Mystery deepens over Milosevic's death

Sordid end to "international justice" charade

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The controversy surrounding the sudden death of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic in his jail cell at the Hague has only deepened with the autopsy performed in the Netherlands and the vague, self-serving statements made by officials of the UN war crimes tribunal.

After a Dutch toxicologist confirmed that the drug rifampicin—used to treat leprosy and tuberculosis—had been found in the 64-year-old Milosevic's blood, the UN authorities suggested he may have committed suicide or deliberately sought to injure his health in order to press his demand to receive treatment in Russia, where his wife and children now live.

Rifampicin counteracts the effects of medications Milosevic was taking to treat high blood pressure and heart disease. The autopsy concluded that the former Yugoslav president died of a heart attack.

Milosevic's lawyer insisted that his client did not self-administer the drug. "Mr. Milosevic said he never used any medicine against leprosy or tuberculosis," the lawyer, Zdenko Tomanovic, said Monday.

He also cited a letter Milosevic had sent to the Russian government the day before he was found dead in his cell, charging that he was being poisoned. "I am writing to you and asking you for help in protecting me from the criminal activities being perpetrated in the institution operating under the sign of the United Nations organization," the letter stated.

Tomanovic added, "One issue is whether Mr. Milosevic's claim that he was being poisoned is justified or not. The central issue is whether or not Mr. Milosevic had appropriate medical care."

This same charge was leveled against the UN war crimes tribunal by Serbian President Boris Tadic. "Undoubtedly, Milosevic had demanded a higher level of health care," he said. "That right should have been granted to all war crimes defendants."

Tadic, who was brought to power following demonstrations that toppled Milosevic in 2000, criticized the UN tribunal for its statements blaming Milosevic for his own death. "I think they are responsible for what happened," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced in Moscow that his government did not trust the autopsy on Milosevic commissioned by the UN and was sending its own team of doctors to the Hague to examine his body. He said Moscow was "disturbed" by the tribunal's decision to deny Milosevic's request to receive medical treatment in Russia. "It cannot fail to alarm us that Milosevic died shortly afterwards," he said.

Even the UN tribunal's chief prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, while insisting that the death was the result of either natural causes or suicide, questioned why his deteriorating health was not detected in the course of frequent medical examinations. "It is very strange, even if it is of course possible, that he should have died so suddenly without these medics having noticed a worsening of his condition," she said.

Suicide appears highly unlikely. Milosevic was in the middle of mounting his defense against the 66-count indictment charging him with war crimes and genocide. He was attempting to turn the tables on his accusers, using the trial as a platform for indicting the US and other Western powers for waging a one-sided war against Yugoslavia in 1999 and promoting the secessions that broke the country apart in the years that preceded the US-NATO war.

Milosevic was acutely aware that his defense was being broadcast live to Serbia, where his attack on the legitimacy of the tribunal enjoyed significant support. He also continued to play an active role politically, through the Serbian Socialist Party, which consulted with him regularly on its policies.

In the weeks before his death, he had asked the tribunal to subpoena Bill Clinton, who was the US president throughout the wars in the Balkans, and retired general Wesley Clark, who commanded the NATO forces that conducted a 78-day bombing campaign which claimed thousands of lives and wrecked much of the country's infrastructure. The former US president and the ex-general—both leading Democrats—are among the chief beneficiaries of Milosevic's sudden demise.

Amid the media's ubiquitous references to Milosevic as the "Butcher of the Balkans" and statements of regret about his death cheating "justice," there is barely a critical word to be found about the war launched by the Clinton administration almost exactly seven years ago. It was very much a liberals' war, with Clinton administration officials smugly proclaiming it the first military intervention launched for purely "humanitarian" purposes—a war to defend human rights and halt ethnic cleansing. These pretexts, used in a well-orchestrated media campaign to generate support for the US intervention, played much the same role in American propaganda as "weapons of mass destruction" would in the next major US military aggression.

The *Guardian* newspaper, the mouthpiece of British liberalism and a firm advocate of "humanitarian" imperialism, inadvertently let the cat of the bag in its lead editorial Monday on the former

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Yugoslav president's death:

"Milosevic's legacy will... be the opposite of what he would have wished for. His actions helped establish the idea of liberal intervention that emerged in the '90s after the first Iraq war and in response to the Rwandan massacres and the Balkan conflicts. Assuming a right to violently intervene in the affairs of Serbia's neighbours, he ended by provoking a series of interventions against Serbia that established the principle that neither sovereignty nor specious arguments about civil war can protect a leader or a regime guilty of crimes against its own and neighbouring peoples."

This "principle"—that major imperialist powers may ignore the national sovereignty of small nations in enforcing their interests by military might—was to have been given international legitimacy by the trial of Milosevic, which had already entered its fifth year by the time of his death. It was the first such prosecution of a sitting head of state, and was intended to establish the "right" of the imperialist powers to sit in judgment of those it deemed to be war criminals—almost invariably their former allies—while remaining fully immune from any such charges themselves.

In the event, the trial became a rather embarrassing sideshow, largely ignored by the media and then eclipsed by the US-orchestrated proceedings against that other former ally of Washington, Saddam Hussein. Prosecutors were unable to bring forward any probative evidence demonstrating that Milosevic had ordered the commission of war crimes.

The trial was based largely on a political indictment, designed to prove that the ex-president was singularly responsible for the carnage that took place with the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. This theory, of course, conveniently absolves the imperialist powers—especially Germany and the US—for the role they played in fostering the country's division along ethno-nationalist lines—a process they promoted with reckless indifference to the civil wars it was bound to provoke.

As for ethnic cleansing, Washington's moral indignation was highly selective. Kosovo, where wildly inflated claims of "genocide" supplied the *casus belli* for the war against Yugoslavia in 1999, was deemed by Washington to be a "success." Some in the Clinton administration compared their war favorably with that of Bush senior eight years earlier, claiming they would have produced a more successful outcome in Iraq.

In reality, from the standpoint of political stability, human rights or a halt to ethnic cleansing, the US intervention only facilitated a continuing catastrophe, with an estimated quarter of a million ethnic Serbs driven from their homes in Kosovo. As one UN report acknowledged, non-Albanian ethnic minorities in the province, still nominally a part of Serbia, have faced an "unrelenting tide of violence" since the American intervention brought to power a government based on the US-backed Kosovo Liberation Army and allied gangster elements.

The "human rights" war launched by the Clinton administration in 1999 and the "war against terrorism" initiated by the Bush administration four years later are not two different types of wars, but merely successive stages in the evolution of the same policy of utilizing US military power to assert the hegemony of American imperialism in geopolitically strategic regions of the globe.

If there was a politically important difference between these two episodes, it was the ability of the Clinton administration to exploit the credulity of petty-bourgeois liberals and lefts in building a constituency for a "moral" use of military force against a small and historically oppressed country.

In fact, the intervention in the Balkans, just as the war that was to follow against Iraq, was motivated by the drive of the US ruling elite to dominate world markets, control strategic raw materials and exploit new sources of cheap labor. In Yugoslavia, this translated into support for the dismantling of the multinational federation into constituent ethno-nationalist states and a war against Serbia, which opposed the carve-up for powerful historical reasons bound up with the dispersion of the Serbian population among Yugoslavia's different constituent republics.

While there is no doubt that Milosevic bore his share of responsibility for the bloodshed that erupted in the Balkans in the 1990s, in the end the political source of his guilt lay principally in his adaptation—like other Yugoslav ex-Stalinist bureaucrats turned nationalists—to the capitalist market policies of imperialism in the region and his use of nationalism to divert the opposition of working people to the economic devastation wrought by these policies.

He found himself on trial because his government's policies fell on the wrong side of US interests. Others who carried out similar policies have been embraced as people with whom Washington can do business.

A case in point is Agim Ceku, named this month as the prime minister of Kosovo. An indicted war criminal, Ceku was a general in the Croatian forces, which he led in the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Serbs from the Krajina region in 1995. He went on to become Washington's handpicked commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army, directing new atrocities, backed by NATO bombing, four years later.

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