

The New York Times on the Milosevic trial: a triumph of cynicism

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16 February 2002

The *New York Times* published an editorial on February 11 hailing the opening of the war crimes trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic as a “triumph for the civilized world.” The column was the latest example of a species of commentary that has come to characterize the *Times*’ editorial page.

The piece adopts a moralistic and superior tone even as it whitewashes the predatory policies of American imperialism and the newspaper’s own complicity. It is a mixture of ignorance and deliberate falsification.

The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for Slobodan Milosevic or his nationalist policies, nor do we excuse or minimize the depredations of his regime against ethnic minorities in the former Yugoslavia. A political opportunist devoid of principles, Milosevic played the communalist card and stoked up Serb chauvinism to facilitate his political rise when the Yugoslav state was disintegrating in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He was incapable of mounting a struggle against the ruinous intervention of the Western powers, or addressing the growth of unemployment and poverty within Yugoslavia, and instead used Serb nationalism to obscure the bankruptcy of his own regime.

In his political program and repressive methods, he was in essence no different than the various nationalist politicians with whom the US and NATO allied themselves, including Franjo Tudjman in Croatia and Alijah Izetbegovic in Bosnia, all of whom whipped up communalist hatreds and carried out violent attacks on minorities within their own territories.

Our political opposition to Milosevic did not oblige us to support the 78-day air war carried out by the US and NATO against Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, a brutal action that was packaged by the US and the Western media as a humanitarian crusade against ethnic cleansing. We emphatically opposed that war. Similarly, we are not obliged to endorse the political aftermath of the war—the judicial farce that is presently unfolding in The Hague.

Virtually every sentence in the February 11 *New York Times* editorial contains a falsehood; some contain two or three. The piece begins by declaring that the Milosevic tribunal is the “most important war crimes trial in Europe since Nuremberg.” This equation of the Milosevic trial with Nuremberg, reiterated further on in the editorial, is a gross historical distortion. We will return to this question.

In the same opening paragraph the *Times* declares: “His [Milosevic’s] trial is a triumph for the civilized world, which has created a court capable of condemning the most heinous crimes with appropriate gravity and fairness.”

As a rule of thumb, the more flowery and high-flown the language (“a triumph for the civilized world”), the more sordid the economic and political aims being concealed by the *Times*’ editorial writers.

In fact, the Hague tribunal is a mockery of justice. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) indicted Milosevic for war crimes in May 1999, at the height of the US-led bombing of Serbia. The timing of the indictment was not accidental. It was calculated to bolster support for the war, both within the US and internationally, and

intimidate growing opposition at a point when the US was seriously considering launching a ground invasion.

A series of deadly assaults by the US and NATO on Yugoslav civilians had drawn worldwide attention, as had the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. There was growing revulsion against the destruction of Serbia’s infrastructure, including refineries, water purification systems, bridges, railway lines, schools and hospitals, which was causing immense suffering. A new and convincing justification for the carnage was necessary. Milosevic had been demonized for months. The indictment, however, raised the ante—now he was an officially certified war criminal.

The original indictment—notwithstanding the claims of genocide and Western estimates of hundreds of thousands of Albanian Kosovar victims—charged Milosevic with responsibility for the deaths of 340 civilians. It virtually ignored the role of the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and its backers in Washington in fomenting civil war in the province, as well as the part played by the NATO bombing in provoking the mass exodus of Kosovars and inflaming ethnic tensions on every side.

In its February 11 editorial, the *Times* discreetly avoids the route by which Milosevic reached The Hague, i.e., his illegal abduction—a kidnapping agreed to by the present Serb government in exchange for US cash. Kidnapping and bribery—truly, a triumph for civilization.

Once Milosevic was safely under lock and key, the tribunal, aware of the weakness of the original charges, changed the indictment and piled on accusations of genocide in connection with the 1992-95 civil war in Bosnia.

Britain’s *Financial Times*, in a February 12 editorial generally sympathetic to the court, was obliged to acknowledge: “The prosecutors’ biggest challenge is establishing the chain of command that could link Mr. Milosevic to individual atrocities. If they fail to prove that as Serbia’s leader he was responsible for what was done in Serbia’s name, much of their case will collapse.” The *Financial Times*’ editorial went on to admit, “There is more than a whiff of victor’s justice about the proceeding.”

