

Ethnic Cleansing in the Former Yugoslavia

How a determined band of English activists overcame all odds to bring food & assistance across Europe to fight the mass slaughter the world was ignoring

Bob Myers

Releted: see “Workers Aid & the Betrayals of the Left: An Introduction” in this issue.

It's very hard now, probably impossible, to capture the urgency of the spring, summer and autumn of 1992. In a few months, hundreds of thousands of people were killed. Not just that, the survivors were driven from their homes. Two million of them.



Families became refugees, split up for months or years: the lucky ones made it to “fortress Europe,” the rest to refugee camps in one place or another. All this took place less than a day’s car drive from Brussels.

Here is not the place to write a history of the break up of Yugoslavia. All I want to do is provide a glimpse of people in ex-Yugoslavia who tried to fight, morally and militarily, against ethnic cleansing and oppression and the activities of people outside that region who supported them.

Through 1991 and 1992 the world’s media brought increasing news of towns and villages being ethnically cleansed. Vukovar, the anti-nationalist industrial town in Croatia, was shelled flat by Serbian nationalists. The Croatian nationalist leader Tudjman publicly denounced the aggression against “his” people but privately smiled as a center of opposition to his rule was destroyed. In Bosnia, Sarajevo was surrounded. The Muslim side of Mostar was also reduced to rubble, first in 1992 by Serbian nationalists and then in 1993 by their Croatian counterparts from the other side of the river. The centuries-old bridge across the Neretva, the Stari Most, finally collapsed in November 1993 under Croatian nationalist artillery bombardment.

Refugees who could escape sought refuge in towns held by Bosnian soldiers, only to find that these were soon besieged and shelled, leaving the residents without heating, light, food, or medicine.

From the start the United Nations imposed an arms embargo on the area, supposedly to try to halt the killing. It had no effect on the ethnic cleansers, who controlled most of the old Yugoslav army and some of the biggest stockpiles of military hardware in Europe. The embargo only hit their victims, mostly those of Muslim ancestry, who had only limited arms—hunting rifles or what they could capture.

Across Europe and beyond, people with any sense of feeling for their fellow human beings watched the news in growing anguish. How could this be happening? Why could no one stop it? In the summer of 1992 came the news of concentration camps. So much for the “never again after 1945” talk of the world’s “great statesmen.” The only response was from aid organizations that attempted to get food to the refugees, but this soon became impossible as nationalist forces strengthened their stranglehold over the region.

Responding to public pressure, the UN finally sent troops to assist the aid convoys. At the same time “humanitarian” groups, the UN and organizations like the European Parliament talked about “warring factions” and treated them as equally to blame. The world was reminded of “primitive Balkan tribesmen” with murderous characteristics that had been seen many times in the past. If these people wanted to kill each other what could the world do but try to help the innocent civilians whose terrified faces could be seen on every news broadcast? The policy of the Great Powers and UN became one of separating the “warring factions”—in effect to divide Bosnia, the same plan as the ethnic-cleansers.

If this were all I knew then, like many others, I would probably have turned off the TV and put aside the papers. For me, the only viable future lies in a world without borders between people, but now a bloody slaughter designed to drive people apart was taking place. Events seemed monstrous if there was nothing that could be done.

However, this was not the whole picture. Hidden from just about everyone were people determined to resist barbaric ethnic division. For some time I had been reading articles from a Serbian socialist, an oppositionist who, like many real socialists, had been living in exile, driven out by the autocratic Tito regime. Within socialist circles he had been fighting an almost lone battle in the late 1980s to show that the destruction of Yugoslavia was being organized not by some outside force like German capital or NATO, as many on the left thought, but primarily by the Serbian regime itself.

The Yugoslavia established after World War Two by anti-Nazi partisans had been whittled away by years of Tito’s bureaucratic rule and was finally being destroyed by Milosevic. The real death of Yugoslavia came in 1989 through 1990, when Milosevic began the total suppression of the Kosova Albanians.

Though the institutions of “Yugoslavia” still existed, any idea of a federation of the region’s peoples was finished. Open, extreme discrimination and oppression were now the name of the game. Milosevic, previously a businessman and bureaucrat in the energy sector, had become leader of the Serbian Communist Party through an anti-Albanian hate campaign. The oppositionist’s articles showed that the Serbian leadership’s so-called “defense of Yugoslavia” against “breakaway republics” was a fraud. Moves towards independence by Slovenia and Croatia were only a reaction against the growing arrogance, brutality and chauvinism of the Serbian regime as it tried to convert the eight self-governing regions of Federal Yugoslavia into a fiefdom—a “Greater Serbia.”

Another revealing picture came from Bosnian refugees. At a meeting in London in June 1994, where some sixty people came together to discuss how to respond to the war, I listened to a woman from the Bosnian mining town of Tuzla explain how in her town ethnic groups were fighting side by side in the trenches and organizing the town's defenses. For her the description of "civil war" was a fraud propagated by Milosevic and parroted by the UN. This lie put an "equals" sign between all sides in the war. It hid the truth of a long planned and organized assault on unified Bosnia by Serbian and Croatian leaders. She denounced the racist press coverage of "Balkan tribesmen" and pointed out that all past wars on Balkan soil were in fact clashes between empires—Turkish, Austrian, Russian, British, French, etc. She recounted Tuzla's militant part in the Balkan people's historical efforts to free themselves from control of these empires and their local servants. Traditions of solidarity and militancy had shown themselves more recently too. Tuzla miners, themselves very poor, had collected money for the British miners on strike in 1984 through 1985. Many people in the town had watched and hoped the strikers would defeat Margaret Thatcher.

This focus on Tuzla was reinforced by my Serbian socialist contact, who had sent me a letter from Serbia. The Tuzla miners, he wrote, were defending a simple principle of the right of everyone to live and work together. The ethnic cleansers were besieging the town, using starvation to defeat this resistance. Couldn't British miners and trade unionists return the solidarity of 1984 through 1985? Couldn't they try to get food to the town?

Our little meeting united to try to initiate this proposal. We would appeal to the trade unions and people at large in the UK and Europe to get food through to Tuzla. But knowing the existing union structures were mostly uncritically supporting their own governments' "nonintervention" stances we decided that rather than simply appeal for them to take action we would start a convoy ourselves. The plight of the communities resisting ethnic cleansing could not be resolved by our handful of people—it needed a popular uprising—but we hoped that our example would help develop such a movement.

We started from zero. None of us had ever done anything like this. We needed money, food, lorries, drivers and so on. In a few cities we put up collecting stalls in the streets, held public meetings, lobbied trade union conferences. Money started to come in and we found the public keen to help. Some gave to us just as they would give to "humanitarian aid" collectors, but many more were enthusiastic that our appeal was not simply to feed hungry people but to support those resisting ethnic cleansing. We were showing a side of the war few people knew about.

We got better organized. Such was the mood in the country at large that we managed to get permission to collect food inside big supermarkets. On a good day a small group of volunteers could get a ton of food and maybe five hundred pounds by asking every shopper to buy an extra item.

We bought our first lorry and refugees painted our logo and telephone number on it. People saw the lorry on the streets and rang in volunteering to join the team. Two lorries set off from the strike-bound Timex factory in Scotland, stopping in towns along the way, raising money, spreading awareness, gaining more active supporters. Six weeks later ten lorries assembled at Dover ready to head off across Western Europe. Five more lorries joined, from France, Hungary and Sweden. We were given official receptions at town halls and factories. A delegation from the convoy got a standing ovation from the European Parliament—but no practical support.

The convoy finally reached Zagreb in Croatia, only a couple of hundred kilometers from Tuzla. But from here the main route over the Zagreb-Belgrade highway was blocked. By who? Well, to start with, by the nationalist ethnic cleansers who controlled all roads into Tuzla. But as we went from office to office in Zagreb we discovered something else. Zagreb housed the headquarters of the UN military forces charged with getting aid through. We were sent backwards and forwards, from military HQ to the UN High Commission for Refugees, to the Croatian government: everyone refused to help. A real picture of UN activity began to emerge. No one wanted to help us because we were taking food to people resisting ethnic-cleansing. Food could sometimes be got to refugees, people already driven from their homes, but not a finger was being lifted to help the besieged communities fighting to prevent the fall of their towns. No airlifts were organized, no convoys were being escorted in. Tuzla had a large airport and UN helicopters shuttled backwards and forwards, but the only food sent was for UN personnel in the town. Western governments and the UN were responding to popular alarm at home by telling their citizens—"leave it to us, we are getting help to the victims." But it was a fraud, just like their arms embargo, which only harmed the resistance.

"Humanitarian aid effort" was a cover-up for the real UN-NATO-UK-US agenda: to divide Bosnia—exactly as the ethnic cleansers proposed. Lord Owen from the UK shuttled back and forth with an assortment of maps and

proposed “peace settlements” that carved up Bosnia in different ways, sometimes creating borders that passed right through towns. Of course this made sense if it was true that all ethnic communities hated each other. But they didn’t. They were being driven apart by force and the delivery or non-delivery of food was being used as a weapon, both by the ethnic cleansers and by Western governments. As for the so-called NGOs (non-governmental organizations)—they revealed themselves for the most part to be unofficially government-run: their uncritical stance towards the UN and Western governments helped camouflage the filthy diplomatic/political/military intrigue fueling the slaughter.

Faced with this intransigence, we used our lorries to block the UN military headquarters for several hours, holding up placards reading “Why are you letting Tuzla starve? Open the aid routes.” Local Croats joined us, venting their own anger over the way the “international community” had stood by as Vukovar was destroyed. But we were a small campaign. Yes, we had raised money, food, lorries, volunteers, etc., and spoken at more meetings than we had first thought possible, but our movement was still too small to make any impact on the UN. Almost no political parties or European trade unions or civil rights movements said anything about us or did anything to support the opponents of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Some followed the “we must support the UN’s peace effort” line, while others took the more “radical” stance of favoring “unity” and thus supporting “the maintenance of Yugoslavia.” However both positions lent strength to Milosevic and neither supported our efforts.

Thus, the main road to Tuzla remained blocked by a hidden alliance of armed ethnic cleansers and UN military. There were disagreements amongst the convoy team about what to do. We were people from many different countries and different backgrounds only just starting to work together. Three lorries set off to try to find a way into Tuzla through the mountains. Other people returned to their own countries to expose the UN’s role, demand that the UN open all aid routes, and to campaign for the main road into Tuzla and central Bosnia to be opened. Several weeks later the three lorries that had gone through the mountains reached Tuzla—they were the first outsiders to reach the city in over a year, apart from UN personnel “observing” the war.

The lorries’ arrival, with only the tiniest amount of food, was nonetheless a great boost to the miners and townsfolk. They thought the world had abandoned them, but now friends had made it through. However there were many problems. The desperate miners’ hopes were raised and they mistook the lorries for the advance guard of the whole European trade union movement. Twenty thousand miners and their families needed food and we had to explain that we were engaged in a battle against the prevailing outlook of our governments and institutions and especially against our so-called “labor leaders.”

In March 1994 an uneasy truce was brokered between the Croat nationalists and the forces of multi-ethnic Bosnia. The onslaught from the Serbian nationalist forces continued unabated, but the truce opened up a route into Tuzla—not along main roads, they all remained blocked—but via a crazy route over mountains, forest dirt tracks, farm land, and bits of road not under enemy control.

From the UK it would take a couple of days to reach Zagreb with all the holdups for customs checks at borders. From Zagreb the pre-war route to Tuzla was a five hour drive, but now it sometime took a couple of days, if we were lucky. Usually we spent four, five and even eight days slowly crawling along the mountain tracks. Time was wasted passing through the endless checkpoints of different armies, queuing in lines of lorries stretching for several kilometers, and arguing and quarreling with various nationalist/local gangster/political figures along the way.

Croatian nationalists wanted a share of our load as the price of passing through “their” enclave. We refused to give them so much as a tin of beans, but witnessed many “aid” organizations handing over a third or more of their loads. Our food was for a community fighting against ethnic cleansing and no one else. Sometimes local gangsters arrested our drivers or held us up for days hoping we would relent and hand over the supplies, but all we did was kick up the biggest fuss we could in the media, with politicians, and so on. We always got through—eventually.

When we planned our first convoy we had not thought how our initiative would evolve after that. But we quickly focused on finding ways to turn the general concern of people into an organized movement of solidarity, not just by bringing in food—that could not defeat the ethnic cleansers—but by mobilizing a political movement. One that would organize solidarity in every possible way; one that would oppose Western government support for the division of Bosnia and its multi-ethnic communities; and one that would fight alongside the Yugoslav resistance.

Everywhere we encountered warm responses from people, but they all looked to us to organize things—and we couldn’t. We were a handful of people who could barely keep the convoys going. Debts running into tens of thou-

sands of pounds loomed over us continually. Breakdowns in our fleet of clapped-out lorries threatened disaster. We had no office, no paid organizers, and no funding but what we collected on the streets. We needed millions of people to organize themselves, or make their existing organizations take action. But none of this happened. People supported us, cheered us along, helped us, but this support never rippled outwards, never lit up into a wider “bush fire,” because our little efforts were dwarfed by the “damping down” influence of the existing social organizations’ support for the UN’s “peace initiative.”

Most of our volunteers were unemployed young people, people who hated the idea of ethnic cleansing. They didn’t have jobs, they didn’t have influential positions, they were not in trade unions, but one way they could express their convictions was by organizing the convoys, so they kept them going. As soon as one got back we started collecting for the next one. All through 1994 and into 1995 the convoys went back and forth. There was dust and heat in summer and snow, frozen brakes, and dirt tracks turned to vast mud quagmires in winter. All together, thanks to the campaign in the UK and sister organizations in Spain and France, we took in over a hundred lorries.

From the moment we first arrived in Bosnia we began to make friends and find eager collaborators amongst the trade unions, especially the miners’ and teachers’ unions, which were really the only surviving mass organizations apart from the army. Industry had come to a halt as roads were blocked and men and women had gone to the front lines. But the teachers kept the schools going unpaid and defended multi-ethnic education. Their vision of a society completely contradicted the plans of the ethnic cleansers—and the miners kept working to supply Tuzla’s electrical generating station with fuel.

We also met with the student union at the university. We visited health workers at the hospitals and staff at orphanages and other institutions. We sat and talked with committees and individuals. For the most part, men and women told us that before the war they never cared who was Croat or Muslim or Serb. They hated the nationalist politicians of all ethnic groups who wanted separate societies. The miners told us about the days in 1992, before the war started.

The parliament in Sarajevo was dominated by the three Bosnian nationalist parties supposedly representing the three ethnic groups and squabbling between them had paralyzed parliament. Then the Bosnian-based “Yugoslav” army, increasingly composed only of Serbian and Montenegrin troops and under officers subordinated to Serbian fascist paramilitary groups, attacked Croatia and seized a third of its territory. Across Bosnia there were barracks of these “Yugoslav” troops, and their tanks lined Bosnia’s borders to “protect” Yugoslavia.

In the spring of 1992 huge demonstrations were held outside the Bosnian parliament in Sarajevo. The crowds, led by large numbers of Tuzla miners, shouted their opposition to all the nationalist parties—if parliament could not settle anything they would disband it and take control! Then sniper shots rang out and demonstrators dived for cover. Miners edged their way up to the hotel from where the shots came. They seized the gunmen—Serbian nationalists—and handed them over to the police.

Days later the gunmen were released and barricades organized by Milosevic supporters began to appear in Sarajevo, put up to prevent people from voting in a referendum about whether Bosnia should break from the Milosevic-controlled “Yugoslav” federation. People who were able to vote voted overwhelmingly for an independent, multi-ethnic Bosnia with equal rights for all citizens. But events had gone beyond votes. Milosevic replied with war.

All across Eastern Europe people had brought down old tyrannical regimes. The question was what to replace them with? People only had the opportunity to begin thinking collectively about this with the first days of freedom. In Yugoslavia any such discussion was drowned in a deafening artillery bombardment. Across the country gangs went from village to village driving out the ethnic “undesirables” and all those who refused to support their actions. When we drove to Tuzla we passed through mile upon mile of villages, deserted and empty, where every house had been burnt out. Milosevic’s troops, with their control over all heavy weaponry, commanded the mountain tops and bombarded every town that held out.

Tuzla fared better than most. Thanks to their militant history fighting fascism during World War Two and spirit of ethnic unity, its people were prepared. Miner battalions dug trenches and fortifications well outside the city and throughout the war the Tuzla region remained the largest Bosnian “free territory”—free for all people.

We learnt all this and much more in formal meetings with the mayor and city council, local army commanders, and in visits to mines, factories, schools and the homes where we stayed and shared people’s lives during our brief visits.

Electricity ran for a couple of hours a day on alternate days, water for half an hour before sunrise. With no fuel, the streets were reclaimed by pedestrians and horses. In addition there was the huge fleet of brand new white, 4x4 Land cruisers owned by the UN/ NGO “humanitarian” business circus that is now part of every political conflict around the world. UN/NGO people stayed in Tuzla’s hotels or they rented houses. We found beds with local citizens, ordinary folk, soldiers, students, nurses or in the student halls.

Right from the first we felt the spirit of resistance to nationalism, barbarism and ethnic division and realized we had to help this spirit make its voice heard in the outside world, which knew only about “Yugoslav ethnic hatred.” So we arranged for delegations from Tuzla to come to the UK, France and Spain to meet with people, so that others could hear what we had heard. Delegations of miners, teachers and students came, told their stories and asked for help.

Some unions responded. Bill Speirs, the President of the Scottish trade union congress was persuaded to visit Tuzla. The telecommunications workers’ unions of the UK and France joined one convoy with lorries of supplies for their fellow communication workers in Bosnia. On the convoy going out, during meal breaks and overnight stops, the French and British telecommunications workers chatted with other people who had been before. They could not agree with our idea that the UN should drop its arms embargo and let the victims of ethnic cleansing defend themselves. Surely, they argued, more guns will only lead to more killing.

When we reached Tuzla they went off with their fellow workers from Bosnia, visited their homes and work places, and handed over the food they had brought. Two days later we gave a press conference for the Bosnian media. One of the British telecommunications people spoke on behalf of his UK and French coworkers. He thanked his new Bosnian friends for their hospitality and went on to say that in the time they had been there they had been able to find out how things stood. As a result they were now returning to their trade unions in France and Britain to campaign for the lifting of the arms embargo. Direct person-to-person contact had helped them see what no amount of lectures, resolutions or pamphlets could have done. It proved the worth of us trying to break down the physical barriers that existed between the embattled multi-ethnic communities and the world outside—barriers erected by the ethnic cleansers and the international community’s “democratic statesmen.”

In Europe, public hatred of ethnic cleansing was widespread, but unfocussed. There was no social movement, no coming together to protest, organize and act as the external wing of the Yugoslavian resistance movement. However, even without this much-needed support, the balance of forces inside Bosnia began to change. In the first few months of war a highly-prepared military force, whipped up by a frenzy of anti-Muslim propaganda, had swept through Bosnia, in most places meeting little organized resistance.

A few enclaves like Tuzla and Sarajevo held out, but elsewhere towns and villages were “cleansed.” The front lines then settled down and for the next two years remained pretty static. The longer this went on the worse things got for the ethnic cleansers. Their victims began to acquire arms, mostly through capture. The ethnic cleansers’ morale deteriorated. Against unarmed civilians they had swaggered, but against people armed and fighting for their lives the bravado evaporated.

When the front lines had advanced people got rich taking everything of value from the homes of fleeing refugees—money, washing machines, fridges, electric cables, door frames—everything. But once the front lines got bogged down there was no more loot.

In Tuzla in early 1995 we found spirits were high. The Tuzla defenders were starting to push back the front lines. Behind the scenes the US moved in to take the diplomatic initiative. Tudjman and Milosevic were told to accept the fact that they could not wipe out the “Muslim” resistance and carve up Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia like they had planned. As the war continued the odds increased that the resistance would break out and turn the tide. This was a threat not just to Croatian and Serbian nationalists, but also to the West’s desire for a docile, manageable atmosphere that would facilitate the free movement of capital. A triumphant resistance could well create the political space to enact anti-capitalist social changes the majority of people wanted.

Meetings were held, but before any of the ex-Yugoslav politicians could sign their names to a deal there remained a small problem. No matter how many maps they drew, there were still people in the “wrong” places. Nationalist politicians could not sell out “their” people so these “impediments” had to be moved before a deal could be signed publicly.

The result was the massacre at Srebrenica. The UN had declared it a safe haven. For three years 30,000 hungry, terrified Muslims had sheltered in the besieged town with the UN flag waving over them. In July 1995 the Serbian nationalists advanced into the town without resistance. The UN simply handed it over without a shot. Dutch UN and Serbian commanders drank champagne together before the Dutch drove off, leaving the Muslims at the mercy of the ethnic cleansers.

Women and children were bussed to the front line of Tuzla free territory and pushed into no-man's land. Eight thousand men between sixteen and sixty were murdered. One woman who escaped to Tuzla climbed into a tree and, surrounded by other traumatized refugees, hung herself. Her photo appeared across the world, and again the public were shocked. The West's complicity in her tragedy, however, was masked from view.

Events at Srebrenica were followed by the Serbian army's withdrawal from occupied Croatia and the expulsion of the indigenous Serbian population by Croatian troops. On all sides miserable refugees trudged to a future with no home and no hope—Muslim, Serb and Croat alike had been used as propaganda and military fodder by "their" politicians and then dumped, betrayed.

In November 1995 Bosnian Muslim, Serbian and Croatian political leaders were flown to the Dayton air base in the USA and a deal was done to divide Bosnia. UN/NATO troops poured in and became the new masters of an exhausted, war-weary population. Today, six years later, 30,000 Western administrators control a Bosnia that remains divided, even if the front lines have vanished. There is no fighting, but nothing is settled.

Our work continued. Bosnian friends asked us to help them break out of their respective "ethnic ghettos." We helped Tuzla teachers meet in Hungary with leaders of education unions from Croatia, Vojvodina, Serbia and Kosova. These contacts were the beginning of a long road. The first meeting between Kosovar Albanian and Serbian teachers' representatives did not lead to Serbian teachers speaking out against Serbian brutality in Kosova, but the meeting certainly did lift the spirits of the Bosnians. They developed their union work across Bosnia, in the Serbian-held sector as well as the new "Muslim" Bosnian State. They were determined to oppose people who wanted ethnically-divided curricula in all schools. In fact, Tuzla still sent all its children to common schools.

In 1998 we helped the Bosnian miners' union organize an International Workers Conference to discuss government proposals to privatize the mines. The conference, attended by people from 13 countries who had all had bitter experiences of privatization, helped the Bosnian miners to decide to fight the government plans. Thanks to visits with miners in the UK, they knew they could not do it alone and appealed for international support. Once again the forces supporting resistance to the "new order" were too weak and the Bosnian government slowly advanced its privatization program. As in the rest of ex-Yugoslavia, previously "socially owned" property slipped into the hands of politicians, war profiteers and foreign capital.

Throughout the war we had known of the dark cloud hanging over Kosova, but never had the resources to open up contacts there. After the Dayton agreement we began to wind down the convoys and were now able to make contact. We had much to learn.

During the NATO bombing of Kosova in 1999 many people denounced Western "imperialist aggression" without saying a word about the "imperialist aggression" that had been going on since 1990, when Milosevic's troops occupied Kosova, disbanded its parliament, and began the wholesale persecution of two million Albanians. We knew better, because two of us had reached Kosova in 1996 and over the next three years there were more visits.

While all kinds of "left" organizations were blaming Western capitalism for encouraging the Albanians to break away from Yugoslavia, people who actually went to Kosova found just the opposite.

On our first visit we were guests of the Kosova miners' union at the Trepca mineral mines. From them we learnt how, in 1989 through 1990, the miners and teachers' trade unions had led protests against Milosevic, with hunger strikes and marches to Prishtina. Their slogan had been "Defend Yugoslavia." This was aimed against Milosevic's moves to change the Yugoslav constitution by removing Kosova's equal status with the other Republics. It was only after their efforts to defend the Yugoslav constitution failed and Serbia seized control of Kosova that the miners and others turned toward calls for independence. They were left with no other road to follow.

When Milosevic used force to end Kosova's autonomy in 1990, mass protests broke out and Belgrade retaliated with arrests, shootings and the sacking of all state employees in Kosova—miners, teachers, health workers etc.—180,000 people. We arrived in 1996 after the Albanians had already spent six years under a state of total and arbitrary

police/military rule accompanied by unemployment, hunger and fear. Over the next three years our delegations reported a deteriorating situation.

At Dayton, Western leaders had elevated Milosevic into a “great peacemaker.” While the UN trumpeted the Dayton agreement as bringing “peace” to Bosnia they kept quiet about the clauses endorsing Milosevic’s control over Kosova. This policy remains intact today. Despite the bombing, despite backing a new horse during the Serbian presidential elections, Western policy makers remain opposed to Kosova breaking from Serbian control and oppression. Their reasons are the same as their reasons for refusing to lift a finger to help the resistance in Bosnia—they fear a self-organized popular uprising, out of the control of any reliable regime.

On our first visit to Kosova we met various people, told them about what we had done in Bosnia and listened to their opinions. We were urged to get Kosova delegations to the UK and elsewhere to let the world know what was going on. However, by 1998 the activities of the Serbian paramilitaries in Kosova—burning villages, surrounding the towns—compelled us to appeal to get food through to the mining town of Mitrovica.

It was possible to reach there by car. Serbian friends in Belgrade had helped us obtain Yugoslav visas and we had driven cars over the mountains to Serbian-held Kosova. But this backdoor method was not possible for lorries. They needed proper papers to enter. For several months we tried to get visas from the Yugoslav embassy in London but without success. Then, due to a temporary shift in international diplomacy, we suddenly got visas. We transported food collected by Bosnian miners to Mitrovica. Already the town resembled many of the besieged Bosnian towns during the war. Villages alongside the main roads were being ethnically cleansed and burnt down. The community in Mitrovica feared the worst.

All this time the US administration and Britain’s New Labour government were shamefacedly lying to the Albanians. They told them to stick to peaceful protests and that eventually they would be free. At the same time they were telling Belgrade that they would not countenance Kosova independence.

Then the volcano exploded. Milosevic had ridden to power on an uncontrollable force of ethnic hatred. His only way to escape growing discontent rising from poverty in Serbia itself was by continually racking up the flag-waving nationalist fervor. Serbian paramilitary groups increased their attacks on the “hated” Albanians and Albanian patience with their ten-year-long strategy of passive resistance finally wore out. They turned to armed resistance against their tormentors.

Western politicians were caught in a dilemma. They wanted a stable Balkans and had backed Serbian control over Kosova in the hope that this would keep the lid on Albanian discontent in Kosova, Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece and Albania itself. However, Milosevic’s actions threatened to create the very explosion the West had hoped he could contain. As refugees poured out of Kosova and into Prishtina from other towns, NATO decided to act—not in support of the Albanians or out of concern with their tragedy, but simply to find a way to put the lid back on things.

No troops were to be sent in as that would automatically be interpreted as armed assistance to the Kosovar Albanians. Instead, bombing raids started—a tactic that would do nothing to stop the mass ethnic cleansing but would force Belgrade to be more pliable. NATO troops finally went in after a deal was struck with Milosevic. As in Bosnia, NATO became the new masters and refugees returned to find a new occupation force.

The European left, which automatically denounced the “imperialist invaders,” failed to recognize that, as far as the Albanians were concerned, the new occupiers were treating them better than their previous colonizers. During the bombing it was easy for people to shout slogans and argue for or against the bombings. But all these slogans were half-truths. On the one hand the “anti-imperialist” left wanted to fight only one wing of imperialism—NATO, not Milosevic. On the other, supporters of the bombing ignored that NATO was half-responsible for the Yugoslavian tragedy and assumed that it was engaged in some kind of benign intervention.

For us, who had close friends in Belgrade and in Kosova and were in daily contact with Albanian refugees who had lost contact with families driven into the mountains or neighboring countries, we could find no slogans adequate to deal with the problem. All we could do was describe the entire picture as we saw it. The Kosovars faced death,

They needed help from people who had no hidden agenda. They needed allies amongst the Serbian people. But where were any such movements of internationalism and solidarity? They didn’t exist. All we could do was point to the gap between the help the Kosovars needed and what actually existed—and try to close that gap. We took food to refugees in Albania and reforged our relations with miners from Mitrovica.

The situation for the miners was serious. For ten years they had been locked out from their mines—which legally they jointly owned—by Serbian guns. From the mountains and exile they rushed back to save the mines from flooding as the Serbs withdrew, only to find they were once more locked out—this time by UN guns. French troops occupied the mines and refused to let the Albanians in. In response, miners started to organize protest marches against the NATO-enforced theft of their property and we began work outside the region to publicize their plight.

Given the current situation, what did we achieve, and what did our friends in ex-Yugoslavia achieve? In the late 1980s Jeffrey Sachs, a Harvard economist advising the Polish government after the collapse of the Soviet empire, wrote: “The complications of privatization begin with the fact that the ownership of state enterprises in Eastern Europe is already politically contested. In many cases workers wonder what all the fuss is about, because, of course, they already own the firms.

Privatization should begin by establishing that the central government owns enterprises and has exclusive power to engage in privatization. The government should reject worker claims to full ownership.” Sachs goes on to recommend “shock therapy” in order to minimize resistance to privatization—act fast and catch the workers off their guard before they can formulate an alternative.

Looking back, we can see that this proposal was implemented across Eastern Europe as old Communist Party bosses formed alliances with various criminal gangs and took control of property themselves. In Yugoslavia Milosevic and other “socialists”-turned-capitalists hoped to pursue the same policy, but they were unable to catch the masses totally off guard.

As the Party bureaucrats tried to begin to implement economic policies that suited a capitalist environment all across the Yugoslav federation people were protesting against unemployment, against non-payment of wages, against corrupt politicians. The political elite discovered converting the “peoples” property into private property owned by them could not be achieved through political decree. Milosevic hit on a strategy. His party and state machine, state controlled media, etc. worked overtime to whip up hatred against non-Serbs. People were turned against each other.

Did the violence succeed in facilitating the capitalization of the former Yugoslavia? At this point it is not possible to say. Yes, the people of Yugoslavia were beaten and battered sufficiently by Milosevic and the other former communists for privatization to be carried through in Serbia and elsewhere, and for a great deal of public assets to be destroyed or transferred to private control.

This process is going on right now. But resistance to ethnic division and economic oppression was not completely destroyed. Across the region people are working for a truly humanitarian society.

Their numbers are small, but they take their place today alongside the many other voices opposed to the existing state of the world. As this global, multi-faceted movement for a better society grows these ex-Yugoslavs, with their long hard fight against the division of peoples and the imposition of capitalism, will strengthen it with their experiences. And if our actions helped even in a small way to keep alive this spirit of resistance in Bosnia, Serbia or Kosova then our work was worthwhile.

Practical international solidarity is a must in a world in which capital, commodities and exploiters are free to roam while people are hemmed in by governments. Over the last year we have been contacted by an anti-fascist group in Moscow that has been demonstrating against the war in Chechnya. After reading about our convoys they expanded their protest campaign to include collecting food and clothes for the Chechens—a call for Russians to repudiate the violence of their government and help the war’s victims.

From southern Africa we received calls from young people building a movement against the wars in Congo and Angola. They too wanted to go beyond resolutions and protest demonstrations by linking up with people across the region in an effort to unite against the continuing plunder of the continent’s resources.

—April 2001

See also

The Sad Truth: Milosevic “Crucified”: Counter-Spin as Useful Idiocy FE #358, Fall, 2002

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