

Media lies and hypocrisy in wake of Milosevic's death

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13 March 2006

The death of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in his jail cell at the Hague on Saturday has unleashed a torrent of historical distortions and outright lies that echo the propaganda campaign waged more than seven years ago to justify the US-NATO war against the country.

Officials with the UN war crimes tribunal reported that Milosevic died from a massive heart attack, but indicated a determination of whether it was from natural causes would have to await a toxicology report.

Chief UN war crimes prosecutor Carla del Ponte suggested that the former Yugoslav president may have committed suicide in order to avoid an expected guilty verdict and a life prison sentence. Milosevic's lawyer, however, reported that his client had written a letter to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov just a day before he died pleading for help and charging that his jailers were giving him harmful drugs in an attempt to silence him.

According to Dutch public television, a blood sample taken from Milosevic last month showed traces of a powerful drug used to treat leprosy which can neutralize other drugs the former Yugoslav leader was taking for high blood pressure and heart disease.

Milosevic's assassination cannot be ruled out. In any case, there is no question that the UN tribunal, and behind it Washington, bear full responsibility for his death. It was well known that Milosevic was suffering from serious heart problems, yet last month the court's chief judge denied his request that he be allowed to receive treatment in Russia before resuming the trial.

It is also clear that the trial—universally promoted by Western governments and media as “the most important since Nuremberg”—had turned into a political embarrassment, producing no real proof of Milosevic's direct responsibility for the terrible crimes carried out during the civil wars that erupted in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It had threatened to become even more of a problem for those who organized it after Milosevic, at the end of February, asked the tribunal to issue a subpoena ordering former US President Bill Clinton to testify, apparently with the aim of showing that Washington itself was responsible for crimes against humanity in waging an illegal war against Yugoslavia and conducting a sustained bombing campaign against civilian targets.

Not a hint of the central role played by US imperialism and other Western powers in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the resulting carnage is to be found in the media's reaction to Milosevic's death. Instead, most of what has been written and stated on broadcast news consists in vilifying the former Yugoslav president

as a latter-day Hitler and lamenting the fact that he will not get the punishment he deserves.

Typical of the media coverage was the commentary provided by Christiane Amanpour, CNN's chief international correspondent, who declared Saturday: “From the moment he ascended to the pinnacle of power that is where he stayed and that is where he directed what went on in the Balkans—the worst crimes against humanity that Europe and the world had seen since World War II in Europe. This was something that went on almost unabated for the better part of the 1990s decade. He was known to his enemies and to his victims as the ‘Butcher of the Balkans.’”

Amanpour's statements are of the same character as the grotesquely exaggerated and unsubstantiated charges—made at the time by former State Department spokesman James Rubins, who happens to be her husband—of “genocide” against Kosovo Albanians, the pretext for the US war against Yugoslavia in 1999.

Similarly, Roger Cohen, the *New York Times'* former foreign editor, published a smug and cynical piece on the newspaper's front page Sunday portraying Milosevic as a man for whom “the truth was always a commodity to be manipulated in the single-minded pursuit of power.” As an example, he claims the Yugoslav leader had “reinvented” the Croats “as World War II fascists.”

Is this meant to suggest that the World War II mass murder of approximately 900,000 Serbs and Jews by the fascist Ustashe movement either didn't take place or is merely ancient history, or that the ideology of the Ustashe's political heirs played no role in the resurgence of Croatian national separatism? Cohen, despite his professed concern for the truth, doesn't bother to spell this out.

He goes on to characterize Milosevic as “a ruler of exceptional ruthlessness always ready to use force in a series of wars, from Croatia in 1991 to Kosovo in 1999.” He continued, “In effect Mr. Milosevic destroyed the delicate balance of the Yugoslavia he professed to defend and then expressed wonderment at its violent destruction.”

There is no doubt that Milosevic bore substantial responsibility for the political developments that facilitated the break-up of Yugoslavia. For the Western media, however, to portray him as the all-powerful figure who “directed what went on in the Balkans” or single handedly “destroyed the delicate balance of...Yugoslavia” is as false as it is patently self-serving.

