

Cities blacked out, water supplies cut

US-NATO bombing targets entire Yugoslav population

Martin McLaughlin
26 May 1999

With the deliberate destruction of the electrical power and water system, the US-NATO air war against Yugoslavia has entered a qualitatively new stage. Gone is any pretense that the United States and its European allies are at war only with the government of President Slobodan Milosevic, and not with the people of Serbia.

It is difficult to convey the full dimensions of the tragedy which is now unfolding in Yugoslavia, and especially in Belgrade, a major European capital, a city of two million people, now thrown back to pre-industrial conditions by the US-NATO bombing. The reader must imagine what would be the conditions in Detroit, Hamburg, Osaka or Sydney without electrical power, without water, without gasoline or other fuel, without medicine in the hospitals or fresh food in the grocery stores.

The people of the United States, Canada and Western Europe have very little conception of the extent and impact of the bombing which has been carried out over the last two months against Serbia. This lack of understanding is in part the product of deliberate media concealment: the more ferocious the air bombardment, the more brazen the targeting of civilians and the economic infrastructure, the less time it is given on the television news.

The US-NATO onslaught against Yugoslavia must be recorded as one of the great crimes of the twentieth century. An entire society, and a major European city, are being pounded into rubble. Overwhelming military force is being employed against a semi-defenseless opponent, with a ruthlessness and cynicism not seen on the European continent since Hitler's bombers struck Warsaw and Rotterdam.

The Pentagon and NATO planners are proceeding quite deliberately in the perpetration of what is, by any objective standard, an immense war crime. They are purposefully choking off the resources on which life depends in a modern industrialized society. Based on detailed assessments of bomb damage and the experience of similar bombing in Iraq, they know that, month by month, the number of deaths in Yugoslavia will mount from the thousands to the tens of thousands, and even higher.

The deaths will come overwhelmingly from the most vulnerable in Yugoslav society—the elderly, the sick, and above all, the children. They will die of illnesses and conditions which have been largely banished by modern public health and medicine—cholera, dehydration, diarrhea—or from the oldest killers of all, cold and

hunger. A half million children have died in Iraq from the long-term effects of the bombing during the Gulf War, which destroyed the country's modern infrastructure, and from the continuing US-enforced economic embargo. Now the same devastating price is to be extracted from Yugoslavia.

Last weekend the biggest air strikes of the two-month bombardment left much of Serbia without electrical power and running water, with the worst impact in Belgrade, Nis and Novi Sad, the three largest cities. NATO warplanes are systematically targeting the country's electrical power distribution system. Unlike previous attacks using "blackout bombs," specialized devices using graphite filings which short out the electrical system but leave the basic infrastructure intact, the bombing which began Saturday was with conventional explosives, bombs and missiles, which destroyed power generating stations and transmission towers.

Gravity-guided "dumb" bombs rained down on the Kolubara thermal power plant, 35 miles south of Belgrade, causing heavy damage. All five of the power transmission stations in Serbia were hit over the weekend with precision guided weapons, in a strike which NATO spokesmen said was a coordinated effort to shut down the country's electrical system for a matter of weeks.

Belgrade was without power for the longest period since the war began, with no electricity available for 48 hours, and only sporadic power since then. The water system was also affected, since the water pumps required to supply running water are electrically powered. On Monday the city of two million had water reserves of only 10 percent of the normal level, and only 30 percent of the people had running water for any period of time. Water was being delivered to Belgrade neighborhoods from reservoirs by tanker trucks.

NATO officials claimed that the halting of water supplies was an unintended side effect of the power outages. But deliberate attacks were made on water pumping facilities in at least one major town, Sremska Mitrovica in northwest Serbia, where 15 NATO bombs hit on Monday, and NATO warplanes returned the next day for a follow-up raid.

The conditions in Belgrade are nightmarish. Some of the city's hospitals continue to provide medical services such as emergency surgery and deliveries, with the help of emergency generators, and with hospital workers hauling water in open buckets and soft drink bottles. Many healthcare facilities have fared even worse.

At one clinic treating victims of cerebral palsy, children suffering epileptic seizures could not be hooked up to electronic monitors because of the blackout. Premature infants in neonatal care units had to be kept warm by hand, with nurses struggling to work without incubators or monitors.

At the Institute for Mother and Child Health Care in downtown Belgrade, the 24 hours without power destroyed all blood products which were stored in a freezer. A doctor said that the blood products had to be discarded because they could not be tested for contamination, since the testing instruments also required electrical power. The institute has twice been shaken by near-misses, once during the bombing of the nearby Chinese embassy.

For ordinary citizens of the capital city, starvation is a real threat, as well as thirst. Refrigerators and freezers have been shut off by the blackout, and the hotter weather of late spring means that food will spoil more rapidly. Milk and other perishables are already virtually unobtainable, and there are bread lines every day outside those bakeries which have contrived to stay open.

The deputy mayor of Belgrade, Milan Bozic, said that water shortages and outbreaks of disease could be only a matter of days. "I can see a small village surviving months or years in these conditions, but in such a big city—I simply cannot imagine it," Bozic said. Referring to the genocide in Cambodia two decades ago, he added: "This is not Phnom Penh. We cannot force-march everyone to the countryside."

US and NATO spokesmen openly declare that their purpose is to inflict pain on the civilian population. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported Tuesday, "senior allied military officials acknowledged that they also want to damage the quality of everyday life so that suffering citizens will start questioning the intransigence of their political leadership."

At one press conference, questions about the impact of the bombing on Yugoslav civilians were dismissed with the retort, "Compare that to the consequences suffered by the civilian population of Kosovo who have been driven from their homes and have neither shelter, heat, water or food."

In its own way, this argument clarifies why the demonization of the Serb population has been so essential. It has been necessary for the US government to equate the behavior of the Serbs with that of the Nazis so that they can be bombed like Germany was bombed in the Second World War. The fraudulent claims of "genocide" in Kosovo have been advanced in order to justify atrocities against the people of Yugoslavia.

Already the bombing raids have killed several thousand civilians, and likely a far larger number in the Yugoslav military. By many estimates, more people have been killed by NATO in two months of bombing than in 10 years of Albanian-Serb conflict in Kosovo. The figure for Yugoslav soldiers killed may actually be far higher.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, during a visit to Washington, told reporters at a breakfast that 5 percent of Serb "military assets" were being destroyed each week. If this applies to the 120,000-man army, it would mean 6,000 casualties a week, or nearly 50,000 since the war began. Even allowing for NATO boasting, such figures are by no means impossible. During the Persian Gulf War an aerial assault of much shorter duration is

believed to have killed at least 100,000 Iraqi soldiers.

Unlike the Gulf War, the bombing of Yugoslavia did not begin at the maximum level of intensity, but has rather built up gradually. Two factors have been essential to the escalation: the unexpected continued resistance of Yugoslavia to the NATO ultimatum, and the lack of a response to the bombing by American and European public opinion.

The media has played an essential role in the marketing of the war on Yugoslavia. No assertion of NATO and the Pentagon is too stupid, self-contradictory or brazenly false to be repeated by the American press. Orwellian language abounds. The death of innocent men, women and children from bombs and missiles launched by over a thousand warplanes are unintentional "collateral damage." Bakeries and water pumping stations blown to pieces by NATO's barrage are "dual-use facilities" because soldiers, like civilians, eat and drink. And, of course, deliberate terror bombing is a "humanitarian" war.

The willing self-censorship and bias of the American media has been supplemented by the suppression of reporting and commentary which is not under Pentagon control. The most notorious action was the bombing of the Serb government network RTS. Television and radio transmitters of both RTS and independent Serbian broadcasters continue to be hit by bombs and missiles. Last week Eutelsat, the European satellite consortium, voted to cut off satellite feeds from RTS, effectively blocking transmissions from Yugoslavia to other Balkan and European countries.

Two weeks ago, the Clinton administration hinted that it would move to shut off access to the Internet from Yugoslavia, only to back down in the face of protests. Serbian groups using the Internet to report on conditions inside the country—including groups politically opposed to Milosevic—now warn that the shutdown of electrical power may cut off their access to a world audience.

Like any criminal, NATO prefers to do its dirty work in the dark. Inevitably, however, the full dimensions of the bombing campaign will come to light, and the people of America and Europe will see what has been done in their name.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact