

An exchange on the break-up of Yugoslavia

21 February 2008

Below we publish a letter from a reader on a recent WSWs article on the Serbian elections, followed by a reply by the article's author, Paul Mitchell.

The article, "Right-wing nationalist leads in Serbian presidential elections" (30 January 2008) was very good at taking a detailed look at the Serbian Presidential race. The only part you had wrong is that the West played no part in the break-up of Yugoslavia. They put an arms embargo on Croatia so they could not fight a war. This is more prevention of the break-up than a facilitation of it. Lastly, what do you mean by, "The situation urgently requires the building of a socialist internationalist party of the Fourth International based on the perspective of the United Socialist States of the Balkans"? This is taken from the end of the previously stated article.

DV

Dear David,

Thank you for your response. It is wrong to suggest that the arms embargo you say was placed on Croatia indicated an attempt by the Western powers to prevent the break-up of the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The policy pursued by both the United States and Europe in the 1990s was to actively encourage the secession of Yugoslavia's constituent republics and to target Serbia as the regional power considered to be the main obstacle to the assertion of the West's control over an area of geo-strategic interest.

The Balkans has been the arena for great power intrigue before and since the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand became the spark that set off the First World War. In the decades following the Second World War, the Yugoslav regime founded by Tito played a pivotal role in the conflict between the Soviet bloc and Western imperialism. At the end of the war Churchill and Stalin met to divide up spheres of influence in the Balkans and agreed Yugoslavia would be split "50-50" between East and West. After initial conflicts with imperialism over Trieste and the Greek civil war and the subsequent break with Stalin in 1948, Tito adapted his regime to the framework imposed by this deal between Stalinism and imperialism.

With the Truman Doctrine of 1947, the US took over the failing British Empire's interests in the Balkans and forged a special relationship with Yugoslavia. Despite Tito's socialist pretensions, Washington provided him with military aid, economic assistance, trade and credit. In return, Yugoslavia became a key factor in NATO's containment strategy toward the Soviet bloc, particularly in the Mediterranean.

The Tito regime used its unique geopolitical position to obtain favourable economic relations with the West, the Soviet bloc and the so-called developing countries. This in turn played a substantial role in the initial successes of Yugoslavia's system of "market socialism." At the same time, however, it made the Tito regime extremely vulnerable to the sweeping changes in international relations which began in the 1980s.

The turn of the Eastern European and Soviet Stalinist states toward capitalist restoration spelled the end of the US's special relationship with Yugoslavia. It no longer needed it as a military bulwark against the Soviet Union. Washington began to view the federal Yugoslav state as an obstacle to privatisation of the country's economy as demanded by the IMF and World Bank. In a bid to speed up the process of capitalist

economic "reform," the US and the other major powers threw their weight behind those political forces in favour of dismantling the old Titoist structure, within both the old party apparatus and dissident layers alike, many of them actively promoting ethno-communalism. Initially in that number was Slobodan Milosevic himself, who sought to consolidate his own political grip by backing the retrograde nationalist demand for a "Greater Serbia" and Franjo Tudman, who glorified the medieval roots of the Croatian nation and trivialised the atrocities of the fascist Ustasha during World War II.

German imperialism, anxious to flex its political muscles after reunification, promoted the secession in Slovenia and Croatia and rushed to extend full recognition once these republics broke with the Yugoslav federation in 1991. The Kohl government dismissed warnings that the Croatian regime's abuse of its Serb minority and the failure of either regime to negotiate an agreement with the rest of Yugoslavia would result in civil war. Bonn insisted that the "right to self-determination"—a formula which it had invoked to justify Germany's own reunification—overrode all other issues.

While both the US and the other Western European powers initially opposed recognition, they ultimately accepted Germany's position. The US wanted to shift the costs of economic development in Eastern Europe onto German capitalism and was not able unilaterally to dictate political terms in the region. The Western European powers were preoccupied with the completion of the Maastricht Treaty on economic union and with tying the newly reunified Germany to all-European institutions. Recognition for Croatia and Slovenia in the end became a bargaining chip in the final negotiations on Maastricht.

Soon after Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia in June 1991, the so-called "Homeland War" erupted—a conflict between Croatia's police forces and nationalist forces from the Serb minority that were given covert support by Belgrade. In a belated attempt to prevent civil war, now that it had let "the genie out of the bottle," the European Union voted through an arms embargo, not on Croatia, but on the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in July 1991. This did not actually cover Croatia which had seceded. Therefore, two months later, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 713 that extended the embargo to all the territories of the former Yugoslavia.

It was not until November 2000 that the arms embargo was formally lifted on Croatia and October 2001 that it was ended in all of former Yugoslavia. So for over a decade an arms embargo was in place. Yet this was a decade that saw civil war in Croatia and the Bosnia-Herzegovina during which arms flooded into region while the US and European powers stood by.

After initially opposing recognition of Slovenia and Croatia and backing the arms embargo, the US in fact aggressively promoted the independence of Bosnia, seeing it as a means of regaining the initiative in the unfolding Balkan crisis. Once again there were warnings that secession by this republic, where the Serbs constituted an even larger minority and where the Yugoslav army maintained the bulk of its troops and military assets, would provoke civil war. Once again they were ignored, as each of the imperialist powers pursued its own interests.

