Behind the Milosevic trial: the US, Europe and the Balkan catastrophe

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Whatever one's opinion of formerYugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic—the *World Socialist Web Site* is decidedly not among the defenders of this former Stalinist apparatchik turned Serb nationalist and advocate of capitalist restoration—the events surrounding his capture and transfer to The Hague make a mockery of Western governments' claims to be defending democratic rights and the rule of law in the Balkans.

Not a few bourgeois commentators have acknowledged that the ex-head of state was essentially kidnapped, behind the back of Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica and in defiance of a ruling issued only hours earlier by the Yugoslav Constitutional Court suspending Milosevic's extradition order. He was turned over to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague as part of a sordid commercial deal worked out between the US and Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic: Washington would end its threat to boycott the impending "donors' conference" in Brussels and support an aid package of more than $1 billion to Belgrade in exchange for Milosevic's transfer to the ICTY.

The transparently corrupt character of this quid pro quo provoked concern among sections of the European bourgeoisie, who fear, with good reason, that the US-backed action will irreversibly discredit the Hague tribunal and expose it as an instrument of American policy in the Balkans. The Swiss daily *Le Temps* complained, "It is no exaggeration to say that the extradition of the former dictator was a business deal... Whoever the person involved—and especially if we do not like him—the law is the law, and this move was no more than an act of force at odds with principles usually upheld in the West."

Notwithstanding the outpouring of rhetoric about human rights and justice, the kidnapping of Milosevic is a further demonstration of contempt on the part of the major powers for the sovereignty of small countries and their disdain for the rights of elected governments, even, as in this case, governments they had a major hand in placing in power. The ICTY is assigned the job of providing a legal fig leaf for a return to colonial-style interventions by the imperialist powers against small nations.

The ICTY had already forfeited its pretence of impartiality when it issued its initial indictment of Milosevic for alleged war crimes at the height of the US-NATO air war against Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999. The issuance of this document, coming in the midst of growing public concern over NATO's attacks on civilian targets in Serbia, was, as the WSWS explained at the time, a political action in judicial guise. (See "The Milosevic indictment: legal document or political diatribe?", 1 June1999).

The notion that a trial arising from such circumstances can conform to generally accepted standards of fairness and due process is patently absurd. Whatever Milosevic's depredations against Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population, the impending proceedings before the Hague tribunal will have the character of a show trial.

Those orchestrating the process—the American and European governments that prosecuted the 1999 Balkan war and oversaw the dismantling of Yugoslavia that preceded it—have a vested interest in launching a fresh propaganda campaign to demonise Milosevic and portray him as an evil genius who bears sole responsibility for the disaster that has engulfed the region over the past decade.

This political aim is all the more pressing given the calamitous results of Western policies in the Balkans—the transformation of Bosnia into a communally divided military protectorate, the forced expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo at the hands of NATO's Albanian separatist allies in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and the outbreak of civil war in Macedonia—and the exposure of gross exaggerations and lies utilised by the West to manipulate public opinion before and during the US-NATO air war against Serbia.

The prosecution of Milosevic is riddled with contradictions. In the first place, the ICTY indictment ignores the role of the NATO air war in sparking the mass expulsion of Albanian Kosovars by Serb forces. It fails to take into account the role of the American CIA and European intelligence agencies in backing the KLA in the months leading up to the war, when the Albanian guerrillas launched a campaign of violence against Serb police combined with threats and scattered violence against Serb civilians in Kosovo.

There is no doubt that Milosevic pursued a chauvinist policy that involved violent attacks on ethnic Albanians, but Washington and the capitals of Europe pursued a policy of subversion and destabilization that made communal warfare all but inevitable.

According to press reports, the ICTY plans to expand its indictment against Milosevic to include alleged acts of genocide during the civil war in Bosnia. Yet the US and Europe made Milosevic a key guarantor of the 1995 Dayton Accord that ended that war and established United Nations control. If the Hague tribunal were guided by considerations of historical truth, logic and consistency, it would be obliged to name Western leaders such as then-President Clinton as accomplices to genocide after the fact.

How, moreover, is one to explain the double standard that pervades the West's avowed passion for human rights and the prosecution of war crimes? Washington was openly hostile to the prosecution of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet when the fascist general and mass murderer was under arrest in Britain and facing extradition to Spain.

It does not take great insight to connect this lack of enthusiasm with Washington's own role in toppling the democratically elected Allende regime, backing Pinochet's 1973 coup and supporting his ensuing reign of terror. Indeed, leading American figures who played key roles in the Chilean events, including former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, are currently being pursued by prosecutors in Belgium and Latin America in connection with the Chilean events. Not surprisingly, the Bush administration is not cooperating with these investigations.

No less a personage than former United Nations chief prosecutor Judge Richard Goldstone has said that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon should be tried as a war criminal for his role in the massacres of thousands

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of Palestinians. But who can doubt that Sharon will continue to be feted by the US and his regime supplied with advanced weaponry and billions of dollars?

If there were an objective application of international justice for crimes against humanity, Milosevic would stand fairly low on the list compared with the political representatives of the US and Europe, whose actions in Korea, Africa, Vietnam and elsewhere have led to the deaths of millions. To cite a contemporary example, the war against Iraq killed thousands, and hundreds of thousands more have died as a result of ongoing sanctions and bombing raids without historic precedent against a defeated country.

The US has done everything in its power to make sure that its politicians and soldiers enjoy carte blanche exemption from prosecution for war crimes. The US has opposed the setting up of a broader international criminal court, which was agreed by 35 states three years ago, but needs the endorsement of 60 governments before it is established. In 1984, the Reagan administration repudiated the jurisdiction of an earlier International Court of Justice after it found that the mining of Nicaraguan harbours by Washington was a violation of international law.

Far from seeking historical truth, the Milosevic trial will be used to divert international public opinion from the critical role played by the imperialist powers in the tragedy that has befallen the Balkans. In all of the media commentary, none of the fundamental issues relating to the history of the Balkans are broached. This is no accident. Washington, in particular, counts on the general ignorance of the population concerning the origins of the Balkan catastrophe to give it a relatively free hand in pursuing its predatory policies in the region.

Yugoslavia as it emerged from World War Two was the product of a popular movement against the Nazi occupation and Serbian royalist forces. The partisan insurgency was led by Josip Broz (Tito) and the Yugoslav Communist Party. Tito established a delicately balanced federation of disparate ethnic groups and regions. Under the specific historical circumstances provided by the Cold War, the Tito regime was able for a number of years to manoeuvre between the US and the Soviet Union, while maintaining a unified federation based on constitutional guarantees to the various ethnic components—Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Albanian Kosovars, etc.

The origins of the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts of the past decade lie in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the impact of policies dictated by the Western powers and imposed through International Monetary Fund and World Bank structural adjustment programmes. The aim of the West was to dismantle the state-run economy and restore the unfettered economic domination of international capital over Yugoslavia.

Pressure from the West contributed to soaring inflation and huge job losses in the late 1980s and early 1990s, conditions which sparked strikes and other mass protests by the Yugoslav working class. Seeking to divert the class struggle, ex-Stalinist bureaucrats such as Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia promoted nationalist sentiments, while vying for support from Western governments. Milosevic was initially a protégé of the West and a supporter of its capitalist market policies.

Germany, following its reunification in 1991, decided its interests in the Balkans could best be furthered by promoting the secession of relatively prosperous Slovenia from Yugoslavia, followed by the secession of Croatia. The US, initially opposed to the break-up of Yugoslavia, swung around and quickly became the chief Western protagonist of Bosnian independence.

Historians with knowledge of Balkan and Yugoslav history warned that the precipitous dismantling of Yugoslavia could only lead to an eruption of communal warfare. The secession of Croatia and Bosnia, for example, suddenly deprived ethnic minorities within these regions of the constitutional protections they had enjoyed under the federation. Nationalist politicians such as Milosevic in Serbia, Tudjman in Croatia and Alija Izetbegovic in Bosnia exploited popular fears to advance their respective agendas. In terms of “ethnic cleansing” and other forms of terror against minority populations, there was little to distinguish between the three nationalist leaders.

Support for the dismantling of Yugoslavia led the West, above all the US, into conflict with Milosevic. Washington concluded that the Serbian ruling elite had the greatest interest in preserving a unitary state in which it played the dominant role. As so often in the past, e.g., Noriega in Panama, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, a one-time political asset of US imperialism, in this case, Milosevic, found himself under the American gun.

US covert support for the KLA and its open embrace of the Albanian nationalist force on the eve of the US-NATO war were part and parcel of its anti-Serb policy. The ICTY indictment of Milosevic was an extension of this same aggressive policy.

NATO attempted to justify its 76-day bombing campaign as a humanitarian war to halt genocide against the Albanian Kosovars. Milosevic was dubbed the “Serbian Hitler”.

The claim that Milosevic is a modern-day Hitler is a combination of gross exaggeration and cynicism. In the first instance, Milosevic is a bourgeois leader of a small and economically weak nation, not an imperialist power like Nazi Germany. In the second place, there is no evidence that he pursued a policy of mass liquidation, nor does the level of civilian deaths in Kosovo in any way approach the atrocities associated with the Nazi Holocaust.

Since the end of the US-NATO war, the ICTY has admitted that the final number of bodies uncovered in the Kosovo conflict will probably be “less than 10,000”. As of today, nowhere near that number of bodies has been found.

Milosevic will be the first former head of state to be tried before an international criminal court. This is being hailed as the dawn of a new era in which war criminals cannot hide behind their official posts. To accept such claims would be politically naïve in the extreme.

After all the crimes they have committed, the notion that international justice can be entrusted to the US or European ruling classes, or the international bodies they control, is ludicrous. Milosevic may for political reasons be deemed worthy of prosecution, but such measures will not be applied either to the imperialist leaders or their favoured stooges.

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