

Correspondence on the failure of nationalism in Yugoslavia

9 February 2004

Regarding your article, "Milosevic trial sets precedent: US granted right to censor evidence" (31 December 2003):

I would be very grateful to Paul Mitchell if he could list the human rights abuses by Serbia that the USA exploited as a pretext for yet another proxy war. I was born in 1949 and all my life the USA has been at war. Do you [portray] Izetbegovic to be a perfect democrat, as does Catherine Samary, an expert-ignorant and journalist-actionaire of *le monde-diplomatique*?

What I cannot figure out is why do the Trotskyists hate Yugoslavia? We stood against Stalin, didn't we? All alone! And still all alone Milosevic stands against American nazi imperialism!

Best regards

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The United States government and its allies in NATO claimed they bombed Yugoslavia in 1999 to prevent human right abuses. Politicians and officials exaggerated figures of Serbian atrocities against ethnic Albanians and compared the Kosovo civil war to the Nazi Holocaust.

US Defence Secretary William Cohen told *CBS News* in May 1999 that 100,000 men were missing, and "may have been murdered" and David Scheffer, US war crimes envoy claimed that more than 225,000 ethnic Albanian men were missing.

No sooner had the war finished then these lies began to unravel. A press spokesman at The Hague war crimes tribunal, Paul Risley, told reporters, "The final number of bodies uncovered will be less than 10,000 and probably more accurately determined as between two and three thousand."

There are many articles on the *World Socialist Web Site* about the lies put out by Western governments to justify their intervention in Yugoslavia. You will not find one that suggests "Trotskyists hate Yugoslavia," as your email claims. The Marxist movement does not analyse phenomenon in moralistic terms like hatred. It has always addressed the terrible legacy of capitalism and Stalinism scientifically and historically in order to provide the peoples of Yugoslavia and the Balkans with a perspective to overcome it.

Yugoslavia broke with Stalin in 1948, but its leadership never broke with the nationalist perspective of Stalinism.

Despite the conflicts between Tito and Stalin, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) still upheld the anti-Marxist and anti-internationalist perspective of national socialism that constituted Stalin's theory of building "socialism in one country." This theory was in direct opposition to the perspective of a Socialist Federation of the Balkans that was formulated by Marxists in the nineteenth

century and developed by Leon Trotsky.

Svetozar Markovic, the founder of the Serbian socialist movement, developed the concept of a socialist federation of the Balkans in the 1870s. The first congress of Balkan Social Democratic parties in 1910 called for a Balkan federation "to free ourselves from particularism and narrowness; to abolish frontiers that divide peoples who are in part identical in language and culture, in part economically bound together; finally to sweep away forms of foreign domination both direct and indirect that deprive the people of their right to determine their destiny for themselves."

In his theory of Permanent Revolution, Trotsky insisted that in countries with a belated bourgeois development only the working class could bring about democracy and national emancipation. Trotsky elaborated this perspective for the Balkans saying, "The only way out of the national and state chaos and bloody confusion of Balkan life is a union of all the peoples of the peninsula in a single economic and political entity, on the basis of national autonomy of the constituent parts. Only within the framework of a single Balkan state can the Serbs of Macedonia, the Sandjak, Serbia and Montenegro be united in a single national-cultural community, enjoying at the same time the advantages of a Balkan common market. Only the united Balkan peoples can give a real rebuff to the shameless pretensions of Tsarism and European imperialism."

Stalin and his faction attacked this perspective by claiming that nationalism in the Balkans was inherently revolutionary because it rested upon the peasantry. They shifted the CPY from its earlier proletarian internationalist position towards one that encouraged national and ethnic separatist movements and in the process deposed the entire CPY leadership in 1928.

Tito rose to power in the CPY and came to lead the resistance to Nazi occupation. However, he came into conflict with the proposals to install a popular front government in Yugoslavia as part of the redivision of the world agreed between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin in 1944. With the CPY-led partisans enjoying mass support, the bourgeois representatives resigned, and in November 1945 the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was proclaimed.

Tito started negotiations on a Balkan Federation with Bulgaria and supported a revolutionary uprising in Greece, but this perspective was soon abandoned under pressure from Moscow in favour of pan-Yugoslav nationalism. The prospect that backward Yugoslavia could pursue a self-contained socialist development in

a divided Balkan region was impossible from the start, as the Trotskyist movement recognised. It posed the question, “The alternatives facing Yugoslavia, let alone the Tito regime, are to capitulate either to Washington or to the Kremlin—or to strike out on an independent road. This road can be only that of an Independent Workers and Peasant Socialist Yugoslavia, as the first step towards a Socialist Federation of the Balkan Nations. It can be achieved only through an appeal to and unity with the international working class.”