In February 1992, the United Nations Security Council deployed a

Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the Serb areas under the Cyrus Vance Peace Plan. The following year, Croatian Army units attacked the “Medak Pocket” on the edge of the UNPROFOR patrolled area. Canadian UNPROFOR troops were involved in a daylong battle that was described as Canada’s largest military action since the Korean War. Afterwards they accused the Croatian Army of killing unarmed Serb civilians. However, the battle never came to public attention until 1996 and it took the Hague war crimes tribunal (ICTY) nearly a decade to indict those involved.

One of those indicted by the ICTY was Croatian general Ante Gotovina who was charged with “command responsibility” for war crimes committed during the August 1995 Croatian offensive codenamed Operation “Oluja” (Storm) when he was in command of the Croatian military in the Southern UN Protected Area of Krajina. Operation Storm resulted in the biggest single act of ethnic cleansing in the Yugoslav civil war—the displacement of up to 200,000 Krajina Serbs. At least 150 people were murdered and hundreds more have never been found.

Despite repeated denials by US officials there is plenty of evidence that the Clinton administration provided vital support during Operation Storm. Former US Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke referred to the Croat forces as his “junkyard dogs” in the book *To End A War*. Holbrooke’s book recounts his conversation with the Croatian Defence Minister during the battle, “We can’t say this publicly but please take Sanski Most, Prijedor and Bosanski Novi. And do it quickly before the Serbs regroup”.

On November 5, 1994 *The New York Times* reported Paul Beaver, a military analyst at *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, explaining that “The Bosnian Army has doubled in size over the past year to about 164,000 men, all in uniform and equipped, against about 102,000 Serbs. They have obtained Russian-made rocket-propelled grenades from the former East Germany, Chinese antitank weapons from Pakistan and ammunition from Iran.”

The Times commented, “The United States appears to have pursued a policy of turning a blind eye to this arms trade, which has had the effect of advancing one element of American strategy in the Balkans... the American military attaché at the embassy in Zagreb, Col. Richard Herrick, had attended a recent demonstration of Croatian air power. Among the aircraft on show were 12 MIG fighter planes—Croatia had no more than four when the embargo was imposed—and several MI-24 armored assault helicopters that fired guided antitank missiles. Croatia had none of these helicopters or missiles when the embargo took effect in 1991.”

“...An official at the American Embassy in Zagreb, who confirmed Colonel Herrick’s presence at the military exercise, said, ‘Yes, of course we’re aware of circumvention of the embargo.’ She then corrected herself, saying the State Department had no verified reports of violations.”

In evidence published in the US Congressional Record for June 11, 1996 Acting Assistant Secretary of State Barbara Larkin reveals, “Although it remained Administration policy to abide by the arms embargo, it was not our policy in 1993 and 1994 to take active steps—either militarily or diplomatically—to enforce the arms embargo with respect to military shipments to Bosnia by third countries.” Larkin explains that the State Department told Ambassador Galbraith that there were “no instructions” on how he should respond to the request by Croatian President Franjo Tudjman to allow transport of armaments through Croatia to Bosnia—in other words he was to turn a blind eye.

The US government also took more active steps endorsing a contract between the Croatian Army and the US military consultancy firm Military Professional Resource Incorporated that provides military training. Tudjman’s son Miro, who was head of Croatian intelligence at the time, claims the relationship went further, with the Croat and US government enjoying a “de facto partnership”. He says the US government provided \$10 million worth of listening and intercept equipment and all “intelligence in Croatia went on line in real time to the National Security Agency in Washington”.

It is alleged that US drone aircraft operated out of Gotovina’s military

HQ in order to spy on Yugoslav Army movements. Photographs show him with US military personnel in front of a computer screen showing “Battle Staff Training Program” and “Welcome to Training Centre Fort Irwin”. According to Nenad Ivankovic, a former army commander and Gotovina’s biographer, Gotovina “feels betrayed by the silence of the US today and by the people he knew. The CIA saw everything that happened during Operation Storm and never objected then”. Washington refused all requests from the ICTY for documents relating to this period, including satellite photographs of key battles.

From this analysis, which shows how destructive Western intervention in Yugoslavia has been, I hope you can see the necessity of a correct perspective for the peoples of the region. This is why we call for “the building of a socialist internationalist party of the Fourth International based on the perspective of the United Socialist States of the Balkans.”

Svetozar Markovic, the founder of the Serbian socialist movement, advanced 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.”

Leon Trotsky elaborated on this perspective—aimed as it was on overcoming national divisions—in *The Balkan Question and Social Democracy*, “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.”

During the Second World War, Tito and the Communist Party-led partisan movement showed that the call for a socialist federation retained its validity and appeal in the fight against Nazi occupation and Western domination. However, this perspective was soon abandoned in favour of pan-Yugoslav nationalism. The prospect that backward Yugoslavia could pursue a self-contained socialist development in a divided Balkan region was flawed from the start, as the Fourth International 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 week’s announcement of Kosovo independence is only the latest graphic example of the way the people of the Balkans are used as pawns in the geopolitical struggle of the imperialist powers—this time between the US and Russia. (See “Kosovo’s declaration of independence destabilises Europe”) For this reason, the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe retains its full validity today.

For more information about the break-up of Yugoslavia and the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe please read the Balkans section in the WSWs archives, especially the articles:

Imperialist war in the Balkans and the decay of the petty-bourgeois left
After the Slaughter: Political Lessons of the Balkan War
Marxism, Opportunism and the Balkan Crisis
I welcome any further discussion on these issues.
Paul Mitchell



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact