

# Critique of Kosovo War urges European powers to unite against US

10 June 2000

Masters of the Universe? NATO's Balkan Crusade, *Edited by Tariq Ali, Verso, 2000, ISBN 1-85984-269-0, £15 (\$20 in US)*

It is one year since NATO forces entered Kosovo, following the US-led bombing of Yugoslavia begun on March 24, 1999. Politically speaking, one of the most striking aspects of the war was the key role played by former lefts, pacifists and liberals in its orchestration and implementation. In contrast to the onslaught against Iraq at the beginning of the 1990s, the war with Yugoslavia was, for the most part, waged by social democrats, Greens and other nominally left politicians, under the guise of humanitarian concern for the fate of the Kosovar Albanians.

*Masters of the Universe? NATO's Balkan Crusade* is a compilation of writings and speeches by a section of the left that dissented from this official position. It includes pieces by the noted playwright Harold Pinter, Alex Callincos of Britain's Socialist Workers Party and Noam Chomsky, the American professor of linguistics, anarchist and social critic.

Two of the contributors—Robin Blackburn and the book's editor Tariq Ali—were leading members of the International Marxist Group in the 1960s and early 70s, then the British affiliate of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. The United Secretariat headed up parties which had programmatically broken with Trotskyism in the early 1950s, while still claiming to represent the movement that Trotsky had founded in 1938.

The United Secretariat advanced the conception that the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR and its satellite “Communist” parties, the social democratic parties in the West, and the bourgeois national movements and regimes in the former colonies could all serve as vehicles for the socialist revolution, provided sufficient pressure was applied to push them to the left. In both theory and practice, this orientation repudiated the historical perspective upon which the Fourth International had been founded: the necessity for the building of a new revolutionary Marxist international in opposition to Stalinism, reformism and bourgeois nationalism.

*Masters of the Universe? NATO's Balkan Crusade* includes informative pieces on Balkan history, including *War: Building States from Nations*, by Susan L. Woodward, and *The Criminalisation of Albania* by Michel Chossudovsky. These point to the role of the Western powers in destabilising the Balkans as a means of expanding capitalist property relations into the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Several of the articles and speeches were written at the time of the bombing of Serbia and seek to highlight the hypocrisy of NATO's claim to be pursuing humanitarian aims. They illustrate

how the war against Yugoslavia was deliberately provoked—with US Secretary of State Madeline Albright playing the leading role by setting down conditions at the Rambouillet talks that were impossible for the Milosevic regime to meet.

But such articles are secondary to the main thrust of the collection. The purpose of the book is summed up by Tariq Ali as “a major intervention in the debate on global geo-political strategy after the Cold War.” Its central target audience is the political representatives and defenders of European imperialism. Its message is that the European powers must devise an independent strategic response to the political, military and economic ambitions of their major rival, the US.

The articles by Ali and Blackburn, in particular, make clear that the main objection to the war on the part of this section of ex-radicals was the fact that it was led by America. Their espoused opposition to imperialism is in essence a form of anti-Americanism.

Ali writes in his introduction that one year on, the NATO intervention is generally considered to be “a complete mess.” He continues: “Hence the muted triumphalism and a desire by its media-backers to forget the entire episode”. Ali and his co-thinkers use the debacle of the NATO occupation of Kosovo as an opportunity to call for Europe's capitalist powers to end their subordination to the US, and to advance an alternative economic and military strategy for doing so.

Ali notes the aggressive turn made by US imperialism following the collapse of the USSR and the antagonisms that this has engendered amongst Europe's ruling classes. “It is unlikely that the Germans, French, Italians and Greeks will be as easily dragged into another adventure” like Kosovo, he writes approvingly.

This type of superficial estimate of future developments underscores the theoretical vacuity of Ali's approach. A genuine opponent of imperialism would appraise the NATO war and its aftermath soberly, recognising the potential for a major clash between the Great Powers, and set out a socialist perspective for uniting the international working class against imperialism as a whole, whether of the American or European variety.

