

NATO attack on Serbia has repercussions for Europe as a whole

Peter Schwarz
31 March 1999

Little more than a week of intensive air attacks against Serbia has resulted in numerous military and civilian facilities and factories going up in flames and the deaths of an untold number of human beings. Also included amongst the first casualties of the war is what remained of the world order that provided Europe with a certain degree of stability over the past five decades.

The official justification for NATO's attack--to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and to limit the conflict in Kosovo--has rapidly proved to be a fraud. Instead of solving the crisis in the Balkans, the war is Balkanising world politics. A wildfire threatens to spread to the entire region, affecting Europe as a whole.

It was not hard to foresee that the air attacks on targets in Serbia and Kosovo would unleash one of the largest floods of refugees since the beginning of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. According to Albanian government sources, almost 100,000 refugees have streamed over the mountainous border with Kosovo since the offensive began. NATO itself has spoken of some 500,000 Kosovan Albanians presently fleeing the hostilities.

These figures are just as hard to verify as the claims of the Albanian government that several thousand Kosovars have been massacred by Serbian forces. Since the withdrawal of all journalists and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers from Kosovo, it is difficult to distinguish between the war propaganda of the various parties and the truth. Nevertheless, there is no question that the NATO offensive has further intensified the interplay of national hatred and violence in Kosovo. This follows from the entire previous course of events.

Since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the interventions of the Great Powers have been directed towards splitting up the multiethnic state into ever-smaller autonomous units. This was justified on some occasions by referring to the right to self-determination, on others by invoking humanitarian motives. The result has been to encourage bitterness and nationalist sentiment, and has helped several right-wing nationalist cliques, which are, in turn, supported by the Great Powers or played off against each other, to gain power.

The crisis in Kosovo is the result of these policies; and could have been predicted long ago. However, as long as the Serbian regime in Belgrade was useful in pushing through the Dayton Accord regarding the fate of Bosnia, it was tolerated. When that process was completed the Western powers began to arm the underground Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and to enhance its diplomatic status. For its part, the strategy of the KLA was to launch attacks on Serbian facilities so that the reprisals would provoke an intervention by NATO.

In the meantime, accusations have continued to arise that Washington expressly sought to prevent a peaceful resolution. Willy

Wimmer, vice-chairman of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, has accused the United States of trying to "completely upstage" the OSCE and the Contact Group. In an interview with a German radio station in mid-January, Wimmer said, "The impression is often created that the reason why the Europeans must not achieve anything is so that the United States can intervene here. Possibly, quite different objectives are pursued in their Balkan policy."

The official justification for the attack on Serbia--that years of pent-up national hatred must be dampened by bombs--is like suggesting that one put out a fire with kerosene.

The war is now starting to unfold according to its own logic. While NATO continues to insist its official aim is to force the Milosevic regime to sign a peace accord providing for an autonomous Kosovo within the Serbian state, the escalation of the war has long since removed any such possibility.

Every day the bloodbath in Kosovo intensifies, the calls for the deployment of NATO ground forces or a massive arming of the KLA grow louder. In both cases, the inevitable consequence would be either the complete separation of Kosovo, or its division into two hostile parts. The creation of an Albanian mini-state in Kosovo would itself raise the question of a Greater Albania and draw the neighbouring states into the conflict. Albania is already threatening to enter the war and Macedonia could be next.

A quarter of the 2 million inhabitants of the Macedonian state founded in 1991 are of Albanian origin. Half of the Macedonian army is comprised of Albanians. There are considerable Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek minorities living in the country. The high emotions that have already been enflamed could be seen last Thursday in the violent demonstrations of Serbian youth outside the American, British and German embassies in the capital, Skopje.

It would be impossible for Greece to remain uninvolved in any conflict in Macedonia. For years, Athens has refused to even recognise the name of this state for fear that it might encourage territorial claims to the eponymous region in northern Greece. Moreover, some 10,000 NATO troops are presently stationed in Macedonia to oversee a future Kosovo accord. They could easily be drawn into the war, regardless of the opposition to such a course inside most of the NATO states.

Montenegro--which borders Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia--is also being put under enormous pressure by NATO to secede from federal Yugoslavia.

The fragile cease-fire in Bosnia would hardly survive under such circumstances. How could the secession of Bosnian *Republika Serbska* then be prevented when both Kosovo and Montenegro have parted company with Serbia proper with the military support of

NATO? The present war, therefore, has the potential to spread like wildfire, with unforeseen consequences. There is not the slightest indication that the governments that have unleashed this war have any answers to such developments.

Another result of the war against Serbia is the dramatic worsening of relations with Russia. Within Europe, a new Cold War threatens to develop that could have far-reaching consequences for the planned expansion of the European Union (EU) and NATO.

Within the framework of the Contact Group, Russia supported an accord granting the autonomy of Kosovo, but has strictly opposed the enforcement of this by military means. The demonstrative disregard for the Russian veto and the attack on a country with traditional ties to Russia have unleashed a wave of indignation that threatens to bring a nationalist regime to power.

The government of Yevgeni Primakov at first reacted with symbolic gestures--cancelling a state visit to Washington and breaking off diplomatic ties with NATO. If relations continue to cool, this could have serious implications for Europe's internal equilibrium.

French President Jacques Chirac, in consultation with the German government, has won the agreement of the Russian premier to act as an intermediary with Belgrade. In this way they hope to patch up the breach with Moscow. Primakov is to propose to the Serbian government that there could be a strong Russian contingent in the troops securing any Kosovo peace. This might then act under the auspices of the UN, rather than NATO.

In the European NATO countries the first days of war united most of the political parties behind their respective governments. In the press, however, critical voices could be heard from the start. These expressed two predominant themes.

One is the concern that the attack on Serbia without a UN mandate clearly signifies the flouting of international law.

A typical commentary in the German press: "What is collapsing without comment before our very eyes is something that was only achieved with difficulty: the rule of international law. In the League of Nations, in the Kellogg Pact, and finally in the charter of the United Nations, the peoples [of the world] have promised to mutually respect their borders under all circumstances and not to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states."

The unspoken fear in all these editorials is that a precedence is now being established that means that international relations will operate according to the rule of the jungle, the right of the strongest. If today the veto right of Russia and China in the UN Security Council is ignored, why not tomorrow that of France and Britain, or Germany, which is also claiming a permanent seat?

The second theme revolves around the question: what will happen if the war escalates any further? It is clear that most of the European governments are not prepared for such an eventuality and had hoped that the threat of war alone would suffice to ensure Belgrade's co-operation.

Herbert Kremp asks in the conservative German paper *Die Welt*, "All the questions that are currently posed come back to the same essential point: Did the Western politicians make a correct estimate of their opponent before they authorised the NATO attack?"

Josef Joffe, a supporter of the NATO attack, wrote in the *SÃ¼ddeutsche Zeitung*, "The ethnic earthquake that broke out again in 1991 is immune to cruise missiles. What should happen when the bombing stops? There is only one good answer to this: under no circumstances should ground troops be dispatched, that have to impose a peace through arms."

Nevertheless, the call for the deployment of ground troops grows louder. The first high-ranking diplomat to openly call for their use was Wolfgang Petritsch, the Austrian EU representative. The former commander of the UN troops in Bosnia, French General Philippe Morillon, has also said the use of ground troops is unavoidable.

The German government continues to avoid giving a categorical answer to such questions. But that such a course is being considered can be seen from the actions of the former Defence Minister Volker RÃ¼he, who has loudly called for the withdrawal of the 3,000 German troops stationed in Macedonia. He clearly fears that, regardless of the fact they were sent there to police any agreed peace, they might easily become the vanguard of a hostile intervention force.

The deployment of ground troops would further intensify the conflicts inside NATO and inside Europe. In Germany, which since the defeat of 1945 has not participated in any war, such a course would unleash a great shock. Already some 400 mothers of German soldiers stationed in Macedonia have joined together to prevent their use in a war setting. To this end, they have sought contact with the mothers of Serbian soldiers.

In Italy and France the coalition governments are already split. In France, the Communist Party of Robert Hue and the Citizens Movement of Interior Minister Jean-Pierre ChevÃªnment oppose the NATO action. The same stance is taken by the Italian Communists of Armando Cossutta and the Greens in Italy. Here, where even the Catholic bishops have spoken against the war, a further escalation might bring down the government. Cossutta's party has threatened to withdraw its ministers and parliament has demanded a halt to the air attacks and the immediate resumption of negotiations.

Opposition to the war is even stronger in Greece, where the government as a whole opposes it. This NATO member not only enjoys close traditional ties to Serbia, but in the case of Macedonia is directly involved in the outcome of the war.

Amongst the people of Europe, there is undoubtedly a broad opposition to the war. However, in the "official" opposition, which finds its echo in the press, only considerations of power politics find expression: growing US-European antagonisms and Washington's interference in the older continent are felt to signify a weakening of Europe.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact