

Workers Aid & the Betrayals of the Left

An introduction

David Watson

2002

The failure of dissidents in the West to come to terms with the Yugoslav debacle & the subsequent slaughters weighs like a nightmare on the mind & spirit of anyone trying to sort through the complex realities of the present period.

We are publishing Bob Myers' moving testimony to international solidarity on the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Bosnian genocide (see "Ethnic Cleansing in the Former Yugoslavia" on following page), most of which occurred between the spring and autumn of 1992.

Alas, one will search almost entirely in vain through back issues of the *Fifth Estate* for this story, and so no honor is due us; it was a story we should have engaged, and by 1999 it had come back to haunt us.

Indeed, the failure of dissidents in this country and the West generally to come to terms with the Yugoslav debacle and the subsequent slaughters now weighs like a nightmare on the mind and spirit of anyone trying to sort through the complex realities of the present period.

We remember well enough being stunned and horrified, along with most other people, in the autumn of 1991 as fighting broke out in Croatia, and even more during the spring and summer of 1992 when Serbian ethno-fascists went to war to conquer and ethnically "cleanse" multicultural Bosnia. We, who had spent most of our lives posing a great "No" against empire, wondered how we could do something about those terrible events.

What we lacked in this case was the power to do something that needed to be done—only empires had that power. We weren't about to take our flimsy placards into the street to demand that the genocidal US war machine do something about genocide, a genocide being carried out by others.

Feeling Helpless and Outraged

As it became increasingly clear that the West and the United Nations were not only failing to stop the brutal sieges of Bosnian towns and the mass murder of Bosnian citizens, but were actually complicit with the genocide and even helping to manage it, we still did nothing, except to watch the downward spiral into barbarism through the next few years—one hideous bloodbath among many—feeling helpless and outraged.

Bob Myers tells a different story, a story of pragmatism rooted in principle. Even though the efforts of the Workers Aid to Bosnia group came too late to prevent the genocide, their work was far more advanced in conception, imagination and courage than anything we did or saw here. We commend them and we honor them and we intend now to support them the best we can, along with other individuals and groups who work to defend and extend anti-statist, internationalist alternatives for solidarity and justice throughout the Balkans.

As for the ostensibly radical antiwar left, including much of the anarchist movement, the wars in the former Yugoslavia have been a paradigm-wrecker. For example, the no-brainer that the US empire's motives are not humanitarian but cynical, hypocritical and self-serving now passes in many quarters as proof of some coherent cap-

italist conspiracy to carve up the Balkans, and by extension, proof that Serbia was the innocent victim of the New World Order. While it is certainly true that capitalism is always and everywhere carving and re-carving, this one-dimensional anti-imperialism surrenders to what Slavoj Zizek has called the error of “double blackmail,” the false choice between the empire and its enemies. [1]

As I argue in a forthcoming book, *Pandemonium: Reflections on the Balkan Wars and the New World Dis/ Order*, an extended historical polemic on the Balkan wars and the response of the left, we need an anti-imperialism to match the challenges not only of the New World Order but the New World Disorder unleashed by its contradictions. [2] However clear Western, and particularly US, hypocrisy and indifference to human life, one had to be a moral and political cretin not to feel some ambivalence about the 1999 NATO campaign.

Yet cretinism abounds. In his introduction to the 1945 edition of *Animal Farm*, George Orwell remarked, “Unpopular ideas can be silenced and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need of any official ban...At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question.” Many will recognize these lines so favored by Noam Chomsky to be almost incessantly repeated in his appallingly disappointing book, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo* (1999), and frequently quoted by leftists who are merely parroting him rather than honestly confronting Orwell’s point.

But in fact the idea has more than one possible interpretation. As Orwell continues, “To exchange one orthodoxy for another is not necessarily an advance. The enemy is the gramophone mind, whether or not one agrees with the record that is being played at the moment.” The presence of such a “gramophone mind” among self-styled anti-imperialists explains why so many people with so much understanding have gone so wrong, how a puffed-up indignation against the “demonization” of Serbia in the West and an apparent insight into the distinction “between worthy and unworthy victims” (Chomsky’s term) can sink to a simple inversion of values, and thus to an unreflective demonization of the Kosovar Albanians, historically the Palestinians of Europe.

It also helps us to understand why so many well-meaning people simply let the International Action Center (a front for the marxist-leninist Workers World Party—disciples of a mixture of maoism and trotskyism, which alone should suggest their limited reasoning skills), *Z Magazine* or Serb nationalist apologist Alexander Cockburn do their thinking for them on such matters without doing the reading and thinking for themselves. Finally, it forces us to recognize that just as the imperial metropole has no monopoly on violence, it has no monopoly on manipulation and deceit; dissent, like consent, can be manufactured, even if the target group is far more limited.

Conspiracy Mongering

Other particularly squalid moments have occurred in the history of leftism—one thinks of the stalinist betrayal of Spain, and the Hitler-Stalin Pact—but this particular period and this historical juncture will go down in history as one of the most callous and feckless. Sadly, the so-called radical movement is losing its sense of complexity, of history, of ambivalence, and ultimately its own humanity. Most ostensible oppositionist discourse on the Balkans, from the hard Marxist left to the independent socialist left to even many anarchists, has sunk to a duckspeak of conspiracy mongering and holocaust denial, or to the nostrums of diplomatic conflict-resolution, or to crass and aggressive apologetics for mass murderers.

Readers who think this characterization an exaggeration will have to judge for themselves. They can only do so by studying the matter in depth, since leftist magazines and Internet sites are a cesspool of misinformation, where one can find myriad examples of holocaust denial from leftists and rightists—it is a kind of a red-brown front, in fact—that Serb concentration camps never existed, or that the Bosnians “bombed themselves” in Sarajevo, or that the mass execution of thousands of men after the fall of the Srebrenica enclave was a “hoax.”

And—if one can keep one’s lunch down—some leftists are even circulating a petition to free poor old Slobodan Milosevic (while demanding the head of Pinochet). One has to find this depressing in part because some of these people have had reasonable things to say about US support for dictatorships abroad, global capitalism, and other important related issues, and so they now function either to recruit the naturally skeptical into ‘a counter-cult with its own authoritarian mystifications, or they simply discredit worthy opposition altogether through a kind of Gresham’s law by which healthy ethical reasoning is driven out by paranoia and dogmatism. (This is in fact what

happened in Serbia and to a less dramatic extent in Croatia, where many dissidents ended up becoming ethno-fascists.)

Any radical movement serious about changing life, whether or not it can do anything in the near future about the social crises it faces, must never allow itself to become a purveyor of lies. As Theodor Adorno put it in *Minima Moralia*, "The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us." We have no choice but to demystify so-called demystification. [3]

We differ somewhat with Bob Myers in our interpretation of some of the historical events he describes. For example, Myers emphasizes a critical issue typically misunderstood among Western leftists, that of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural character of Bosnia. He is correct that working class Tuzla was much more anti-nationalist than other places, and that the resistance to Greater Serbian fascist aggression also reflected this character.

He does not make it clear in this essay, but generally it needs to be stated, that Muslim nationalism historically, right up to the recent war, depended on the notion of a multicultural Bosnia, and was nothing like Serb and Croatian nationalism.

The exterminist aggression of the Serb nationalists and the influx of brutalized Muslim refugees into places like Tuzla inevitably eroded this commitment to multinationalism throughout Bosnia.

That was in fact part of the Serb nationalist plan in committing horrible atrocities against the Bosnian Muslims, and in particular the conscious focus of violence on women and children and the brutality of the camps. This needs to be clarified, because it is impossible to understand the Yugoslav wars without close attention to causality and chronology. It is repugnant to see various Serb nationalist propagandists and apologists, and even highly regarded leftist writers and journals, typically cite examples of the growing polarization and reaction of the Bosnian Muslims to the brutality they suffered as if these were causes and not consequences of the genocide.

We think his description is incomplete in some other areas as well, but the history he is engaging is terribly nuanced and such differences are inevitable. Nevertheless, we consider his essay a refreshing change from most of what we have read on the subject, both because it is accurate in its large portrayal, and more importantly perhaps because it tells the story of common people deciding to engage in uncommon, immensely generous, and gravely dangerous acts of solidarity. The practical response of Bob Myers and his comrades to fascist genocide has been profoundly inspiring to us; we are sorry we did not learn of it much sooner. We urge our readers to contact and to support the Workers Aid group.

Notes

1. See his useful "Against the Double Blackmail," *New Left Review*, April 1999. To their credit, and to our knowledge only later, the marxist humanists of *News & Letters* also had a decent understanding of events and a human response. Whatever our disagreements with them (and there are many), they are correct in their assessment that among most leftists, "The concrete truth of anti-imperialism gets turned into its opposite, into a false abstraction that stands opposed to a living human subject." Sensibly, they write, "We have no illusions about the hypocrisy which guides US actions in Kosova or anywhere. But we do not allow U.S. imperialism to stop us from recognizing that the way to oppose the forces of global counterrevolution is to solidarize with those struggling against genocide." (See *Kosova: Writings from News & Letters, 1998-1999*, available from News & Letters, 36 S. Wabash, Room 1440, Chicago IL, 60603.)

2. The book on the Balkan wars will be sent to our readers as a special double issue. An essay describing my ambivalence about the Kosova war, "Empire and Exterminism," was published in the May 2000 *New Internationalist*.

3. Numerous books, publications and websites are worthy sources of credible information. Readers might start with Branka Magas's *The Destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracking the Breakup 1980-1992* (Verso, 1983), perhaps the very best contemporary left-oriented analysis of the process of the Milosevic counterrevolution and the breakup. It must be supplemented by other such excellent books as Laura Silber and Allan Little's *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (1996), David Rieff's *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (1995), Michael Sells' *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (1996), Tim Judah's *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (second edition, 2000) and his *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (2000).

Noel Malcolm's admirable histories, *Bosnia: A Short History* (second edition, 1996) and *Kosovo: A Short History* (second edition, 1999).

Two other left-oriented books that give balanced reports are Catherine Samary's *Yugoslavia Dismembered* (1995) and *Burn This House: The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia*, edited by James Ridgeway and Jasminka Udovicki.

There are many other extremely valuable texts, but these are a start. They will help the reader to recognize that the breakup of Yugoslavia is paradoxically much more complex in some ways, and yet not so complicated in others, than most of the left pretends. Another very useful source of information and understanding is *Bosnia Report*, published by the Bosnian Institute (14/16 St. Mark's Road, London W11 1RQ England). The Bosnian Institute does invaluable work; send them a donation and buy and read as many of their back issues as possible.

They are also available at www.bosnia.org.uk. Other websites worth looking at are the Balkan Crisis Report at www.iwpr.net, www.bosnet.org, the Balkan Report from www.rferl.org/balkan-report, Michael Sells' website at www.haverford.edu/relg/sells, and the Balkan Witness website at www.glypx.com/BalkanWitness. This latter site has a list of still more useful websites. A book on the debates on the left around the former Yugoslavia edited by Danny Postel, *Debating Kosovo: Contending Leftist Perspectives* (Bowman & Littlefield), is due out soon.

Related

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

fifth Estate

David Watson
Workers Aid & the Betrayals of the Left
An introduction
2002

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/356-spring-2002/workers-aid-the-betrayals-of-the-left>
Fifth Estate #356, Spring, 2002

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)