

Twenty years since the US bombing of Yugoslavia

Bill Van Auken
23 March 2019

March 24 marks 20 years since the US and NATO launched a one-sided war against Yugoslavia, bombing Serbia and its capital Belgrade for 78 straight days. Factories, schools and hospitals were destroyed, along with bridges, roads and the electrical grid in a bid to bomb the Serbian population into submission to US and Western European imperialism's domination of the Balkans.

The airstrikes killed around 2,500 people and wounded another 12,500 according to Serbian estimates.

One of the US-NATO airstrikes used laser-guided bombs to take out a railway bridge in southern Serbia, killing at least 10 people on a passenger train. Another slaughtered 21 people in a nursing home. And a deliberate strike on the TV broadcaster RTS in Belgrade took the lives of 16 civilian workers.

In one of the most provocative acts of the war, the US carried out a strike on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three people. Washington claimed that the bombing was an "accident," but Beijing and the Chinese population rightly saw it as an act of aggression that foreshadowed an escalating US military buildup against China.

"Operation Noble Anvil", as the bombing campaign was dubbed, was launched without any authorization from the United Nations after Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic refused to accept the so-called Rambouillet Agreement, which in reality was a US-NATO ultimatum that demanded Belgrade allow NATO troops to occupy the province of Kosovo and be granted free rein over all of Yugoslavia. Even the veteran imperialist war criminal Henry Kissinger acknowledged that the so-called agreement "was a provocation, an excuse to start bombing."

The war constituted the final chapter in the imperialist dismemberment of Yugoslavia, a country that had existed since 1918. Having pulled the rug out from under the Yugoslav economy, the major imperialist powers encouraged the growth of ethnic nationalism—spearheaded by ex-Yugoslav Stalinist bureaucrats turned communalist capitalist politicians—warming their hands over the fire as they pushed Serbs, Muslims and Croats to slaughter one another, and using Yugoslavia as a testing ground for military intervention and a new generation of so-called precision-guided munitions.

The essential precursor of the war was the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the hands of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy. During the Cold War, Washington and its NATO allies had supported the unity of Yugoslavia as a counterweight to the influence of the USSR in the lands to its south. But after the

Stalinist bureaucracy's drive for capitalist restoration culminated in the breakup of the Soviet Union, the imperialist powers launched a reckless and ultimately catastrophic scramble for the Balkans.

Germany began by recognizing the independence of the Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Croatia, flexing its new-found muscles as an imperialist power in Europe following its 1990 reunification. While Washington first opposed the move, it subsequently threw itself into the carve-up by recognizing Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent "nation" meriting its own state. This set the stage for a bloody conflict between the territory's three constituent populations—Muslims, Serbs and Croats—and ultimately imperialist intervention.

Underlying the drive to war over Kosovo was the imperialist imperative of bringing Serbia, the strongest power in the region, to heel in order to solidify US-NATO hegemony.

The war was launched by the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton under the thoroughly discredited and hypocritical banner of "humanitarian intervention" and the claim that the US and its allies were intervening to stop a massacre of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population at the hands of Serbian security forces.

Washington and its European imperialist allies, backed by a thoroughly pliant capitalist media, cast Serbian leader Milosevic as a new "Hitler" and the Serbian people as a whole as "Nazis," obscenely comparing the repression in Kosovo to the Holocaust.

Claims that 100,000 ethnic Albanians had been slaughtered that were floated in advance of the US-NATO war were debunked in its aftermath. The real death toll in Kosovo before US and NATO bombs began to fall was revealed after the war to have been closer to 2,000, with the majority of the killings committed by the armed separatist group, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)

The KLA, previously classified by Washington as a terrorist organization, was elevated in the run-up to the war as the sole legitimate representative of Kosovo's population. Its extensive ties to organized crime throughout Europe as well as to Al Qaeda were swept under the rug as the CIA poured money and arms into the group, which carried out terrorist bombings and ethnic killings against the Serbian population. The KLA, working in close collaboration with its US sponsors, sought to create as much violence and death as possible in order to pave the way to Western intervention.

Twenty years later, the former chief of the KLA, Hashim

Thaçi—proclaimed in Washington as “the George Washington of Kosovo”—has headed a succession of governments, even as control of the landlocked mini-state’s economy remains in the hands of European Union officials and its territory is still occupied by 4,000 NATO troops, including 600 US soldiers.

