

Assessing the Kosova war, two years on

It is now a little more than two years since Serbia surrendered after 11 weeks of NATO bombing.

NATO did not go to war because it supported the Kosovars. For twelve years it had steadfastly supported the rule in Kosova of what, as far back as 1913, Trotsky had called "Serbian imperialism".

NATO went to war to force the Rambouillet "agreement" on the Serbian regime. Rambouillet proposed to restore to Kosova, which was populated by more than 90% ethnic Albanians, autonomy within the Serbian state.

That would have been a very great improvement for the Kosova Albanians. NATO's prime concern at Rambouillet, however, was to curb, stifle and frustrate Albanian nationalism. There is a more or less continuous area populated by Albanians stretching from the Albanian state through Kosova to parts of Macedonia and Montenegro. They are divided by artificial borders. NATO's concern was that, once Albanian resistance began to take the form of guerrilla warfare, the increasingly savage Serb oppression of the Kosova Albanians could destabilise much of the Balkans.

Macedonia

And in fact, now that the Albanians of Kosova have escaped Serbian rule, the compact Albanian community in the border regions of Macedonia has begun to demand its rights, destabilising the artificial frontiers of that state. NATO's support for Macedonia in its suppression of the right to self-determination of the Albanian minority signals its general disregard for the rights of small nations and communities.

For most of the 1990s, Kosova Albanian resistance to ethnic oppression — they were kicked out of jobs, basic schooling, higher education and medical care, and attacked by soldiers and cops when they tried to organise schools of their own — had taken the form of unarmed civil disobedience.

To prevent destabilisation, NATO wanted to secure some tolerable conditions of national life for the Kosovars, before Milosevic and the Kosova Liberation Army set the Balkans alight. Thus Rambouillet laid it down that the KLA should be disarmed while Serb soldiers and police largely controlled Kosova.

They started bombing Serbia in the expectation that Milosevic would cave in quickly. On past experience in Croatia and Bosnia, Milosevic was a man they could do business with.

NATO's calculations

NATO may well have bargained for Milosevic to defy a few days, or even a couple of weeks of bombing. They may well have bargained for Milosevic to use that short time for a brutal drive against the Kosovars. That could have been advantageous to NATO, by diminishing the subsequent problem of disarming the KLA and keeping the Kosovar people under NATO control. But plainly NATO thought that a few days, or at most a couple of weeks, of bombing would be enough to bring Milosevic to heel.

Far from bringing Milosevic quickly to their bidding, the bombing gave him cover for what must have been a pre-planned all-out drive to kill or clear out as many as two million Kosova Albanians. The noise of the exploding NATO bombs in Serbia, the bombs that were supposed to pro-

tect the Kosovars, formed hellish background music to the catastrophe that engulfed the Albanians.

NATO chose to wage a long high-tech air war, with minimal NATO casualties — to bomb the Serbian economy back decades, while the Serb chauvinists went on doing their awful work in Kosova.

Third Camp

NATO remained what it always had been. As we wrote in *Workers' Liberty*: "Nobody should trust NATO politicians, or NATO bombs and troops. Socialists should not take political responsibility for them or advise them on what to do next". We could not support NATO. We called for independence for Kosova and arms for the Kosovars. We denounced NATO's desire to maintain a strong rump-Yugoslav state and conserve the national borders in the region regardless of the rights of such groups as the Kosovar Albanians. Our camp

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Workers' Liberty

Bulletin for the discussion at "Marxism 2001", no.6.

was the "Third Camp" of the working class and oppressed peoples aspiring to liberation.

What is the balance sheet now? Undoubtedly the bombing did drive the Serb opposition into solidifying with Milosevic against the enemy in the sky. For a while — and, as we can now see, only for a while. Defeat soon brought revolution in Serbia.

What if Milosevic had won an easy victory over NATO? What if he had realised the old Serb nationalist programme of driving the Albanians out of Kosova — a programme attempted previously by massacres in 1913, and by "cold" methods both in the 1930s and in the 1950s? That would have been not only a catastrophe for the Kosovars, but also, for Milosevic in Serbia, what Egypt's victory over Britain, France and Israel, at Suez in 1956, was for Gamel Abdul Nasser. It would have raised him above challenge by any opposition in the calculable future.

Whitwash Milosevic?

The nature of NATO in general, and of its record and war aims in ex-Yugoslavia, ruled out support for NATO in the war; the immediate issues, and the predictable consequences of victory for Milosevic, should have ruled out support for Serbia. By losing the war, Serbia did not lose any rights that socialists or democrats could support them in claiming. To pretend that the air war was about NATO making an attack of the old colonial-imperialist sort on Serbia's national rights defies the facts and whitewashes Milosevic.

After the war, Kosovar Albanians

and the KLA felt it was "our turn now" and committed atrocities against Kosova's Serb minority, with the complicity or semi-complicity of NATO. To condemn those atrocities is right and necessary. To pretend that they justified the Serbian side in the war is nonsense.

"Stop the Bombing, Stop the War!" (NATO's war) meant "Victory to Milosevic" and "Leave the Kosovars to Milosevic"!

In fact, at meetings of the "Stop the Bombings; Stop the War" campaign, the Socialist Workers' Party, were fanatical in their opposition to adding such slogans as "Yugoslavia/Serbia out of Kosova"; "Arm the Kosovars"; "Independence/Self-Determination for Kosova". They wanted the campaign to mean what the slogan they did not dare raise actually means: "Victory to Milosevic". They bolstered their case by agitation, some well-founded and some exaggerated, about the horrors of the NATO bombing.

Anti-imperialism?

To take that position meant to ignore, disdain, or neglect the national rights of the long-oppressed people at the centre of the conflict — the Kosovars — in the interests of nothing higher than getting a good campaign, "the broadest possible anti-war movement", in Britain as a recruiting pool for the SWP. Despite the "anti-imperialist" shouting, it was a position of truly arrogant disregard for the rights of oppressed nations.

Both the left and the revolutionary international socialists are, for now, a very weak force; so, politically, is the working class. That is why the demoralised and confused "anti-imperialists" could look hopefully even to genocidal Serbian imperialism to "give NATO a bloody nose". And why their socialist mirror image, the depoliticised, military-technology armchair generals of the shamefaced "Victory to NATO" camp wound up agitating for ground troops in Kosova.

The job of consistent socialists, political pioneers of a renewed mass working class socialist movement, was not to cover for Milosevic and demonise NATO, or play the same role the other way round. It was to promote independent working class. In conflicts like that of the Balkans, our responsibility is to tell the truth and advocate consistent democracy — a democratic Balkan Federation, organised in a network of self-determining, ethnic-national entities.

We are never nationalists. But socialists are always champions of the nationally oppressed. We advocate their right to self-determination, up to independence. This does not imply acceptance of pre-ordained stages — first solve the national questions and then the social questions. A consistently democratic programme on the national question is part of the working class socialist programme. It is the only way the working class — accepting and advocating a democratic framework within which the peoples can live together — can unite. It is the only basis, translated into state structures, on which a socialist society can be organised. That is one lesson of the breakdown of Yugoslavia.

"The attempt of the bourgeoisie during its internecine conflict to oblige humanity to divide up into only two camps is motivated by a desire to prohibit the proletariat from having its own independent ideas. This method is as old as bourgeois society; or more exactly, as class society in general. No one is obligated to become a Marxist; no one is obligated to swear by Lenin's name. But the whole of the politics of these two titans of revolutionary thought was directed towards this, that the fetishism of two camps would give way to a third, independent, sovereign camp of the proletariat, that camp upon which, in point of fact, the future of humanity depends." (Leon Trotsky).

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