Not so Ali. Evincing his affinity for the European bourgeoisie, he accuses the US (with British support) of “bouncing” Europe into the war against Kosovo, as if the Germans, French, Italians, Greeks, Spanish, etc. were themselves victims, having been duped and misled by the Americans. This fantastical version of Great Power *realpolitik*, which conveniently ignores the no less rapacious designs of the European imperialists on the people and

resources of the Balkans, is contrived to support Ali's call for the European bourgeoisie to challenge the emerging "uni-polar world," i.e., American hegemony. Here Ali echoes a form of anti-Americanism that has become the rallying cry for elements within the ruling elite and sections of the media of Europe, some of which assume a "left" coloration, while others are overtly right wing.

Throughout the volume there are continued calls for Europe to develop its own relations with Russia, China and India as a counterweight to the US, as well as to devise a "Marshall Plan" for the Balkans. In his essay, entitled *NATO's Balkan Crusade*, Ali argues, "There are only two serious alternatives for this region: either a series of NATO protectorates imposed by war and bloody battles, leading to the re-militarisation of Europe and a new Cold War with Russia, or a serious attempt to create a new regional framework and to engage Russia in constructive negotiations on all outstanding issues."

Ali's assertion that there are only two "serious alternatives" for the Balkans—domination by the US or a settlement imposed by the European Union—sums up the orientation of this layer of former radicals. It is an unwitting admission of prostration before imperialism and the capitalist status quo. The possibility of an independent political movement of the working class and the development of socialist revolution in Europe does not even figure in Ali's calculations.

From such a premise, it naturally follows that one's range of action is ultimately limited to choosing one or another imperialist master. Ali and his co-thinkers choose Europe over America.

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Peter Gowan, in *The Euro-Atlantic Origins of NATO's attack on Yugoslavia*, makes even more explicit the extent to which this group of former radicals are offering their services as spokesmen for European imperialism. He presents a scenario of a "social liberal" Europe on the one side, and the US, champion of "global neo-mercantilism" on the other. Following the USSR's collapse, Europe's elite was for building a political entity "based on social-democratic, christian democratic/social liberal identity", he writes.

Such a scenario meant, "European political construction would be carried out under a banner which implicitly challenged the whole American capitalist social model". It was in order to thwart these plans, and prevent the "emergence of a unified West European political will" that the US pressured its European allies into the war, he claims.

This presentation does not withstand even superficial scrutiny. The 1990s, far from heralding a revival of "christian democratic/social liberal identity" on the continent, saw its final dismantling. In one European country after another, the bourgeoisie turned aggressively against the social reforms implemented in the post-World War II period, and attacked workers' wages and living standards. This has been accompanied by strenuous efforts to cut public spending, privatise the state sector and drive up productivity.

Far from being "pressured" into adopting these measures, European capital regards them as vital if it is to develop its competitiveness against the US. For the past several years, this capitalist offensive against the European working class has been

carried out in one country after another by governments headed by social democrats and ex-Stalinists.

The inclusion of a May Day 1999 speech by former German Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine underscores the political orientation of Ali's collection. In his remarks, Lafontaine made a direct appeal "to the European governments" to make clear to the US that "pushing the UN aside was a mistake". He called on the "governments of Europe to take a stand against" Russia's exclusion from negotiations with Yugoslavia, at US insistence.

In March 1999, Lafontaine resigned both his post in the Schroeder government and his chairmanship of the Social Democratic Party. He represents that section of the German and European bourgeoisie most concerned that US military hegemony within NATO, together with the undermining of Russia, threatens lasting American domination of the continent.

The prostration before imperialism evinced by Ali, Blackburn and their co-thinkers epitomises the evolution of an entire social and political milieu. During the 1960s, at a time of growing social unrest, major class conflicts and rising national liberation struggles, a layer within the middle class became radicalised. The United Secretariat became the political home of many of those who were inspired by these movements, but harbored a profound skepticism toward the revolutionary capacities of the working class. They looked, instead, for substitutes—in the Stalinist and labour bureaucracies or petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the repudiation of reformist policies by the old labour parties and trade unions in the West, and the rightward lurch of national regimes and national liberation movements in the ex-colonial countries, this skepticism has culminated in an explicit rejection of a socialist perspective and an open embrace of imperialism. The vast majority of former pacifists, liberals and left-radicals lent their moral support to NATO in its air war against Serbia. Ali and Blackburn oppose the war, but their opposition has a tactical, rather than principled, character. In essence, their criticism of the war echoes the grievances of sections of the European bourgeoisie who feel their imperialist aspirations are being trampled on by the Americans.



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