What is entirely absent from this potted—“bad Milosevic”—version of recent Yugoslav history is the decisive role played by major imperialist powers. The US and Germany, in

particular, deliberately engineered the country's breakup, with a thorough indifference to the inevitable tragic consequences of their intervention.

It should be recalled that, like that other arch villain, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Milosevic was at one time viewed with favor by Washington, which, in the 1980s, supported him as he championed IMF-dictated "market reforms" and privatizations of nationalized industries. Like his counterparts in the other Yugoslav republics—Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, Alija Izetbegovic in Bosnia and Milan Kucan in Slovenia—Milosevic attempted to divert popular anger over the loss of jobs and the decimation of living standards that resulted from these policies by fomenting ethnic nationalism. He was not, however, the initiator of this process. Rather, like other reactionary Stalinist bureaucrats, he adapted himself to the centrifugal social forces that it unleashed.

With the collapse of the USSR and the reunification of Germany in 1991, the geopolitical position of Yugoslavia underwent a fundamental transformation. A resurgent German imperialism saw its interests in the Balkans—historically a German sphere of influence—best served through the promotion of secession by Slovenia—the most prosperous Yugoslav region—and then Croatia.

Washington, after first opposing Germany's intervention and the breakup of Yugoslavia, decided to get in on the act itself in order to further its goal of hegemony over the former Eastern bloc countries newly opened to capitalist exploitation. It became the chief sponsor of Bosnian independence, and later backed Albanian nationalism and the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army in the run-up to the 1999 US-NATO war.

All those who were knowledgeable of Yugoslav history and politics warned that this kind of piecemeal breakup of the Yugoslav federation would inevitably lead to civil war. The forging of new nation states based upon ethnic nationalism led inexorably to the practice that came to be known as "ethnic cleansing."

Washington, having thrown its support to Yugoslavia's dissolution, targeted Serbia, which defended the unitary state, as its enemy. The US opposed ethnic cleansing only when it was carried out by Serbs, while actively supporting it when Croatia, Bosnia and the Kosovo Albanians pursued identical aims through the same bloody methods.

While none of this excuses the crimes for which Milosevic is responsible, the fact remains that those who initiated his prosecution themselves bore direct responsibility for the bloodshed in the Balkans.

The International Criminal Tribunal at the Hague was in every sense an exercise in victors' justice. Milosevic was essentially kidnapped from Serbia through a corrupt deal that offered the regime in Belgrade that had replaced him economic aid in exchange for surrendering the ex-president.

The indictment of Milosevic was a political rather than a juridical document, issued in the midst of the US-NATO bombing campaign against Serbia. The tribunal itself was established and financed by the very same powers that launched the illegal war against Yugoslavia and carried out what are clearly war crimes—the bombing of civilian targets—during that intervention.

That the US has been a principal organizer of this trial exposes

the fraud of the entire enterprise. Washington itself accepts neither international law nor the jurisdiction of any international court over its own actions on the world arena. It has boycotted the International Criminal Court and strong-armed governments around the world into signing waivers exempting US officials and US troops from any liability for war crimes carried out against their peoples.

If, moreover, the trial of Milosevic were really about human rights and international justice, the obvious question is: Why has the UN not put George W. Bush in the dock?

There is no question that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and others in the current US administration are responsible for far greater war crimes and a far greater loss of innocent human life in waging an unprovoked and illegal war against Iraq than anything perpetrated by Milosevic.

The strongest charge that can be made against Milosevic—presented in Cohen's commentary in the *Times*—is that he resorted to war as a means of achieving political ends. How immensely greater the guilt, then, of the current US president? At least Milosevic could make the argument that his military actions were carried out against the dissolution of his own country, largely as the result of the machinations of powerful outside powers.

What is Bush's defense? Every pretext given for the invasion of Iraq has been exposed as a lie. In the end, one is left with the inescapable conclusion that the military force of the most powerful imperialist nation on the planet was unleashed against a small and already war-ravaged country in order to achieve the hegemony of US capitalism over a strategic region and its oil wealth. In other words, it was a criminal war of plunder.

That Milosevic was tried, while Bush was numbered among his prosecutors, only exposes the so-called international justice system as an instrument of imperialist foreign policy.



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