

A Belgrade Ecologist Cries Out for Peace

David Bacon

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][Kosovo: The Empire at War]]

NATO bombs rained down on her city, beginning in its suburbs and then moving into the heart of Belgrade. First the planes and cruise missiles came just at night. But then their aerial assault seemed to know no set time of day.

Finally, Branka Jovanovic sat down at her computer terminal and typed out a cry for peace, sending it out on the Internet to the world.

While Yugoslavs and Serbs today are routinely painted in the US media as bloodthirsty nationalists, Jovanovic can hardly be called by such a name. She belongs to the German Greens. She is president of the environmental committee, NZS, in Belgrade. She is even honorary president of the Ecological Party of Tirana, capital of Albania, and has helped to organize numerous groups promoting dialogue between Muslims and Serbs. Her own children are born of a mixed marriage:

An ecologist, she sought to put a human face on the environmental catastrophe caused by the bombing. "NATO chooses targets in the vicinity of extremely dangerous machinery," she explained. "On the very first day, the municipality of Grocka was hit, where the Vinca nuclear reactor is situated, containing a great storage of nuclear waste."

Jovanovic also listed petrochemical and artificial fertilizer plants in Pancevo, and a chlorine plant in Baric, which, she says, still uses the old technology of the plant in Bhopal, India, where a chemical leak led to the deaths of thousands.

"It is not necessary for me to explain what blowing up one such factory would represent," she declared. "Not only Belgrade, at a distance of 10 kilometers, be endangered, but the rest of Europe would be, too."

"On the second day," she recounted, "in the Belgrade suburb of Sremcica, a chemical production factory and a rocket fuel storage facility were hit, causing a mild toxic exposure of the surrounding area. Four national parks were members of the international association of national reservations. You must realize that Yugoslavia is among 13 of the world's richest biodiversity countries."

On the third day, she told her unknown readers, fleets of NATO bombers and cruise missiles struck Belgrade's neuropsychiatric clinic. They came perilously close to the Yugoslav Cinematheque, one of the richest film archives in the world, listed as a world cultural treasure. The village of Gracanica was also hit—site of a medieval monastery now being considered by UNESCO for inclusion on the world heritage list.

She went further to warn of the impending use of B-1 and A-10 bombers, "carrying missiles with depleted uranium previously used in Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Their use will bring about dangerous consequences to the health not only of soldiers, but also the whole population. As you know, toxins and radioactivity know no nationality or borders."

While President Clinton frames the NATO assault in terms of human rights, the bombing of the factories may be a truer guide to its intentions. Yugoslavia has remained the pariah of US policy in the Balkans since the secession of

Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. While these states have carried out the kinds of economic reforms mandated by the International Monetary Fund in countries around the world, Yugoslavia has not.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the economy also lies prostrate as a result of five years of civil war. But there, the Dayton accords, which ended the fighting, created a novel situation, in which NATO enjoys an unprecedented political and economic role.

The NATO-backed military authority has the power to remove the head of state, and recently exercised it to force the president of the Serbian republic in Bosnia from office.

By agreement, the head of the Bosnian Central Bank is not Bosnian, but an appointee of the IMF. Throughout most of the rest of the world, the IMF has insisted on the privatization of industry, and the creation of investment opportunities for multinational corporations, as a precondition for loans for economic development.

Secretary of Defense William Cohen, in fact described NATO's mandate in those terms to the Boston Chamber of Commerce last year. Expanding into Eastern Europe (of which the Balkans, of course, are a part) spreads political stability, "and with that spread of stability," he noted, "there is a prospect to attract investment." Instability, on the other hand, he cautioned, "destroys lives and markets."

The Rambouillet agreement, rejected by Yugoslavia prior to the bombing, required it to accept the stationing of 28,000 NATO soldiers in Kosovo. The agreement also specified that "the economy of Kosovo shall function in accordance with free market principles." NATO, of course, does not describe its current objectives in bombing Belgrade or intervening in Kosovo in free market terms. President Clinton and NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana say the alliance's actions are intended to protect the human and national rights of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population.

"If the aim of this intervention was the prevention of humanitarian catastrophe," Jovanovic warned, "its result will be a far greater humanitarian catastrophe with far more severe consequences to generations of people living in this country."

But according to one of the most astute observers of the Balkans, NATO action in Yugoslavia has a target greater than local economic reforms. The late Sean Gervasi, a Philadelphia-born writer, U.N. diplomat, and fellow at Washington's Institute for Policy Studies, noted in 1996 that "Yugoslavia is significant not just for its own position on the map, but also for the areas to which it allows access. And influential American analysts believe that it lies close to a zone of vital US interests, the Black Sea-Caspian Sea region."

When bombs began falling on Belgrade, they had already been falling for weeks on another country—southern Iraq. Both flank the greatest pool of petroleum in the world—the vast fields of Central Asia. While those oil deposits were off limits during the Cold War, since the fall of the Soviet Union they have become the object of intense activity designed to gain their control.

As US oil companies began making deals for exploration and development with the governments of former Soviet republics, Gervasi notes that NATO began declaring it had interests in the region. This was a vast geographical extension for an alliance whose origin lies in a Cold War front in western Europe against the now-disappeared Soviet Union.

Last year, nearby Azerbaijan proposed upgrading its relations with NATO to a permanent joint forum. Both countries are located thousands of miles from the North Atlantic, but under their soil slosh the future profits of Chevron, which already has a multi-billion-dollar investment in Kazakhstan.

Gervasi warned that in Yugoslavia the United Nations framework for negotiating resolutions to international problems was being discarded, and in its place, NATO was emerging as a military enforcement mechanism beholden only to western industrial countries, especially the US.

On the UN Security Council, both Russia and China have veto power over any military operations, and would probably use it to prevent intervention to protect oil interests, as they would also-undoubtedly have done in Yugoslavia.

In Belgrade, Jovanovic condemned the use made of her country as a pawn in this geopolitical power game.

With bombs raining on Belgrade's streets, "There is no time to begin this appeal," she said, "with a discussion of the causes and mechanisms for the outbreak of this crisis." Nevertheless, she bitterly denounced "the unknowing diplomatic interventions, the lack of will for peace both in my country and your countries, which brought about the destruction of a significant multi-ethnic country in Europe, the former Yugoslavia."

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