The *New York Times* editors make no such concessions to the facts of the case. Having given the tribunal their unqualified imprimatur, they go on to give a potted and dishonest account of the Yugoslav civil conflicts of the 1990s. They write: “Mr. Milosevic started four wars—Slovenia was the site of the first—which killed 200,000 people, and drove 3.5 million from their homes.” Here the *Times* exemplifies the American media as a whole: insofar as it handles (or mishandles) historical questions, it does so with the presumption that every one of its readers is either grossly uninformed or an amnesiac.

Contrary to the *Times*, the political responsibility for the eruption of the civil wars and the catastrophe that befell the former Yugoslavia rests first and foremost with the Western powers, Germany and the US in particular, which made the decision to organize the carve-up of the country in the early 1990s. The German government took the initiative, actively supporting secessionist and chauvinist movements and pressuring the European Community in December 1991 to recognize Slovenia and

Croatia. The US, meanwhile, was channeling funds to right-wing parties promoting ethnic chauvinism and separatism.

The Germans, followed by the Americans, supported the forces engineering the secession of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia without any preparation or political consultation with the general population. They did this despite warnings from a number of quarters that the secessionist acts would provoke violent conflicts between ethnic groups that suddenly found themselves deprived of protections they had previously enjoyed under the federal Yugoslav constitution.

Having falsified the historical context of the Yugoslav civil wars, the *Times* turns to Milosevic's personal biography in a similarly one-sided and slanted manner: "A longtime Communist functionary, he reinvented himself as a nationalist, and rose to power in Yugoslavia selling the ancient dream of a Greater Serbia." This presentation ignores the fact that Milosevic was a one-time ally of Washington, having emerged as a champion of pro-capitalist market reforms within the Serb leadership in the late 1980s.

Milosevic cooperated with the International Monetary Fund at the same time the latter was destabilizing Yugoslavia through the imposition of austerity measures and sweeping privatizations. These measures led to the growth of mass unemployment and the impoverishment of wide layers of the population—and an inevitable intensification of social and ethnic tensions. The rapid economic decline, under conditions in which the Yugoslav Communist Party had over the course of decades seriously discredited socialism, made the population vulnerable to nationalist demagogues.

The *Times* editorial continues: "He [Milosevic] artfully used propaganda and fear to keep Serbs in a nationalist frenzy through war after disastrous war. It was a cynical strategy to maintain his support among Serbs and divert public attention from his corruption and mismanagement."

These sentences contain a striking irony, to which the *Times* is evidently blinded by its enthusiasm for the US war against Afghanistan. If the word "Americans" is substituted for "Serbs," the passage adeptly describes the present policy of the Bush administration. Mired in the Enron crisis and bereft of any policy to address growing unemployment and social distress, it seeks to escape the consequences of mounting internal contradictions by keeping the country in a war frenzy, as it prepare future military adventures, most immediately against Iraq.

There is another aspect of Washington's past relations with Milosevic that the *Times* conveniently omits—the fact that the Clinton administration promoted Milosevic *after* the Bosnian war for which the former Yugoslav president is now being tried for crimes against humanity. The Serb leader was a central figure in the Dayton Accords, dictated by the US in 1995, which ended the Bosnian conflict. Then Milosevic was hailed as "the guarantor of peace in the Balkans." The *Times*, as late as September 1996, noted that US officials' "praise for Mr. Milosevic underscored the extent to which the United States has tried to transform the image of the Serbian leader from that of a potentially indictable war criminal into that of a peacemaker."

If Milosevic is guilty of genocide in Bosnia, then Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright and Richard Holbrooke, among others, are to be condemned as accomplices in mass murder.

In the end, Washington targeted Milosevic not on account of his "heinous crimes," but because—like other former allies and "assets": Noriega in Panama, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, bin Laden and the Taliban in Afghanistan—he was determined by US policy makers to have outlived his usefulness. The US ruling elite came to consider Serbia under Milosevic an impediment to American domination of the Balkans, a strategic part of the Eurasian continent within striking distance of Russia, the former Soviet republics, the Middle East and the Caspian Sea—regions rich in oil, gas and other critical natural resources. This helps explain the US decision to finance and otherwise support the Kosovo Liberation Army, a

thoroughly disreputable outfit with well-known ties to criminal elements and drug runners in Albania.

