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Yugoslavia

Slobodan Milosevic: Architect of Yugoslav break-up

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Slobodan Milosevic died during his trial at the UN's International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague - just after he was refused permission to go to Moscow for treatment. He was 64. He stood accused of war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo. Whatever the legitimacy of the victors justice represented by the Tribunal - it is a poor substitute for a true international court - there is no doubt of his guilt. The evidence is overwhelming. He was indeed the butcher of the Balkans.

The role of Milosevic, however, remains controversial on the left. Not least because it involves controversies about the role and nature of Stalinism, the causes of its collapse, and the right of self-determination of nations.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/MILOSEVIC.jpg>]

It also raises the issue of whether the unity of Yugoslavia could have been preserved, after the collapse of Stalinism and the Warsaw Pact, and who was principally responsible for its destruction.

The SWP obituary of Milosevic in *Socialist Worker* (18.3.06) raised such controversies in that it makes no significant distinction between the role of Milosevic in the break up of Yugoslavia this and that of Franjo Tudjman of Croatia and even Alija Izetbegovic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were all equally responsible. It even makes no distinction between them when it comes to war crimes - which in the case of Izetbegovic is scandalous. It is worth another hook at the history.

Yugoslavia was a federation comprising six Federal Republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. There were two Autonomous Provinces, Vojvodina (majority Hungarian population) and Kosovo (80% Albanian population) - both within the Serb Republic. There was a history of both Serb and Croatian nationalism prior and during the world war two. This declined in the post-war period under Tito (who was a Croat) to the extent that most people thought of themselves as Yugoslav rather than their original nationality or their religion.

Milosevic - who came to prominence in the 1980s through Communist Party ranks in Serbia and learned his politics in the Belgrade bureaucracy in the latter years of the Tito period - was pivotal in the break-up of Yugoslavia, and carries the principal responsibility for the carnage involved. The driving force behind the carnage was the resurgence of Greater Serbian nationalism, which he orchestrated from an early stage.

The internal social and economic crisis, of course, which brought down Stalinism in the Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, existed in full force in Yugoslavia. This caused tensions between the Republics and forced Yugoslavia into damaging arrangements with the IMF. Milosevic dealt with the crisis of the Stalinist like many of its top functionaries, by turning to nationalism

After Tito's death in 1980 it had been clear that Yugoslavia could only be held together by a guarantee against the rise of Serbia into the dominant position it held in the pre-war period. This meant strengthening, rather than weakening, the relatively progressive 1974 constitution - which had devolved power and autonomy to the constituent Republics. It defined Yugoslavia as a multinational state in which no single nationality could claim a majority. This was the basis on which the Federation coexisted.

This coexistence, however, was soon to come under pressure from Serb nationalism. In the spring of 1981, Kosovar Albanian demonstrators in Pristina - who were campaigning for Kosovo to be promoted to the status of a Federal Republic - were savagely attacked by Serbian police.

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In 1987, Milosevic, who was now Serbian party boss and increasingly a nationalist demagogue, addressed a rally of Serbs in Kosovo and made his infamous "no one should dare to beat you" speech. He was lauded by the Serbs and came away as de facto Serb president in waiting.

Six months later Milosevic was indeed President of Serbia - and the direction he was taking was unmistakable. In 1989 even the limited autonomy enjoyed by Kosovan and Voivodinan as Autonomous Provinces was abolished.

Both Provinces were annexed into Serbia. The de facto absorption of Montenegro quickly followed. Milosevic had torn up the 1974 constitution and was seeking to replace it with a highly centralised state dominated by Serbia.

The consequences for the Federation were absolutely clear. The more dominant Serbia became the less other nationalities were prepared to stay within it.

Milosevic now pledged to reunite Serbs which, he said, had been divided by the 1974 constitution. It was the launch of his Greater Serbia project - by which he meant the creation of a common mono-ethnic state for all the Serbs, currently spread across the various Republics. It was a concept supported by all political parties in Serbia and articulated as early as 1986 in the notorious Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts. It could not be achieved without the break-up of Yugoslavia and the annexation of at least a third of Croatia and two thirds of Bosnia-Herzegovina - with the ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs from those territories.

Once Kosovo, Voivodina and Montenegro were swallowed up, resistance to the advance of Greater Serbia project fell to the newly elected governments of Slovenia and Croatia. They tried to negotiate acceptable terms for them to stay in the Federation; proposing that it take the form of "free union of democratic states" - proposals which were supported by Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. Milosevic rejected this and all subsequent proposals along these lines.

In December 1990 Slovenia voted in a referendum for secession from the Federation, though it did not act on the decision at that stage. Slovenia, however, was now increasingly dragging Croatia with it towards independence.

Franjo Tudjman was elected President of Croatia. He was a Stalinist bureaucrat turned Croatian nationalist, later to have war crimes on his hands.

In March (1991) the Serbs of the Krajina (borderland) Region of Croatia, in what was claimed to be a spontaneous uprising, took over the region and declared it an independent state. The uprising was led by Serb nationalist strongman Milan Babic. They named it the Autonomous Province of Krajina, later Republika Srpska Krajina.

The uprising had the full backing of Milosevic, and it was armed and supported by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA). Federal authority was collapsing and the JNA was already acting under Serbian control. It was a body-blow to the unity of Yugoslavia and a massive challenge to Croatia - which was split wide open by it. Tudjman had no army to resist the JNA and sought to stabilise the situation by diplomacy. He, in any case, had his own agenda for carving up the region (i.e. Bosnia-Herzegovina) in favour of a Greater Croatia once he was pushed towards independence.

Two weeks later, at the end of March (1991), yet another crucial decision was made. Milosevic and Tudjman concluded that Yugoslavia was now effectively finished, and that three, or more, successor states would eventually emerge. The issue now was how they would each carve out their own ethnic states to the detriment of Bosnia. Later, EC mediator Lord Carrington, after meetings with Milosevic and Tudjman, made the same point.

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"When I first talked to Presidents Milosevic and Tudjman", he said, "it was quite clear that both of them had a solution which was mutually satisfactory - which was that they were going to carve up Bosnia between them".

In April (1991) Milosevic recognised the Krajina Serbs as a separate state. Ultra-nationalist Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, called for "an armed force of the Serbian People" to be set up throughout "the Serbs lands of Yugoslavia". He now articulated the Greater Serbian project even clearer than his mentor Milosevic.

Serbian forces were now occupying a quarter of Croatia, and expanding. It was undeclared war, although Tudjman was reluctant to recognise reality given the military imbalance he faced. On May 3rd (1991) Tudjman belatedly warned that war was probably unavoidable. It would be a war, however, that would have little to do with defending the rights of Croatian Serbs (the 200,000 Serbs living in Zagreb were ignored) and everything to do with grabbing Croatian territory and undermining its right to independence.

On May 25th (1991) Slovenia and Croatia simultaneously declared independence. The EC opposed the declaration - which was Western policy at that stage. Two days later the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) invaded Slovenia in an attempt to prevent its implementation of the declaration. The JNA were forced to abandon the invasion after 10 days by a combination of international pressure and surprisingly strong Slovenian resistance.

Ultimately Slovenia could not have defended itself, but Milosevic only had limited interest in Slovenia since it had a negligible Serb population.

In August (1991) Serb forces carried out the first ethnic cleaning of the war in the Krajina village of Kijevo - which was a pocket of Croat population surrounded by Serb-held territory. Soon after Babic announced that the Krajina Serb paramilitary forces had fused with the JNA.

In early September (1991) the Croatian city of Vukovar (43% Croat and 37% Serb) was shelled by Serbian irregulars with heavy weapons supplied by the JNA. Tudjman responded by laying siege to JNA barracks across Croatia. On September 19th a JNA force, with tanks and heavy weapons, left Belgrade bound for Vukovar. Within days Vukovar was under siege and heavy bombardment.

