

Eyewitness account of Yugoslavia after NATO bombardment: "People are preoccupied with day-to-day survival"

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Pavel Popovic works as a courier in central London. He went back to Yugoslavia in August for a month and a half to visit his relatives. The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed him on the situation facing the Serbian people in the aftermath of the US-led NATO bombardment.

What is the extent of the destruction of Serbia's infrastructure by NATO bombs and missiles?

It was very obvious. There was a lot of damage, because even NATO admitted that within two or three days they had run out of military targets. In order to inflict maximum destruction and force the government to surrender they had to go for non-military targets—hospitals, schools, railways and motorways. There could have been military personnel hiding in these buildings, but most often it wasn't the case.

I was very shocked on the news here in England to see my own village bombed. I lived there for 18 years before I went to study in Belgrade. There was never, ever any military infrastructure there. At first I thought there's something wrong, there's nothing there, it's just a mistake.

But when I went back home and talked to people they showed me the extent of the destruction. A few houses, a big crater in the ground and the majority of the bridges. These were never used by the military because they were already in Kosovo before the bombing started. NATO said it was to cut the supply routes, but it was really a justification to ruin the country and inflict so much damage that the civilian population would rebel against the Yugoslav government.

The largest facility to be hit was the Zastava car plant. One report says 6,000 workers lost their jobs as a result. What support do the unemployed and their

families receive?

First of all, I believe it was about 30,000 people, maybe even higher. The support from the government is an absolute minimum. Most of the people have to fend for themselves, but because they still have their roots in the villages they can grow things. That's how people in the towns survive this kind of hardship. They help each other. But there are 1 million refugees and the economy is shattered, so I doubt if they are getting anything much.

What was the scale of damage to industry?

I saw several of the smaller plants hit and some other buildings like hotels. I'm not sure if they were being used by the military, but as I said before lots of things went wrong with the war—intelligence, mismanagement of information. Anyway, NATO didn't care what they hit—they were trying to carpet-bomb the country. I saw a lot of destruction in Belgrade. Some buildings were connected to the government and military, but many weren't. There was difficulty travelling because of the destroyed bridges.

What about your own family?

They were affected, by fear, fear of relatives dying, others dying, how long the war would go on, and what would happen later. They could hear the planes flying above and the explosions.

What was the atmosphere like when you went back?

I got a strange feeling, actually. I thought people would hate me for living in a country that was so heavily involved in the war. But they didn't. And then I thought they would hate everyone in this country, but nothing like that. They said, "Look, we know it's just the government not the people." I was very pleasantly surprised.

But they were bitter that this could happen at the end of the twentieth century, that someone could be carpet-bombed for so long. And that it came from countries that many people in Yugoslavia thought were more democratic than us. They were shocked. Now they know it's not true. The democracy in Britain is not much different to the democracy in Yugoslavia. Events are stage-managed. People are manipulated.

Did the bombing surprise people?

I think 90 percent were shocked so-called Western democracies could do it. Just prior to the bombing, I phoned a few people and said, "Look, I'm sure there is going to be bombing, but don't worry. They have very precise munitions and will just b



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