

Returning to the scene of the crime

Ex-US President Clinton visits Kosovo to celebrate 20th anniversary of NATO bombardment of Serbia

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Former US President Bill Clinton travelled this week to Kosovo to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the end of NATO's savage bombardment of Yugoslavia, which lasted 78 days from 24 March to 12 June 1999. Behind all of the hypocritical festivities, topped off by Clinton receiving Kosovo's Order of Freedom and describing the authoritarian and corrupt government in Pristina as an exponent of "democracy" and "freedom," his visit had the character of a warmonger returning to the scene of the crime.

Clinton was joined for the ceremony by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former NATO supreme Commander General Wesley Clark, all of whom played a leading role in initiating the war of aggression against Serbia under the guise of standing up for "human rights."

The ceremony took place twenty years to the day of the entry of NATO ground troops into the Serbian province of Kosovo on 12 June 1999, two days after Slobodan Milosevic ordered Serbian troops to withdraw. The imperialist military forces remain there two decades later to guarantee the stability of the tiny privileged elite represented by the regime of Hashim Thaçi, a former Kosovo Liberation Army commander who has been accused of war crimes and has close ties to a Europe-wide organised crime network.

"It has been my life's biggest honour to have stood with you against ethnic cleansing and for freedom," proclaimed Clinton during the ceremony. "Never forget, when you think of the challenges ahead of you, and I say that to your existing leaders, you have already done something amazing. You have given a whole generation the first 20 years of their life in peace."

What cynical nonsense! Far from being motivated by concern over alleged acts of ethnic cleansing, which were quickly proven after the conflict to have been massively inflated, Washington and its allies incited the bloody war to pursue their own predatory economic and geopolitical

interests. It was the culmination of the imperialists' strategy, begun with Germany's recognition of the independence of Croatia and Slovenia, to dismember the Yugoslav state so as to consolidate imperialist domination over the Balkans, regardless of the devastating consequences this had for the region's population.

Clinton and his fellow warmongers in Britain and Germany used the charge of ethnic cleansing against Milosevic to justify their bloody onslaught. In the corporate-controlled media, lurid claims were made that Milosevic, who was likened to a modern-day Hitler, was ethnically cleansing Kosovo Albanians on a mass scale. Some reports even asserted the astounding figure of 100,000 Albanians killed. In reality, the number of deaths when NATO intervened was later estimated at not more than 2,000-3,000. The ruthless air war claimed some 2,500 casualties and injured 12,000 more, according to Serbian statistics. Moreover, the aftermath of the conflict produced ethnic cleansing carried out by the imperialist-sponsored KLA, which drove large numbers of Roma and Serbs out of Kosovo.

Clinton's bluster about "freedom" and "peace" is no less nauseating. The former US President was speaking in a tiny, landlocked state which, more than ten years after unilaterally proclaiming its independence from Serbia, remains the poorest country in Europe. Unemployment stands at over 30 percent, with youth joblessness rising to 50 percent. Average wages are little more than \$400 per month. Its government relies on NATO troops to maintain control over this social powder keg, which has threatened to ignite with workers' strikes and protests over unpaid wages and collaborates with unelected European Union officials to implement policy. What "freedom" is this for the vast majority of the population of Kosovo, not to mention workers in Serbia, who confront the devastating consequences of NATO's

bombardment on a daily basis due to the lack of infrastructure and jobs in their cities and towns two decades after their bombardment?

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in a perspective marking the 20th anniversary of NATO's launching of the war, the 78-day assault, which destroyed factories, schools, bridges, and hospitals sought to "bomb the Serbian population into submission to US and Western European imperialism's domination of the Balkans."

The war represented a further escalation of American imperialist violence around the world, which erupted in 1990 with the launching of the Gulf war and would accelerate rapidly following the decimation of Serbia to engulf Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011) and Syria (2011-present), to mention only the most prominent examples. The explosion of US militarism during the past quarter-century of war has claimed the lives of millions, forced tens of millions more from their homes, and devastated entire societies. Moreover, NATO's eastward expansion to Russia's borders, and the US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, has raised the very real prospect of all-out military conflict between nuclear powers, chiefly Russia and China.

Contrary to Clinton's fatuous claims, none of these wars were waged for freedom or democracy. Rather, the eruption of US militarism had deep objective roots in the crisis-ridden capitalist system, and in Washington's protracted economic decline vis-a-vis its chief rivals in particular. Believing that its time had come following the Stalinist bureaucracy's dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US ruling elite sought through military force to overcome the weakening of its economic hegemony.

However, the bogus "humanitarian" propaganda now regurgitated by Clinton served a very real purpose, enabling broad layers of the formerly pacifist middle class to make their peace with imperialism. In Germany, which joined its first foreign military intervention since the downfall of the Third Reich, the war was overseen by a Green Party Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, who during the 1960s and 1970s participated in the radical student movement.

As David North wrote at the time in his pamphlet *After the slaughter: Political lessons of the Balkan war*, "With the exception of Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain—who had virtually no political history until he was selected by Rupert Murdoch to head the Labour Party—all the other major leaders of NATO's war would have claimed, earlier in their lives, to be opponents of imperialism. President Clinton, as everyone knows, avoided the draft, puffed marijuana, and publicly proclaimed his hatred of the US military. Javier Solana, the social democrat who had opposed the entry of Spain into NATO, is now the general secretary of the

military alliance. The German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder spouted Marxist phrases as leader of the Social-Democratic youth movement and opposed the deployment of Pershing missiles only 15 years ago."

This shift was a reflection of broader social processes, above all the fabulous enrichment of a layer of the middle class that had once played with socialist and revolutionary politics. Organizations like the US International Socialist Organization, France's Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR, later the New Anti-Capitalist Party), and Germany's Left Party rapidly emerged over subsequent years as open champions of imperialist wars, as shown by their efforts to justify the bloody NATO onslaught against Libya in 2011 and the US-instigated civil war in Syria.

While these political scoundrels continue to employ fraudulent "human rights" rhetoric to justify aggressive wars led by US imperialism and supported by its European imperialist allies, there is deep popular opposition to the impending threat of a much broader conflict among the major powers. It will hardly have escaped the notice of working people around the world that the very day Clinton was uttering his absurd platitudes about freedom and democracy in Kosovo, current US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was employing the very same language to lay the groundwork for war in the Middle East against Iran.

In remarks at the State Department Thursday, Pompeo denounced Iran for its "aggression" against "freedom-loving nations" and portrayed the regime in Tehran, which has been targeted with economic sanctions tantamount to a declaration of war and a military build-up of US forces by the Trump administration, as a danger to "peace and security."

The decisive lesson of the Kosovo war and what has followed is that the advanced preparations for an even bloodier conflagration can be stopped only by an international working class-led movement to oppose war and its source: the capitalist profit system.



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