Thaçi has been exposed in numerous investigations as the head of a criminal organization involved in drug trafficking and prostitution as well as in the appalling trafficking in human organs “harvested” from captured Serbs. Washington and the EU have repeatedly intervened to prevent him from being prosecuted for war crimes and other criminal activity.

The “humanitarian” intervention to halt “ethnic cleansing” has resulted in massive ethnic cleansing, including the driving out of two-thirds of the 120,000 Roma and Ashkali living in Kosovo as well as many thousands of ethnic Serbs.

Despite Kosovo being the largest per capita recipient of foreign aid on the planet, the landlocked mini-state remains the poorest territory in Europe, with an official unemployment rate of 30 percent (55 percent for youth) and wages averaging just \$410 a month. With all of its wealth and military power, US and German imperialism have managed to create only a failed state and a government controlled by a Mafia.

None of the wounds inflicted upon the former state of Yugoslavia by imperialist intervention have healed. The Balkans remain a powder keg that can be set off at any moment, igniting—as they did in the 20th century—a wider war that can bring in the major powers.

Among the most politically significant features of the 1999 Kosovo war was the unabashed and enthusiastic support lent to the US-NATO bombing of Serbia by former opponents of the American intervention in Vietnam and even self-proclaimed socialists in both Europe and America. This emerging pseudo left, whose social base was among privileged layers of the middle class, would go on to provide crucial political support to imperialism in similar bloody “humanitarian” regime change operations that have devastated both Libya and Syria.

The World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International opposed this reactionary outlook from the start, denouncing the onslaught against Yugoslavia as an imperialist war waged to assert US hegemony over the Balkans as part of a re-division of the territories of Eastern Europe and Central Asia left in a political vacuum following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In June of 1999, after the relentless bombing of Serbia forced Belgrade to withdraw security forces from Kosovo and open the way to US-NATO occupation, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in an statement by David North, the chairperson of the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party (US) titled “After the Slaughter: Political Lessons of the Balkan War,” “The bombing of Yugoslavia has exposed the real relations that exist between imperialism and small nations.”

The statement continued, “The great indictments of imperialism written in the first years of the twentieth century—those of Hobson, Lenin, Luxemburg and Hilferding—read like contemporary documents. Economically, small nations are at the mercy of the lending agencies and financial institutions of the major imperialist

powers. In the realm of politics, any attempt to assert their independent interests brings with it the threat of devastating military retaliation. With increasing frequency, small states are being stripped of their national sovereignty, compelled to accept foreign military occupation, and submit to forms of rule that are, when all is said and done, of an essentially colonialist character.”

It went on to warn that the “cult of precision-guided munitions” promoted on the basis of the United States’ casualty-free Kosovo war, ignored the more basic tendencies of economic development. “Neither this advantage [in the arms industry] nor the products of this industry can guarantee world domination,” it said. “Despite the sophistication of its weaponry, the financial-industrial foundation of the United States’ preeminent role in the affairs of world capitalism is far less substantial than it was 50 years ago.”

Nearly two decades later, this prognosis has proven correct. For more than a quarter century, the US ruling elite has sought to sustain its global dominance through the uninterrupted and reckless use of military power. This has resulted in a string of failures from Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya and Syria—as well as Kosovo—that have served only to exacerbate the crisis of the global system, while exposing the limitations of American military power.

The US-NATO war in Kosovo has been followed by NATO’s relentless expansion eastward, bringing US troops to the very border of Russia. While still playing the “humanitarian” card on occasion, Washington has jettisoned the “war on terror” as the central rationale for global US militarism, adopting a strategy of “great power” conflict, openly preparing for war against nuclear-armed Russia and China, as well as potential challenges from its erstwhile allies in Europe and Asia.

The destructive policies pursued by US imperialism are giving rise to an immense growth of social tensions and class struggle around the world, including in Kosovo, which has seen a wave of strikes against the abysmal conditions facing the working class, as well as in the United States itself. This rising movement of the international working class provides the only viable answer to the growing threat of multiple military conflicts across the globe igniting a new world war. The decisive lesson of the Kosovo war and what has followed is the necessity of building an international, socialist antiwar movement based upon the working class.



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