Further on, the *Times* editorial returns to the Nazi-Milosevic parallel: "Moreover, as with the Nazis, Belgrade's wars were not just an assortment of crimes but the fulfillment of a systematic plan to create a Greater Serbia."

The comparison of Hitler's regime to the Serb government is false on many counts, two above all. First, Nazi Germany was an imperialist power—economically, the strongest industrial power in Europe—with vast interests all over the world. Under Hitler, Germany embarked on a drive for world conquest. Yugoslavia is a small and relatively backward country, with virtually no economic holdings outside its borders.

Second, it is historically false and politically disorienting to equate the level of violence and destruction, as bloody as it was, presided over by the Serb regime with Hitler's "Final Solution." There is a vast and qualitative difference in scale. The Nazis slaughtered millions of innocent civilians. Moreover, their victims were not simply casualties of war or civil war, but rather the victims of an organized and systematic effort to exterminate entire classes and races of people.

The *Times* unwittingly points to the feebleness of its equation of Hitler with Milosevic when it writes of the Serb leadership's "driving out ... of other ethnicities." Leaving aside that all of the nationalist forces in the Yugoslav civil wars carried out atrocities in proportion to their means and abilities, the editorialists apparently forget that the Nazis did not "drive out" the Jews, but put them in death camps and killed them by the millions.

Any serious and objective consideration of war crimes under contemporary conditions would have to begin with an examination of the record of the greatest source of violence in the world at present: the US government, the American military and the CIA. The US war machine is responsible for far more deaths in a series of wars over the past dozen years in the Middle East, the Balkans and Afghanistan than the Serb regime in all the civil conflicts of the 1990s. And its worldwide belligerence ominously raises the threat of greater atrocities to come.

If the Nuremberg trials are to be raised, it should be recalled that the first charge leveled against the Hitler regime was "crimes against peace." The prosecution presented evidence that Nazi Germany adopted a plan for military conquest and systematically carried it out. One could present a compelling case that the US planned and prepared all the wars in which it has been involved over the past decade or so, including the present conflict in Afghanistan. Its role in inciting the war against Serbia in 1999 is particularly well documented.

Having reached the decision to go war, the Clinton administration presented Milosevic at the Rambouillet negotiations in February 1999 "an offer he couldn't accept." Contrary to the claims of the Western powers that they were simply insisting on the autonomy of Kosovo, guaranteed by the operations of a peace-keeping force, Appendix B of the "Status of Multi-National Military Implementation Force" provision of the US-drafted "peace" plan would have granted NATO freedom of movement "throughout all Yugoslavia," i.e., Serbia and Montenegro as well as Kosovo.

If the Yugoslav government had signed the accord, it would have surrendered all claims to sovereignty over its own territory. The *Berliner Zeitung*, the German newspaper, commented, "This passage sounds like a surrender treaty following a war that was lost ... The fact that Yugoslav President Milosevic did not want to sign such a paper is understandable." When he refused, the US and its allies had a pretext for war. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger admitted this truth, writing: "Rambouillet was not a negotiation—but an ultimatum."

One final point. The February 11 editorial on the Milosevic trial appears in a newspaper that is enthusiastically supporting the war in Afghanistan, at a time when evidence is emerging of US military brutality (the bombing

of villages, the beating and killing of civilians) and Washington is openly flouting the Geneva Convention, refusing to categorize its captives as prisoners of war and keeping them locked in cages.

To date, the Hague Tribunal has produced no evidence directly linking Milosevic to specific atrocities in Bosnia, Croatia or Kosovo. Donald Rumsfeld, however, publicly and openly encouraged the killing of Taliban forces immediately preceding the massacre of hundreds of captured troops at the prison fortress near Mazar-i-Sharif. George W. Bush, it is widely reported, has a mini-war-room where he personally selects bombing targets, some of which have undoubtedly involved civilian deaths.

While the *Times* hails the Milosevic tribunal as the zenith of civilization, it fails to mention that the Bush administration has refused to support the establishment of a permanent International Criminal Court. Indeed, when Bush's father was vice president, the US repudiated the World Court after the Court found that the mining of Nicaraguan harbors by the CIA was a violation of international law. This remains the position of the US government, which refuses to accept the jurisdiction of any international body over its actions.



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