

Behind the war in the Balkans:

A reply to a supporter of the US-NATO bombing of Serbia

David North
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Below we publish an open reply, prepared by David North, Chairman of the Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, to a letter sent to the WSW by P. Harris, a supporter of the US-NATO bombing of Serbia. For those who wish to read the text of Mr Harris's letter in full, a link is provided at the conclusion of this reply.

Dear Mr. Harris:

Before proceeding to reply to the specific points that you have raised in your attack on our opposition to the US-led war against Serbia, I believe that certain introductory remarks on both the prevailing political climate and relevant historical experiences are appropriate in answering the pro-war arguments of someone who once protested the war in Vietnam.

The unabashed and enthusiastic support for the US-NATO bombing of Serbia by former opponents of the American intervention in Vietnam, like yourself, is one of the most politically-significant phenomena of the present war. Virtually all the political leaders in Europe and the United States who are responsible for the prosecution of the war against Serbia participated, at one time or another, in demonstrations and other political protests against imperialism. Indeed, Clinton is unusual in this group only in the fact that his days as an opponent of militarism lasted only as long as his personal exposure to the danger of conscription. Others, such as Chancellor Schroeder, Foreign Minister Fischer, Defense Minister Scharping of Germany and even NATO Secretary General Solana, continued to spout Marxist and "anti-imperialist" phrases well into the 1980s.

The evolution of all these gentlemen is clearly the expression of a broader political process. E.J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* proclaims that the response of the anti-war protesters of the 1960s to the bombing of Serbia marks the definitive end of the "Vietnam Syndrome." Now that President Clinton "has embraced the idea that American power can be used on behalf of democracy, human rights and legitimate national interests," the conditions have emerged for the complete reconciliation of those who once opposed the Vietnam War with the American military. "This is a case in which most Vietnam-era doves swallowed their ambivalence and endorsed the use of force."

One of those who has swallowed his "ambivalence" is Walter Shapiro, a columnist for *USA Today*. He describes himself as a "onetime dove" who now "finds himself flying with hawks." Recalling with a tinge of nostalgia his participation in campus protests against the Vietnam War some 30 years ago, Shapiro writes: "I now find myself in the awkward position of trying to justify my support for NATO airstrikes against Slobodan Milosevic." What, according to Mr. Shapiro, accounts for the completion of his transformation into a defender of the latest US-led bombing campaign? It is "the scene of countless atrocities" in Kosovo, "with an estimated 100,000 panicked refugees fleeing the country this week..."

Shapiro assures his readers that his support for the war is determined

solely by a moral imperative: "America is the only nation with the resources and the will to take a firm stand against the barbarians at the gates of civilized society."

These words betray an astonishing absence of historical consciousness! Though he may have convinced himself that the bombing of Serbia marks the dawn of a new and altruistic American foreign policy, Shapiro's rhetoric eerily recalls the language employed by those who launched the first imperialist adventures of the United States 100 years ago. "God," declared Senator Beveridge of Indiana in January 1900, "has made us master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force such as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night." [1]

Among the most peculiar and enduring characteristics of American imperialism has been the manner in which it has employed the rhetoric of democratic altruism to justify its global ambitions. It was during the administration of Woodrow Wilson that hypocrisy was elevated into the essential international modus operandi of the United States. Unlike the old great powers of Europe, its leaders claimed, America only waged war to achieve lasting peace. It only killed in order to liberate. Thus, President Wilson justified the entry of the United States into the great struggle for markets known as World War I with stirring idealistic rhetoric:

"Our object," he declared in his war message to the US Congress in April 1917, "is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power. The right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things we have always carried nearest our hearts--for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free ... The world must be made safe for democracy." [2]

Somewhat more recently, in the very early stages of the last big liberal war, similar rationalizations were employed to justify the projection of American military power overseas. In December 1961 President John F. Kennedy depicted the commitment of the United States to South Vietnam as the defense of democracy and national independence against tyranny and aggression. As he wrote to South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem (whose assassination was to be authorized by the United States two years later):

"I have received your recent letter in which you described so cogently the dangerous conditions caused by North Vietnam's efforts to take over your country. The situation in your embattled country is well known to me

and to the American people. We have been deeply disturbed by the assault on your country. Our indignation has mounted as the deliberate savagery of the Communist programs of assassination, kidnapping, and wanton violence became clear.

"Your letter underlines what our own information has convincingly shown--that the campaign of force and terror now being waged against your people and Government is supported and directed from the outside by the authorities at Hanoi...

"The United States ... remains devoted to the cause of peace and our primary purpose is to help your people maintain their independence." [3]

Pardon the history lesson. But it seems that many of those whose political education began in the 1960s are in the process of forgetting, or have already forgotten, the bitter lessons they learned 30 years ago about the predatory and truly criminal character of American imperialism. Judging from your letter, it seems that you, too, are falling victim to this rather widespread outbreak of political amnesia.

In an inappropriate use of metaphor, you argue that in our opposition to the US-NATO bombing of Serbia, the *World Socialist Web Site* has "taken the approach of discarding the baby with the bath water." This is precisely what you yourself are guilty of. In your outrage over the mistreatment of the Kosovars, you have chosen to ignore all the essential problems of historical, political, social and economic context within which this war is unfolding. The result is an utterly simplistic and impressionistic response to events that leaves you at the mercy of the vast and powerful propaganda mechanisms of the American media.

The underlying intellectual bankruptcy of your approach is revealed in the sentences that immediately follow:

"It is of course true that the United States, Britain and France are imperialist nations. And it is equally true that they are full of hypocrisy and false piety on almost every foreign policy issue you can name, from the Kurds to the Timorese, from Iraq to Israel to Grenada to Panama. But this does not negate the fact that they are surely doing the right thing by (finally!) attacking Milosevic's Serbia to stop his regime's and the Serb nation's crimes against humanity in Kosovo." (Emphases added)

You write as if the term "imperialist" were merely an epithet, a somewhat dramatic and sophisticated way of denouncing the nasty behavior of one country or another. In the language of political economy, however, it has a more profound significance. *Imperialism*, as a scientific term, denotes a definite stage in the historical development of world economy bound up with the domination of finance capital. The political tendencies associated with imperialism, such as militarism and war, are the necessary by-products of objective economic processes, i.e., monopolization, the emergence of transnational corporations, the immense power of globalized capital markets, the economic dependency of small and less developed countries upon the powerful international lending agencies, etc. Whether or not a country is defined as imperialist is not determined by examining, on a case by case basis, its good or bad deeds, but by analyzing its objective role and place in the world economic system. From this essential standpoint, there is a qualitative difference between the United States, France, Britain and Germany, on the one side, and Serbia and Iraq on the other.

What is completing lacking in your attitude toward the war is any consideration of this objective economic and political foundation of world politics. Instead, one is presented with an eclectic approach to events that precludes the possibility of any coherent and integrated analysis. The United States, France and Britain are, you gladly concede, imperialist powers. You go even further and declare their attitude toward virtually every exploited and oppressed people in the world is "full of hypocrisy and false piety." But is it not the case that the "hypocrisy and false piety" of the imperialist powers is rooted in the ruthless subordination of the democratic principles that they formally espouse to the imperatives and interests of a world economic order dominated by their ruling financial

and industrial elites? And if these interests and imperatives result in their sanctioning of, and direct participation in, the oppression of the Kurds, Palestinians, Timorese, Iraqis, Grenadans, and Panamanians, why are the imperialist powers "surely doing the right thing" in the Balkans? How can one explain such an extraordinary departure from the norm? Is it not more likely that you--beneath the pressure of a propaganda campaign that has skillfully exploited the plight of the Kosovars--have made an exception to your general principles, than that they have to theirs?

