists who, in the late 1980s, began to whip up a campaign of anti-Albanian racism.

In the face of a spiralling economic crisis and mass strikes in the late 1980s, Slobodan Milosevic made a bid for power. Though no nationalist, he realized that by aligning himself with Serbian nationalists in their attack on Kosovo, he could divert class anger in Serbia and establish firm control over the state.

Branka Magas describes the nature of the campaign against Kosovar Albanians:

The official media joined in, sparing no tactics. One of the most shameful was to invent daily stories about the rape of Serb women—despite all official statistics showing the absurdity of such racist fables. Another was to claim that the high Albanian birth rate was part of a nationalist plot and should be countered by discriminatory state measures. This hysterical campaign was effective...Factories started to be built in Kosovo for Serbs only, Albanian families were evicted from Serb villages, sale of Serb-owned land to Albanians was prohibited, rape declared a political crime.²

Milosevic stage-managed mass nationalist rallies in Kosovo and other parts of Serbia where demonstrators shouted racist slogans like, “Let us go, brothers and sisters, to attack Kosovo!”

Serb Nationalists Reassert Control Over Kosovo

As state capitalism fell apart around the world in 1989 and economic crisis brought the republics to the verge of collapse, Milosevic revoked Kosovo's autonomy and removed its party leaders.

The effect of the repression was to cause the Albanian population to close ranks. The Trepca miners led the way in February 1989, occupying the mine and going on an eight-day hunger strike.

Schools, markets and shops closed as Kosovars poured out to support the miners in what amounted to a near rebellion. That was followed by a general strike in 1990. The initial demand of the movement was not independence, but merely that Kosovar Albanian leaders replaced by Milosevic be reinstated, and that there be a free and open dialogue on the status of Kosovo. Ordinarily Kosovars were driven to support independence in reaction to the massive repression from Belgrade.

In response, Milosevic sent thousands of Serbian police to take control of Kosovo. Ethnic Albanians found themselves living under apartheid—forced to use separate bars, restaurants, and public transportation. Thousands of Albanians were fired from their jobs. The education system was shut down. Living



Serbian cops break up a Kosovar demonstration in 1989

standards were driven down: per capita income fell to around \$500 per year. Prewar unemployment among Kosovars was 85 percent. Public contact with Serbs was frowned on. Police and army units now maintained order with armored transports and machine guns.

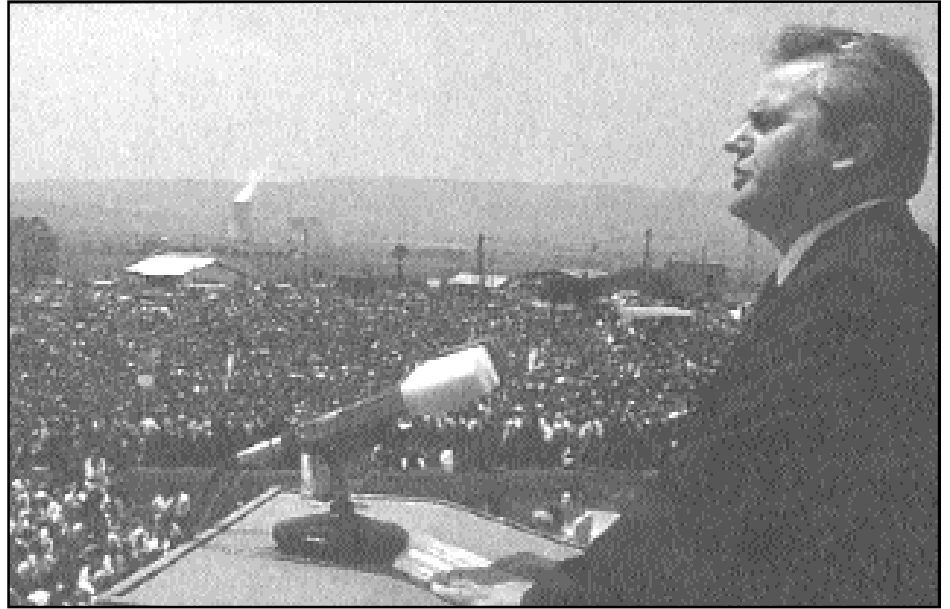
After Serbia took over Kosovo, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), led by a moderate nationalist, Ibrahim Rugova, declared Kosovo an independent state, with Rugova as head of an Albanian “shadow” government. Ignoring the Serbian state, the LDK set up a parallel education, health care and taxation system. The new government urged a policy of peaceful resistance. In a 1991 referendum, 98.7 percent of Kosovars voted for independence from Serbia on the eve of the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

But the failure of Rugova’s strategy drove young Kosovar Albanians to consider moving toward armed guerrilla struggle. It was out of this climate that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) first made its appearance, staging attacks on Serbian police.

The events in Kosovo illustrated clearly Marx’s dictum: “a nation which oppresses another cannot itself be free.” Hand in hand with the rise of Serbian nationalism and the crackdown in Kosovo went the establishment of Milosevic’s repression of all opposition inside Serbia and the reinforcement of one-party rule. In the terse phrase of Branka Magas, “After Kosovo, democracy was also snuffed out in Serbia.” The attack on Kosovo was used by Milosevic to create a political climate in Serbia against any manifestation of opposition to his iron-fisted rule. In this sense, the Kosovo question is the Achilles heel of Serbian politics. Any successful movement of Serbian workers against the Serbian bosses, whom Milosevic represents, can only be successful if it takes on as one of its key demands the legitimate aspirations of Kosovar Albanians for self-determination.

Sadly, today the legitimate aspirations of Kosovar Albanians are being turned by the current war into a political football. For over a century the small Balkan states have relied upon the policy of looking to the big imperialist powers for protection. The latter have been all too eager to embrace the legitimate complaints of client states to use for their own imperialist purposes.

This has led to disastrous results. To escape Serbian oppression of the inter-war period, for example, the Albanians became wards of Italian and German fascism. Today, the KLA in practice is becoming a subordinate junior partner to the U.S., which is using the plight of the Kosovar refugees to advance its own war aims. The U.S. does not even pretend to defend the right of the Kosovars or other peoples of the Balkans to determine their own fate. It opposes their right to self-determination as a threat



Yugoslav President Milosevic speaks at a Serbian nationalist rally in Kosovo Polje

to the status quo it wants to impose as the dominant power in the Balkans and Europe. Kosovo is the cover story for the U.S. to impose its “peace” as the policeman and protector of European stability.

No amount of sympathy for the oppression of the Kosovar Albanians can justify a new war of American domination and the extension of its empire. In the event of a NATO victory, a number of outcomes are possible—the partition of Kosovo, or the creation of a NATO protectorate in Kosovo. If that happens, Albanians will find a new colonial master—in the uniform of the U.S. military officer.

1 Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo* (Columbia University, 1998).

2 Branka Magas, *The Destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracking the Break-Up 1980-92* (Verso Press, 1993).