This question and the analysis made by the Trotskyist movement can be found in *The Heritage We Defend—A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International* by David North.

Faced with growing economic problems and increasing threats from Moscow, the Tito leadership at first tried to accommodate itself to imperialism, and later to manoeuvre between the two superpowers. In 1950 Tito’s government supported US imperialism in the Korean War and also supported Moscow’s suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956.

When Tito died the bureaucracy increasingly turned to free market policies with Slobodan Milosevic, a protégé of the West, setting up the Milosevic Commission in 1987 to justify the introduction of IMF “structural adjustment” programmes. The austerity measures sparked off strikes and other mass protests by the Yugoslav working class. Seeking to divert the class struggle, ex-Stalinist bureaucrats such as Milosevic, Tudjman in Croatia and Izetbegovic in Bosnia promoted nationalist sentiments, while seeking support from Western governments. Despite his elevation to guarantor of the Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian conflict, Milosevic came into conflict with the US. Washington had concluded that the dissolution of Yugoslavia could not proceed whilst the Serbian ruling elite strove to preserve a unitary state in which it played the dominant role.

This brings us to your criticism of Katharine Samary, a supporter and election candidate for the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League). The origins of the LCR lie in a split in the Fourth International in 1953, a few years after Tito split with Stalin. Michel Pablo was a leader of the Fourth International in the late 1940s and early 1950s who, under the difficult circumstances facing the Marxist movement at the time, developed the theory that Trotskyism could never win the leadership of the working class and could only act as advisers and “left” critics of the existing social democratic, Stalinist and petty bourgeois nationalist organisations. The dissolution of the Trotskyist movement was prevented by the intervention of James P. Cannon and the American Socialist Workers Party and the publication of the “Open Letter” opposing Pablo in November 1953, which led to the establishment of the International Committee that today publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The LCR and its co-thinkers in the United Secretariat have followed Pablo’s liquidationist and demoralised course for half a century and Samary is no exception. In 1992, just as Yugoslavia descended into civil war the United Secretariat magazine proclaimed, “The wretched people of Bosnia await their relief from the troops of the United Nations.”

In her book *Yugoslavia Remembered* published in 1995 Samary blamed the dissolution of Yugoslavia on its ethnic differences

saying, “The creation of a Yugoslav state should have brought an end to the rivalry between the communities but the religious, cultural and linguistic differences were too great to maintain peace.”

Rather than identifying the failure to establish a socialist federation as the main lesson to be learnt from the destruction of Yugoslavia Samary concluded, “the main lesson here is that no serious alternative politics in this region can avoid explicit support for the right of self determination for all the peoples of former Yugoslavia.”

During the Kosovo civil war, Samary and other LCR members sent a letter to *Le Monde* declaring, “Stop the bombings, self determination for Kosova!” It complained that “not one of the governments which have supported the NATO air strikes are willing to wage war against the Serb regime to impose independence for Kosova” and argued for the creation of “a multinational police force (including Serbs and Albanians) within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which would oversee the application of a transitional agreement.”

In an interview during the Kosovo crisis with the International Socialist Group in Britain led by Alan Thornett, Samary said, “It is impossible to present any kind of coherent and progressive ‘solution’ at the moment. Every day brings fresh evidence of an uncontrolled dynamic which is degrading the conditions for progressive struggles. So we should busy ourselves with the urgent solidarity tasks, and maintain our critical spirit in the face of all proposals for ‘action’ which actually make the disaster worse. And, at the back of our minds, we should continue working on a number of long-term questions which are essential to a solution to the whole Yugoslav crisis.”

Since the civil war Bosnia and Kosovo, as the *World Socialist Web Site* foresaw, have become ethnically pure statelets run as Western protectorates and subject to local mafias. Learning nothing, Samary merely complained to delegates at last year’s European Social Forum that the Balkans were subject once again to the same “structural adjustment programs” previously imposed by the IMF.

However one cannot counterpoise to Samary’s support for Bosnian and Kosovar separatism the rosy picture you paint of little Yugoslavia standing all alone against Stalin, still less Serbia (or even Milosevic) standing against US imperialism. The future of the peoples of what was Yugoslavia depends on the struggle for the socialist federation of the Balkans in unity with the working class of Europe and throughout the world.

Sincerely,
Paul Mitchell



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