You devote several paragraphs to a review of the events that led to the outbreak of the war. In your account, which in no fundamental respect differs from that which is presented by the mass media, all the violence of the past decade is the product of the policies pursued by Milosevic, who was able to draw upon the "mystical, fanatical nationalism" of the Serbs. The role played by Slovenian, Croatian, and Bosnian Moslem nationalism is not mentioned. But even more serious, in my opinion, is your apparently uncritical attitude toward the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation and the role played by American and European imperialism in that process. Even if we were to accept that Milosevic exceeds all other Balkan nationalists in his wickedness--which would be a difficult call given the competition he faces from the likes of Croatia's Tudjman, Slovenia's Kucan, and Bosnia's Izetbegovic--that would still leave us without the necessary insight into the deeper forces at work in the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Long before Milosevic appeared on the scene, the economic pressures exerted on Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s by the austerity policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund were eroding the economic foundations which maintained the viability of the Federation. The wave of industrial bankruptcies, the rapid growth of unemployment, inflation, the decline in real wages, and the erosion of the social infrastructure rekindled the old national and ethnic rivalries that the Titoist regime had attempted to suppress. Incidentally, the subordination of the Yugoslav economy to the discipline of the market principles demanded by the IMF played no small role in the rise of Slobodan Milosevic. While you express amazement that the NATO powers "stupidly believed" Milosevic could serve their interests, this appraisal did not lack ample foundation. Milosevic obtained a degree of credibility with Western banks and governments because of his apparent enthusiasm for the reorganization of the Yugoslav economy along capitalist lines. As Susan L. Woodward of the Brookings Institute has explained:

"...Milosevic was an economic liberal (and political conservative). He was director of a major Belgrade bank in 1978-82 and an economic reformer even as Belgrade party boss in 1984-86. The policy proposals commissioned by the 'Milosevic Commission' in May 1988 were written by liberal economists and could have been a leaf straight out of the IMF book. It was common at the time (indeed into the 1990s) for Westerners and banks to choose 'commitment to economic reform' as their prime criterion for supporting East European and Soviet leaders (as well as many in developing countries) and to ignore the consequences that their idea of economic reform might have on democratic development. The man who replaced János Kádár as leader of Hungary in May 1988, Károly Grósz, was similarly welcomed for the same profile of economic liberalism and political conservatism--what locals at the time called the Pinochet model." [4]

You also fail to make any assessment of the role played by the United States and Europe in encouraging the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation in 1991-92. It is difficult to judge whether malice or stupidity played a greater role in the events that led to the eruption of civil war in the Balkans. Whatever the answer, the actions taken by the imperialist powers encouraged, rather than restrained, the tensions among the Yugoslav republics. It was entirely foreseeable--and, indeed, it was foreseen--that any attempt to internationalize the internal borders of the Yugoslav republics would have calamitous results. It came as no great

surprise that the borders that had been established between the republics within the framework of a unified Yugoslavia would not be viable were the federation to break up. Ethnic minorities within the different republics--i.e., Serbs within the Croatian Republic, Croats within the Serb Republic, and Croats, Serbs and Moslems within Bosnia--looked to the federal state as the ultimate guarantor of their civil rights. Within the framework established in the aftermath of World War II, it had been possible for Tito to organize compromises between the various Balkan nationalities that comprised the new "Yugoslav" nation. In fact, the Bosnian republic had been designed by Tito to serve as a buffer that would ameliorate the traditional antagonisms between Serbs and Croats.

Thus, the German demand for speedy international recognition of Croatian independence in 1991--without a negotiated settlement of borders that would be acceptable to the populations of the republics in a post-Yugoslav state--made catastrophe inevitable. This is not simply an "after the fact" assessment of a Marxist opponent of imperialism. In a letter written to German Foreign Minister Genscher, appealing for a delay of the German government's plan to recognize Croatia as an independent state, Lord Carrington warned:

"There is also a real danger, perhaps even a probability, that Bosnia-Herzegovina would also ask for independence and recognition, which would be wholly unacceptable to the Serbs in that republic in which there are something like 100,000 JNA [Yugoslav People's Army] troops, some of whom had withdrawn there from Croatia. Milosevic has hinted that military action would take place there if Croatia and Slovenia were recognized. This might well be the spark that sets Bosnia-Herzegovina alight." [5]

Another letter written at the time by the UN Secretary General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, to the President of the EC Council of Foreign Ministers, Hans van den Broek, expressed similar fears:

"I am deeply worried that any early, selective recognition would widen the present conflict and fuel an explosive situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and also Macedonia, indeed serious consequences could ensue for the entire Balkan region." [6]

As for the role of the United States, Britain's Lord David Owen, who played a central role in the events surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia, offers an appraisal that can hardly be described as flattering:

"...The EC mistake over recognizing Croatia could have been overcome if it had not been compounded by going forward regardless of the consequences with the recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The US, who had opposed recognition of Croatia in December 1991, became very active in pushing for recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the spring of 1992. Yet it should not have been judged inevitable, nor indeed was it logical, to push ahead and recognize Bosnia-Herzegovina, an internal republic of Yugoslavia that contained three large constituent peoples with very different views on independence."

Thus, in Owen's judgment, the decision to press ahead with recognition was "foolhardy in the extreme." [7]

The outcome of these sordid diplomatic intrigues--all of which unfolded within the context of the destruction of the old nationalized industries and the establishment of the supremacy of the capitalist market--has been the "re-Balkanization" of the Balkans.

You manage to avoid any serious assessment of this political record, and the responsibility of the imperialist powers for the violence of the last 10 years, by simply proclaiming that "No amount of disgust at the hypocrisy, venality, or other shortcomings of the United States or the other leading imperialist countries can outweigh the concern we must have for the oppressed Albanian people of Kosovo."

What an amazing formulation! The consequences of this "hypocrisy, venality" and what you call "shortcomings" has been a catastrophe that has cost the lives of tens of thousands of people. But all this should be forgotten, or at least ignored. What we must now do is line up, without

thinking, behind the war machine of those who led the Balkans into an abyss and cheer as they pound the Serbs to smithereens!

In your version of events, all the suffering of the last decade is to be explained as the product of Serb nationalism. You offer no clear explanation why this brand of nationalism is worse than that of other Balkan chauvinists, including the Albanian xenophobia of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Indeed, you seem to suggest the Serbs *as a people* deserve the punishment that is being inflicted upon them by US-NATO bombers. "No amount of argument," you declare, "that the people of Serbia do not know what Milosevic is doing can negate the fact that it is being done, being done in their name, being done by their husbands and sons and brothers."

How does this blanket indictment of the Serbs differ in principle from the type of chauvinist stereotyping that is employed by the various nationalist Balkan cliques to legitimize their reactionary policies? To the extent that the policies of the pogromists--whether in Croatia, Serbia or Bosnia--have found popular support, it reflects the inability of the masses to see any alternative to the sectarian framework within which Balkan politics is presently confined. But rather than combating this reactionary poison, you fortify it with additional dosages.

I would not like to imagine what policies you would be pursuing were you living in the Balkans; for like those you are denouncing, your evaluation of the political situation proceeds entirely within the prevailing national framework. It is, for you, merely a question of opposing a good nationalism (Albanian) to a bad nationalism (Serbian). This outlook emerges most clearly in your enthusiastic endorsement of the KLA, whose policies, you suggest, represented "the only path to freedom" for the people of Kosovo.

I beg to differ: the policies of the KLA represent not a "path to freedom" but the road to further defeats, despair, and disaster for the people of Kosovo. For lack of space, I will not review the unsavory details of the KLA's history--its political and ideological origins in Enver Hoxha's reactionary mixture of Albanian xenophobia and Stalinism, its intimate links with organized crime throughout Europe, and its thoroughly corrupt alliance with the CIA. Even if it did not carry all this smelly baggage, the central perspective of the KLA--that of an independent Kosovo--is fundamentally reactionary and bankrupt. What sort of "independence" could be possible for Kosovo? It would be, from the first hour of its existence, nothing more than an impotent protectorate of US and European imperialism. And what sort of economic, social and cultural progress would be possible within this landlocked and impoverished mini-state? Those raw materials that are to be found within its borders--i.e., coal, zinc, manganese, copper, bauxite--would be integrated quickly into the holdings of the massive transnational conglomerates.

