

Behind NATO's war on Yugoslavia

written by Sam Marcy

March 31, 2022



"No to NATO!" in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2019 on the 20th anniversary of the NATO invasion of Yugoslavia.

On March 24, 1999 - 23 years ago - the U.S./NATO armed forces started a [78-day long aerial bombing campaign](#) against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The brutal bombing campaign targeted civilians, city centers, public transportation, schools, hospitals, hotels and even the Embassy of the People's Republic of China.

More than a thousand aircraft were used to drop more than 3,000 cruise missiles and about 80,000 tons of bombs. More than 3,000 people were killed, and up to 20,000 seriously injured.

NATO flattened 25,000 residential buildings, 300 miles of roads, almost 375 miles of railroads, nearly 40 bridges, 100 schools and childcare facilities, 30 hospitals and 14 airfields.

The bombardment ended June 10 with the declaration of a “NATO victory,” as Wikipedia puts it. The real background to NATO’s war on Yugoslavia can’t be found on Wikipedia, however.

Reprinted below is an article by Marxist leader Sam Marcy, originally published in 1992. It also appeared as a chapter in the book “NATO in the Balkans,” published in 1998, only months before the bombing began.

NATO is a U.S.-commanded military alliance established in 1949 as a military force aimed against the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist states. NATO now acts to enforce Washington’s dominance in Europe and to intervene in other parts of the world. NATO’s war on Yugoslavia asserted suzerainty over the Balkans.

After the overturn of the Soviet Union, NATO was expanded to every country of Eastern Europe to lock in place capitalist restoration of the formerly socialist countries. The threatened expansion of NATO’s military force to Ukraine, on the border of Russia, along with NATO naval operations in the Black Sea, are direct provocations of Russia. As Leon Panetta — White House Chief of Staff under Bill Clinton, CIA Director and Secretary of Defense under Barack Obama — explained, the conflict in Ukraine is a NATO “proxy war” against Russia.

How imperialism broke up Yugoslav Socialist Federation

By Sam Marcy

June 11, 1992

It is impossible to seriously consider the Yugoslav situation without first taking into account some pertinent aspects of history and politics.

The imperialist conspiracy to break up the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia didn't start yesterday. It didn't start with the U.N. Security Council voting for sanctions. It didn't start with the earlier meeting of the European Economic Community in Spain.

It started a long time ago, when the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ), led by Tito (Josip Broz) and the Communist Party, defeated the royalist, reactionary and pro-fascist forces of Col. Draza Mihajlovic and his Chetniks.

The front mobilized the workers, peasants, progressive intellectuals and thousands of middle class people in the Partisan guerrilla army that defeated the German Nazi and Italian fascist invaders and their quisling regimes.

The U.S. and the British until 1943 recognized Mihajlovic and his Nazi-sympathizing coalition and refused recognition to the representatives of the Yugoslav people organized in the AVNOJ.

Then, seeing that the progressive and revolutionary forces were on the verge of scoring a historic victory, the imperialists suddenly changed sides and began to give token support to the Partisans. They did so largely to disrupt the socialist solidarity between the Yugoslav leaders and the Soviet Union.

The very same forces which fought in Yugoslavia against the revolution, particularly the royalist riff-raff and pro-fascist groupings, have all these years been promoted,

secured, cultivated and supported financially by the U.S. and European imperialists. Now they are being pushed forward as an authentic leadership to replace the Yugoslav government in Belgrade.

Monarchist democrats?

In recent days, the imperialist press have written about a “democratic opposition” in Serbia. Who are they?

There is “the Democratic Movement of Serbia, which embraces the old monarchy and enjoys the support of many Serbian traditionalists.” (Washington Post, May 31, 1992)

What are these monarchist traditions? Suppression of the Serbian people! These idle rich have for decades been living it up in the decadent casinos and watering places of Europe.

The Post continued: “Crown Prince Alexander — the son of the last king of Yugoslavia who was forced into exile during World War II — met recently in Washington with senior White House and State Department officials. This week he expressed his willingness to preside over a constitutional monarchy in cooperation with the democratic movement and spoke of a coalition government that would fall into the mainstream of European democracy. It seems likely that the opposition will win the backing of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which reportedly has dispatched senior clerics to meet with the prince.”

This stooge, who is ordered around by U.S. imperialism like an errand boy, has expressed his willingness to head up a “democratic government.” And giving him their blessing are the reactionary clergy that supported the Mihajlovic forces. This “Democratic Movement of Serbia” is nothing but the old reactionaries in a new form.

They are now boycotting the elections in Serbia because they haven’t got the forces

to contest them. The sanctions against Serbia just passed by the U.N. Security Council (the same council that okayed sanctions and then outright imperialist war against Iraq) are timed to coincide with and disrupt the elections.

An editorial headed “Popular Opposition” (!) in the Financial Times of London (June 2, 1992) calls for the isolation of Serbia: “The demonstration inside Belgrade by some 50,000 anti-war protesters was an indication that popular opposition to [Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic’s] policies is growing, at least in the capital. However, the peace movement in Serbia is mainly middle-class based.”

In other words, it’s a bourgeois, pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist opposition. The demonstrations seem to be precisely timed to undermine the government of Milosevic.

“It would be an illusion to believe,” concedes the London big business paper, “that it finds much of an echo in the rural Serb and Montenegrin population, not least the Serbs in Bosnia who look on the Belgrade government as their main protector and champion.”

A valuable admission from the mouth of the enemy.

What’s missing here is any word on the attitude of the workers. Notwithstanding the political confusion caused by the maneuvers of the principal imperialist powers involved in the current struggle, the workers of these areas support the Yugoslav government.

Most deeply involved among the European imperialist powers are the Germans and Austrians and, to a lesser extent, France and Italy. That’s who dominated the European Community conference on the Balkans held recently in Spain. ...

Germany made it clear it would recognize Slovenia and Croatia. By Dec. 23, 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia indicated they too were moving toward

secession.

Imperialism and self-determination

What is the Leninist point of view in a case like this? Is the secession of these republics from Yugoslavia an example of self-determination?

Each and every nation has a right to determine its destiny. This can mean integration; it can mean joining in a federation; it can also mean exercising the right to leave, to secession. In any case it has to express the will of the nation or nationality.

But when the choice is the product of external imperialist pressures of an economic, political and even military character, that is another matter.

Was the president of Croatia defending genuine self-determination when he openly called for the U.S. Sixth Fleet to come to Dubrovnik? (CNN Prime News, May 29, 1992; the president spoke in English.)

The strategy of the imperialists has been to lure the republics away from the Yugoslav federation.

But they are not united. There is a struggle between Germany and the U.S. over who will get the dominant position in the entire Balkan area. Each has its own forum. Germany has used the European Community as its instrument. The U.S. is using the United Nations.

Germany and the U.S. are both seeking to make pawns of the republics. The U.S. may at one time support the Yugoslav Federal Republic and later come out against it; Germany may support Croatia and Slovenia at one point and later change. It all depends strictly on the military and political exigencies of the situation. But each is attempting to win overall control for itself.

Rich vs. poor republics

As in so many other areas of the world, there is a more developed so-called northern part of Yugoslavia where the bourgeoisie is stronger, and a southern, poorer part. Slovenia and Croatia are more developed, whereas Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro, as well as the province of Kosovo in Serbia, are less developed.

As of 1975, Croatia was the most industrialized and prosperous. Said the New Columbia Encyclopedia of that year: "More than one-third of Croatia is forested and lumber is a major export. The region is the leading coal producer of Yugoslavia and also has deposits of bauxite, copper, petroleum and iron ore. The republic is the most industrialized and prosperous area of Yugoslavia."

Since then, Slovenia has overtaken Croatia as the most developed.

Henry Kamm wrote in the New York Times on July 13, 1987, about the rich-poor split in Yugoslavia. "The southern republics — Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro as well as the province of Kosovo — are subsidized by the more prosperous areas through a federal fund and direct contributions. ... Slovenia [is aware] that its 2 million people have the highest level of economic development among the republics and provinces that make up the federal country of 23 million. Slovenia is a small Slavic republic. The economic crisis has sharpened the contrast between the rich and the poor."

Kamm interviewed people in Slovenia who resented the southern republics. Milos Kobe said, "Fantastic sums go to the south and they don't know how to use them economically." A man named Kmecl told the U.S. reporter, "We cannot invest in renewal because our capital is going for the development of the underdeveloped. A small country like this cannot afford this. After 40 years of this policy, [the southern republics] are still not developed and we can't maintain the pace. We're immobilized. A technologically highly developed society like Slovenia always needs

more for its own science and culture while the underdeveloped need more for social protection than they produce.”

We have heard this refrain before. It sounds just like the rich bourgeois elements in any capitalist country who complain that they have to subsidize the poor. They forget that their riches come from the sweat and blood of the workers in every one of these republics and that they became industrialized only because of the socialization of the means of production and centralized planning. This is what protected them from the ravages of imperialist penetration. The federation was like a security blanket that helped them develop.

The imperialists have lured the bourgeois elements of Slovenia and Croatia in particular with the promise of becoming an integral part of the European Community and sharing in its alleged prosperity. They think they'll get a market for their products and be able to deal with the West Europeans on an equal basis, without being “encumbered” by the poorer republics in the federation. All of them, including Serbia, are being lured to invest their foreign exchange in Europe or America and thereby become (they hope) a prosperous part of the imperialist system. ...

Socialist federation a great breakthrough

It is impossible to understand the situation in Yugoslavia if we accept the imperialist premise that what has happened is merely the surfacing of national antagonisms that had been smothered or driven underground following the Yugoslav Revolution.

The establishment of the socialist federation of Yugoslavia was a historic victory. For the first time, a united front of the Balkan countries was formed that was able to detach them from imperialist domination, either Allied or Axis. It was the product of a revolutionary upsurge that engulfed the working class movements of Europe.

The federation developed over a period of years. Its collective presidency was a progressive new political conception. Each republic had an opportunity to run the federation for a specified time and in rotation. The same concept prevailed in the structure of the communist parties. They were also organized on the basis of the collective principle that the party in each republic had an opportunity to run the federated communist party.

What opened the gates to imperialism? Unquestionably, a contributing factor was the unfortunate and ill-considered split between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform in 1948 and thereafter isolated from the socialist camp. Years later an attempt was made by the USSR leadership to repair the situation so Yugoslavia could exist without leaning on or getting aid from imperialism. But the socialized, centralized economy of Yugoslavia had already been damaged.

The gates to imperialism opened wide when Yugoslavia established its so-called workers' control of management. This sounded highly democratic — a step away from the rigid, centralized control that stifled the creative energy of the working class. Now the workers' talents and abilities to manage Yugoslavia's affairs would be utilized.

Workers' control as a step away from capitalism is progressive. But it's a backward step when it leads away from centralized socialist planning. The concept of workers' control soon degenerated into managerial control and the abandonment of centralized planning. Yugoslavia fell into the coils of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. By 1981, it was completely dominated by world finance capital. It had opened wide the gates to so-called free enterprise.

Decentralization, then dismemberment

This intensified competition among the various enterprises in each republic and

among the republics themselves in a thoroughly bourgeois manner. Under such conditions, socialist solidarity was lost and more significantly the standard of living plummeted to such an extent that workers were no longer able to purchase basic necessities.

By 1991, the new government had acquired a debt of \$31 billion. Unemployment was over a million and inflation was 200% .

From free enterprise, the necessity arose for free, sovereign, independent republics. Economic decentralization soon led to political decentralization. The dismemberment of Yugoslavia had already begun.

This was not an automatic, spontaneous development. No sooner had there developed the greater autonomy of the republics than the imperialists began to funnel funds into the republics with a view to encouraging and promoting separatist and secessionist objectives. It is they who unloosed the forces of virulent national hatred.

The stimulation of national hatred is a byproduct of imperialist finance capital's investment in Yugoslavia.

Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian leader, is also a product of that tendency. From the earliest days of his ascendancy to CP leadership, the imperialist press played him up as a "charismatic personality." They supported his nationalist demagogic. It was only later that they found it might become disadvantageous to them if he went too far.

It must be taken into account that there was no unified policy of the imperialists in Yugoslavia. Germany, Italy, France and the U.S. had divergent views on how to approach the situation. Each had its own sordid material interests, which often are hidden. Their policies can also be mistaken. It is not an easy task to stimulate, promote and finance nationalist tendencies in the republics and then get them to

carry out the wishes of individual imperialist countries without arousing all sorts of internecine struggles.

The very forces that they stimulated and brought into motion got out of control.

Each imperialist power, even if it has no direct economic interest in Yugoslavia, is inevitably drawn into the struggle so as not to be left out of the picture. Each tries to find a basis for a relationship with Yugoslavia that will bring it advantage.

It is no wonder that the U.S. State Department did not always know what to do. But one thing they were expert at: financing the counterrevolution.

It is true that earlier they had tangentially supported the Yugoslav regime. They felt a so-called nonaligned entity was useful in the struggle against the USSR. But after Tito died there was no basis for tolerating any remaining communist experiments. Then the dismantling began in earnest — not overtly, but covertly.

Secret diplomacy is one of the most important weapons of imperialism. But the different imperialists often find themselves at loggerheads. While each of the imperialists would want to outdo the others in exerting influence over a dominant Serbia, they are not in favor of a Milosevic who postures as an extreme nationalist and who occasionally flouts European and U.S. intervention.

Role of Milosevic

Milosevic is not very different from any bourgeois nationalist in the oppressed countries. Certainly we are opposed to the ideology of a Bonapartist, especially if he has degenerated with the abandonment of communism. But that's no excuse for supporting imperialist intervention.

Really, Milosevic is not much different from Saddam Hussein. His espousal of bourgeois nationalism is no reason for us to fall on all fours and allow U.S.

imperialism to run roughshod over the country.

It reduces itself again to the U.S., Britain and France, notwithstanding their differences, attempting to do what they did in Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Nicaragua and elsewhere. The fact that it is taking place in Europe does not change the situation at all.

It is not impossible that Serbia or a coalition of some of the republics will reunify on the basis of socialist conceptions. In any event, a federation, even on a bourgeois basis, is bound to be more progressive and productive, more independent of imperialism, than if they are cut up into small principalities with no real power in the world community.

We in this country tend to think of the oppressed nations as mainly those in the less developed world — Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and most of Asia. Of course, the bourgeoisie will turn heaven and earth to deny that there is national oppression in the U.S. From kindergarten on, they drum it into the heads of everyone that this is “one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

But not well publicized is the fact that national oppression exists also in Europe.

Just saying that one nationality in the Balkans is more developed industrially than another blurs the relationship of oppressor to oppressed. For instance, Slovenia may be more developed with a higher standard of living, but once it is involved in an internecine war and becomes completely dependent on imperialism, it may well find itself in a position of subordination and potentially of oppression.

The tendency in the capitalist press is to obliterate the relationship between oppressor and oppressed and present the internecine struggle as a purely Balkan affair between the nationalities. Overlooked entirely is that for a period of time there existed a federation that not only increased the standard of living but was able on its

own to play a more or less important role, even on the international arena.

Under present conditions, particularly if the war continues, all the nationalities risk being reduced to pawns of the imperialist powers. It may be true that the Yugoslav regime can hold out for a considerable period against imperialist sanctions, but even should it come out victorious it will have been drained of much of its life blood and material resources, assuming it is able to overcome overt and covert imperialist domination.

Bourgeois radicals tend to neglect the class essence of the struggle in Yugoslavia. No matter how carefully they may try to analyze the relations among the nationalities, if they leave out the relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between the national bourgeoisie and the imperialist banks and industrialists, they are left completely at the mercy of monopoly capitalism.

Proletariat is leaderless

Of course, the most important aspect of the situation in Yugoslavia is the position of the proletariat itself. The proletariat at the present time is leaderless, the Communist Party having abandoned its vanguard role as leader in the struggle for socialist construction.

Only the proletariat can play a consistent internationalist role. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, by virtue of its overriding interest in overturning socialist and state property and promoting private property, not only sharpens its class relations with the proletariat but promotes and stimulates antagonisms between the nationalities.

No nation in modern times is free from class rule. Every state rules in the interests of either the workers or the bourgeoisie. The mere fact it is small or exploited by an imperialist power may obscure that fact but does not invalidate it. This must be borne in mind in approaching the national question. One can easily get lost in the

struggle for nationality, for freedom from oppression, and forget the existence of an exploiting class within the nation.

In the epoch of the bourgeoisie, a nation is merely an instrument of domination by the propertied and exploiting class. Of course, the struggle against the imperialist oppressor must be led by a proletarian vanguard to be effective and the duty of the vanguard is to mobilize all the progressive elements in society on a democratic and anti-imperialist basis. An excellent example of this was the Yugoslav struggle for liberation.

The current Yugoslav regime is in large measure a product of the events in the Soviet Union, beginning with the Gorbachev administration. His reactionary program accelerated all the social antagonisms in Yugoslavia as elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Certainly the sweeping bourgeois restorationist measures taken by the new regimes in the East and particularly the swallowing up of the German Democratic Republic could not but have a detrimental effect on class and socialist consciousness in Yugoslavia.

The leadership, such as it was, panicked under the impact of these events. They not only changed the name of the party, they began to compete with each other over who would go further in bourgeois economic reforms.

The monolithic imperialist press have never had such a clear field to lie and deceive the masses, now that they are no longer restrained by the existence of a socialist camp. The absence of a strong and vigorous working class press also facilitates the task of the bourgeoisie. They are riding high.

But then comes one of those elemental and spontaneous risings, as in Los Angeles, which demonstrate the fragility of bourgeois rule over the working class and the oppressed masses.

Truth crushed to earth will rise again, and with it so will the working class.

