

Atrocity claims and the politics of propaganda

A second reply to a supporter of the Balkan war

David North
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The following letter by David North, the chairman of the WSWs Editorial Board, replies to a message sent by P. Harris, a supporter of the Balkan war. Mr. Harris's letter can be read in full by clicking here (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/harr-j25.shtml>)

This correspondence follows an earlier exchange, in April of this year, between North and Harris (see "Behind the war in the Balkans: A reply to a supporter of the US-NATO bombing of Serbia," <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/apr1999/dn-a08.shtml>).

Dear Mr. Harris:

Thank you for your letter of June 19. Given the fact that the *World Socialist Web Site* published in its edition of April 8 a detailed response to your criticism of our opposition to the US/NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, one could reasonably expect that you would answer the points that I made in that reply. Unfortunately, it seems that you have not used the last 10 weeks to prepare a principled answer. Ignoring my reply to your first letter, you simply launch another round of denunciations of the WSWs.

The cause of your anger is that the *World Socialist Web Site* still refuses to join in the imperialist press campaign over Serb atrocities that is being used to justify NATO's war against Yugoslavia. You are outraged that we do not accept uncritically, without factual substantiation, all the reports of massacres and rapes presented by government spokesmen and the media. You object to our use of the word "alleged"—which, by the way, is the standard qualifier used in legal proceedings until a case has been proven—in referring to crimes attributed to the Yugoslav government.

As anyone who has followed our analysis of the war knows very well, the *World Socialist Web Site* has never denied that Serb forces were guilty of atrocities against Kosovan Albanians. However, in opposing the US/NATO

propaganda campaign, we have repeatedly made the following critical points:

(1) Prior to the initiation of the bombing campaign on March 24, 1999, the total number of people killed in Kosovo, Albanian and Serb, was in the area of 2,000. These deaths occurred in the context of a civil war between the Yugoslav government and separatist guerrillas. However deplorable the tactics employed by the Yugoslav authorities, they were no more brutal than those developed and used by the United States, Britain, and France in their own counterinsurgency operations.

(2) The large-scale atrocities began after the US/NATO forces started bombing Yugoslavia. The causal link between the bombing and the subsequent atrocities is indisputable. The mayhem and killing that followed the launching of the bombing campaign was entirely foreseeable. Having chosen war as its preferred policy option, the United States bears immense responsibility for the tragedy that ensued.

(3) The reports of the American and West European media during the war grossly and irresponsibly exaggerated the actual scale of the killings inside Kosovo by Serb forces. The comparisons between Serbia and Nazi Germany, between the Kosovan civil war and the Holocaust, were based on a distortion of history and cover-up of the political context of the violence in Kosovo.

The WSWs does not, as you claim, "blindly" reject reports of Serb atrocities. We certainly do question the veracity of the reports that are generated by a media that has been caught in lies again and again. Only yesterday, the deaths of British soldiers in Kosovo were immediately attributed to Serbian mines. Later, it emerged that the cause of their deaths was an unexploded British-made cluster bomb.

The initial false report was in keeping with a policy followed throughout the war by US/NATO propagandists: Whenever remotely possible, place the blame for loss of human life on the Serbs. Given the modus operandi of Mr.

Jamie Shea, we needn't apologize for our skepticism toward US/NATO allegations. However, even if one accepts without reservation the pro-war media's reports of mass graves, it is clear that the number of Albanians murdered by Serb military or para-military forces is only a fraction of what was previously claimed by the media. While the media and high-ranking government officials—including President Clinton and Defense Secretary Cohen—inflamed public opinion by suggesting that the number of Albanians murdered was in the area of 100,000, if not higher, it would appear (based on the current media reports) that the number killed was closer to 10,000.

It is not difficult to anticipate your rejoinder: “You are simply quibbling over numbers. Ten thousand dead is a terrible human toll.” Indeed it is, but it was not sufficient—in the opinion of Clinton, Blair and other NATO leaders—to sustain broad public support for the massive aerial bombardment of Yugoslavia. For the public to accept the destruction wrought by US/NATO bombs, it had to be convinced that the war was undertaken to prevent another Holocaust. The fabrication of the death toll was an essential component of a propaganda campaign which sought to disorient public opinion, distort the background of the war, and conceal the real political aims and material interests underlying the decision to go to war against Yugoslavia.

Toward the conclusion of your letter, you attribute our opposition to the US/NATO war to a “totally schematic and inflexible analysis of current events,” rooted in a “version of class-based political-economic analysis, never leavened by any of Marx's humanism and common sense.” To the extent that one can make sense of this criticism, it is that we, unlike you, base our attitude to the war on an analysis of the class interests represented by the states that launched it. We would not challenge your right to reject this conscious class approach, but please do not make Marx an accomplice in your theoretical charlatany. The author of the *Communist Manifesto* insisted, if we remember correctly (though you evidently do not), that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” To remove from Marx's “humanism” this essential insight into the basic driving force of history is to portray the greatest revolutionary thinker in world history as a vulgar liberal—that is, as someone very much like yourself.

Your own position on the war exposes the practical consequences of the sort of non-class “humanism” that you espouse. While accusing the WSWWS of doing “a great

disservice to socialists” by opposing the war, you entrust the realization of socialism—which you define as “fundamental justice, equality, and freedom for all people, including Albanian”—to NATO. Predictably, this reactionary blending of “humanism” and imperialism finds its apotheosis in the bombing of Yugoslavia.

To be blunt, these positions are politically bankrupt. They express the outlook of a deeply cynical political and social milieu, of which you are a part, that has abandoned whatever socialist principles it once believed in.

What separates us politically, Mr. Harris, goes far beyond our different assessments of the scale of atrocities in Kosovo or even of the origins of the war. We proceed on the basis of entirely different historical perspectives. Unlike yourself, we assign to imperialism absolutely no progressive social and historical mission. We do not look to the Pentagon to provide answers to the problems of the Balkans or any other part of the world. Rather, the *World Socialist Web Site* adheres to the essential socialist precept that the fate of mankind depends upon the development of the political self-consciousness of the international working class and its capacity for independent political action. Or as Marx put it so succinctly, “The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” He saw no need to add, “And where that task cannot be immediately achieved, socialists are advised to turn for support to the military machine of the bourgeois state.”

Yours sincerely,
David North



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