To form an idea of what would await an "independent" Kosovo, one needs only look at the fate of Bosnia, which is governed by what amounts to a colonial-style administration. Upon its establishment, real political power rested in the hands of the High Representative of the United States and the European Union, Carl Bildt, the fanatical monetarist who once headed a right wing government in Sweden. The decisions of the nominal governments of the Bosnian Federation and the Republika Srpska depended on Bildt's approval. The Bosnian Central Bank is run by a governor appointed by the IMF, and does not even have the right to issue currency without obtaining international authorization. The outcome of the Dayton Accords is described quite concisely by Professor Michel Chossudovsky of the University of Ottawa:

"As the West trumpets its support for democracy, actual political power rests in the hands of a parallel Bosnian 'state' whose executive positions are held by non-citizens. Western creditors have embedded their interests in a constitution hastily written on their behalf. They have done so without a constitutional assembly and without consultations with Bosnian citizens' organizations. Their plans to rebuild Bosnia appear more suited to sating

creditors than satisfying even the elementary needs of Bosnians." [8]

As for the long-term prospects for peace and security, within a regional environment of ongoing conflicts between politically insecure and economically ravaged Balkan states, it would not be long before the Kosovans were drawn into a new wave of violence.

What, then, is the way out of the nightmare through which Kosovars and Serbs are now passing? The first thing that must be said, unequivocally, is that nothing positive can be created with American bombs. If, as you suggest, the cause of "civilization" is represented by the Pentagon and its arsenal of "PGMs" [Precision Guided Munitions], then humanity certainly finds itself in a hopeless state. An appropriate slogan for those who are truly concerned about the plight of the Kosovars and Serbs is: "US Hands off the Balkans!"

However, this slogan is of limited value unless it is rooted in a broader perspective--one that draws on historical experience and addresses itself to the social force that has the potential to fight for the realization of a progressive resolution of the crisis that afflicts the Balkans--the working class.

It is well known that the first imperialist war emerged out of the confrontation between the major European powers that was sparked by a crisis in the Balkans. It is far less well known that in the years before the outbreak of World War I, the contradictions of Balkan life were followed with intense interest and concern by the finest minds of European socialism, among them Leon Trotsky. It is with a certain amazement that one discovers in articles written nearly 90 years ago insights that retain an extraordinary degree of relevance. Permit me to quote from an article written in 1910, entitled "The Balkan Question and Social Democracy." Of course, certain terms are dated. The dynasties which once ruled the Balkans have been swept away by wars and revolutions. But the thoughtful reader should not find it too difficult to make the necessary mental emendations.

"The frontiers between the dwarf states of the Balkan Peninsula were drawn not in accordance with national conditions or national demands, but as a result of wars, diplomatic intrigues, and dynastic interests. The Great Powers ... have always had a direct interest in setting the Balkan peoples and states against each other and then, when they have weakened one another, subjecting them to their economic and political influence. The petty dynasties [of Milosevic in Serbia, of Tudjman in Croatia] ruling in these 'broken pieces' of the Balkan Peninsula have served and continue to serve as levers for European [and American] diplomatic intrigues." [9]

In the writings of Trotsky--an impassioned foe of all forms of nationalism--one finds a profound appreciation of the complex interplay of international and regional influences and of socio-economic factors at work in the crisis of Balkan life. The salvation of the Balkan people, he insisted, depended upon the transcendence of national and ethnic particularism. "The only way out of the national and state chaos and the bloody confusion of Balkan life is a union of all the peoples of the peninsula in a single economic and political entity, on the basis of national autonomy of the constituent parts."

Trotsky continued:

"State unity of the Balkan Peninsula can be achieved in two ways: either from above, by expanding one Balkan state, whichever proves strongest, at the expense of the weaker ones--this is the road of extermination and oppression of weak nations ... or from below, through the people themselves coming together--this is the road of revolution..." [10]

Upon reading these words one is struck by how deeply mired our civilization remains in the unresolved problems of the 20th century. The great question is whether the working class will learn the lessons of the past, so that the problems bequeathed by this century can be finally resolved in the one that we are about to enter.

Yours sincerely,
David North

Notes

1. Cited in Merle Curti *The Growth of American Thought* (New Brunswick: 1991), p. 657.
 2. Ibid., p. 661.
 3. Department of State Bulletin, January 1, 1962
 4. *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C., 1995), pp. 106-07.
 5. Cited in David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (New York: 1995), p. 343.
 6. Ibid., p. 343.
 7. Ibid., p. 344.
 8. "Dismantling Yugoslavia; Colonizing Bosnia," *Covert Action*, No. 56, Spring 1996.
 9. *The Balkan Wars 1912-13* [New York: 1980], p. 39.
 - 10 Ibid., pp. 39-40.
- Full text of letter sent to the WSWs by P. Harris



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