On October 1st (1991) the JNA laid siege to the Croat port city of Dubrovnik - which was 82% Croat and just 6% Serb. Vukovar fell a month later. It was reduced to rubble after weeks of hand-to-hand fighting. Over 500 Croats were killed and nearly 2,000 wounded. Surviving Croats retreated in disarray.

In November (1991) the Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadzic, voted to secede from Bosnia and found their own state. Serb deputies had already walked out of the Bosnian Parliament and formed their own Parliament. Bosnia was now split apart in the way Croatia had been.

By the end of November (1991) Serb forces had achieved most of their objectives. Milosevic now advocated a cease-fire and UN intervention, which would freeze current battle lines to his advantage. Borisav Jovic, Krajina Serb Interior Minister, put it this way: "At this point the war in Croatia was under control in the sense that all the Serb territories were under our control, all, that is except central Slavonia. Slobodan and I decided now was the time to get the UN troops into Croatia to protect the Serbs there. We saw the danger - when Croatia would be recognised, which we realised would happen, the JNA would be regarded as a foreign army invading another country. So we had better get the UN troops in early to protect the Serbs".

Croatia had lost a third of its territory to Serbian forces. There were thousands of dead and half a million Croatian

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refugees. Early in December (1991) Tudjman visited Bonn to seek EC recognition. A week later Germany announced that if the EC did not recognise Croatia and Slovenia it would do so unilaterally.

Two weeks later Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia decided to seek independence. It was that or being a part of a Greater Serbia they could not accept. On January 17 (1992) the EC agreed to recognise Croatia and Slovenia but not Bosnia-Herzegovina or Macedonia.

On March 1 (1992) the assault on Bosnia started when Serb paramilitaries erected barricades in Sarajevo, dividing the city. Bosnia was torn apart by Serbian and Croatian forces for three years. Bosnian cities were bombed into rubble and their inhabitants starved out. Europe saw its first genocide, since world war two. Bosnian Muslims faced massacre, rape, and terror. In Srebrenica 7,000 Muslim men and boys were killed in the course of a few days. Three quarters of Bosnia's territory was occupied by either Serbian or Croatian forces. 30,000 Bosnian women were raped as part of a policy of terror. The war left a quarter of a million dead and three million Bosnian refugees.

There is plenty for which the Bosnian regime could be criticised. But the idea that it was no different to those of Milosevic or Tudjman is preposterous. Bosnia was by far the most multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Yugoslav Republic. For Bosnia it was a war of survival and a war in defence of a multi-ethnic society. That multi-ethnicity mostly survived throughout the war. There were Serbs and Croats at every level of the Bosnian state and military. 10% of the army were Serb or Croat, and there were 50,000 Serbs and 30,000 Croats in Bosnian Sarajevo throughout the siege.

The war ended in 1995 after Bosnia had at last turned the tide on the battlefield and began to take back parts of its territory. Suddenly Milosevic, the architect of the conflict, became the West's negotiating partner in the Dayton Peace Treaty - which he signed on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs who he had drawn into the conflict. A divided Bosnia was turned into a UN protectorate and left to pick up the pieces.

In nearly 5 years of warfare in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia not a single military action had taken place on the soil of Serbia. Also in all three cases, war had been waged by forces receiving orders from Belgrade, aided by irregulars trained and equipped by the JNA.

As a result of these wars 200,000 died, mainly civilians, half a million wounded, and two million made refugees. All ideas of "equal responsibility" for these wars should be rejected. We should not equate the aggressor with the victim. Milosevic was the prime mover of these wars, Tudjman was a second string dictator with regional ambitions and plenty of blood on his hands. Izetbegovic was the leader of the principle victim of these wars.

After the Bosnian war finished Milosevic was already developing another - his ethnic war against the Kosova Albanians. During the next four years 350,000 ethnic Albanians were driven out of the country to become refugees.

In 1998 the Kosovan Albanians mounted mass protests against Serbian rule, police troops were sent in to suppress them. In 1999 an escalating refugee crisis was used by Nato to launch an unprecedented bombing campaign against Serbia, which went on for 78 days. The US dominated Alliance had found a role for itself in the post Soviet era, an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of its weaponry, and as a means of extending its influence to the East.

In Britain a campaign was launched against the war in the form of The Committee for Peace in the Balkans. The role of Milosevic remained controversial. The Committee itself was silent on the role of Milosevic. The SWP (within it) opposed the bombing but underplayed Milosevic's campaign against Kosovo. Socialist Action - which no longer exists but was influential in the Committee at the time - saw Milosevic as some kind of representative of actually existing socialism and described Serbia as "the chief obstacle to the capitalist break-up of Yugoslavia."

Such politics influenced the shape, and unfortunately the size, of the anti-war mobilisations as well - since it gave them a strong pro-Serb flavour. Most potential supporters of the anti-war movement, beyond the ranks of the organised left, started from strongly opposing the ethnic cleansing of the Kosova Albanians, and stayed away once they perceived the pro-Serb bias of the movement - even those who did not see NATO as a solution.

The issue of independence for Kosovo, which we advocated it as the only lasting solution, was not taken up by the SWP.

We argued that there were two wars taking place: one waged by Milosevic against Kosovo and another against Serbia by Nato - and we were opposed to both. We called for NATO out of the region and Serbia out of Kosovo. We were part of a co-ordination within the Committee of those groups supporting this position: ourselves, Workers Power, the Socialist Party, the CPGB, Workers International and Workers Action.

Many on the left (particularly SA but including Tony Benn and other anti-war MPs) insisted that Yugoslavia had been broken up not by Milosevic's project but by imperialist intervention. They pointed the decision of Germany and the EC to recognise Slovenia and Croatia (the richest Republics) as independent states. Once Slovenia and Croatia had gained independence, they argued, it was "natural" for Serb minorities within Croatia and Bosnia to "rebel" and the scene was set for war.

As the above account sets out, however, German and EC recognition of Croatia and Slovenia came almost a year after the start of war in the region. It came a long time after the invasion of Slovenia and Croatia by Serbian forces: i.e. well after the die was cast on the unity of Yugoslavia. Imperialism, particularly Germany, did seek to intervene, of course, but this was not the decisive factor.

The bombing of Serbia ended when a compromise was found acceptable to both NATO and Milosevic was struck. Key for Milosevic was that Kosovo remained part of Serbia and that the multi-national force moving in to occupy Kosovo was under UN (rather than NATO) control. Previously unacceptable conditions, such as the right of NATO to access to any part of Serbia were dropped. A similar deal could probably have been struck with Milosevic without the bombing.

The national rights and aspirations of the Kosovars were set aside in all this and remain unresolved. Yet again the lesson has not been learned that the problem of the Balkans cannot be resolved without the right of self-determination for all the peoples of the region being respected.

Fittingly Milosevic's final undoing came not at the hands of NATO or the UN but at the hands of the Serbian people. In October 2000 a mass uprising of Serbian workers - a general strike and mass demonstrations and the storming of the parliament building - over a disputed election result drove him and his corrupt clique from office. Six months later after a stand-off at his mansion he was arrested and taken to The Hague.

As for the Tribunal at The Hague, it has been selective as to whom it pursues. Not only have Radovan Karadzic and his military chief Ratko Mladic never been brought to book for Srebrenica. But the likes of Tony Blair, Milosevic's old friend Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright and Wesley Clark - who bombarded Serbia for 78 days killing thousands of people also go unpunished. The use of depleted uranium and cluster bombs; the targeting of a civilian passenger train, the Chinese embassy and Radio Serbia - killing 16 media workers - are of no consequence.

They can all rest a bit easier now. Even Milosevic's attempt to bring them to Hague as witnesses to their crimes has come to an end with his passing.