

NATO targets Yugoslavia:

Report of a visit to Belgrade, 10th-13th May, 1999

While NATO's air campaign against Serbia continued into its second month three members of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group with a French colleague visited Belgrade. Understandably, perhaps, in a time of war both parties to the conflict are accused of using propaganda. For example, the UK news media regularly refers to Serbia as a dictatorship which brooks no opposition; where there is no media freedom enabling people to know what is really going on in the beleaguered province of Kosovo and where people cower, hungry and frightened, at the mercy of what British Defence Secretary, George Robertson, calls Milosevic's "murder machine". It was to investigate these and other claims that the BHHRG embarked upon its mission.

Allegations of dictatorship

Members of the BHHRG monitored the parliamentary and presidential elections held in Serbia in Autumn 1997. Their report, published on the Group's web page, reached the following conclusions:

- After serving two consecutive terms as president of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic observed the Yugoslav Federation's constitution by not altering (or ignoring) its provisions to seek a third term in office. He next stood for election as president of Yugoslavia itself. Such respect for constitutional propriety has not been observed by everyone in the region: Slovenia's president, Milan Kucan, has served three terms in office in spite of the country's constitutional requirement that the state president should only be elected twice. In other post-communist countries (Georgia, for example) the terms of the constitution have been strained to allow the incumbent to continue holding office.
- Although BHHRG observers found many shortcomings in the Serbian election process these were no more serious than those observed in other places - the Yugoslav republic of Montenegro, for example, which was hailed as exemplary by other international monitoring groups. There was a genuine choice between political parties in Serbia and had several Western-favoured democratic parties not chosen to boycott the poll the choice would have been greater still. As it turned out Slobodan Milosevic's ruling Socialist Party emerged from the poll with a *minority* in the Serbian parliament. [SPS: 110; SPO:45; SRS: 82, others 13].
- The most serious allegations of fraud in the 1997 Serbian presidential election were made on behalf of the Serbian Radical Party leader Vojislav Seselj whom many within and without Serbia believed to be the outright winner of the poll. Seselj received little media coverage during the campaign – reportedly 90 seconds on state TV – but he was still deemed by many to be the real victor.
- Allegations have always been made that there is no media pluralism in Serbia. Before the war there were several opposition newspapers as well as radio and TV outlets. Numerous anti-Milosevic foreign-funded NGOs also operated in the country. By May 1999 much of the opposition media had been closed down. However, large numbers of people receive foreign television programmes via cable and satellite and, contrary to the received wisdom, are aware of the situation of the Kosovan Albanians.

Members of the BHHRG failed to detect signs of the sort of behaviour associated with a classic dictatorship while in Belgrade. People openly criticize Milosevic - but not for the war. Many say they never voted for his party the SPS but while the country is under attack they must stand together whatever their political persuasion. Some, like Vuk Draskovic, [interviewed by the BHHRG] criticize the Kosovan Albanians for boycotting elections and thus giving the SPS a free rein. The 40 or so seats allocated to them in the Serb parliament might

have been won by the opposition which would have severely reduced – or eliminated – the SPS's hold on power. He also pointed out that opposition politicians favoured by the West, like Zoran Djindjic, had forfeited any further chance of gaining public support by leaving the country – Djindjic is in Montenegro with the West's other favourite, President Milo Djukanovic. "He [Djindjic] will only be able to come to power on the top of an American tank" says Draskovic who has stayed in the country throughout the war.

Considering that a war is on, police presence in the city is minimal. Even the police who asked to examine the BHHRG's cameras were courteous and unthreatening. Ordinary people were friendly and keen to point out that they did not blame ordinary British citizens for the bombs that were falling on their country every day. In both Bulgaria and Romania members of the Group were followed by local police; crossing the Romanian border took three times as long as crossing into and out of Serbia proper.

Will the Serbs bend? Public perceptions

Nearly everyone we spoke to had endured some aspect of the bombing. People talked about being thrown out of bed [after the bombing of the Socialist Party headquarters, for example]; of the powerful winds that blow through a building after a particularly heavy raid pulling the person into a vortex and seemingly towards the epicentre of the attack. Door and window frames break loose and the building shakes. One day there was even an earthquake in Belgrade after an air raid on the city.

Marija S. a Belgrade housewife is typical. She lives in a small, three-room apartment with her husband, two children, younger brother and elderly parents. Her father has Alzheimer's disease but she had to move him and her mother away from their home in the vicinity of some of the heaviest bombing. Marija and her husband have not worked since before the war and live on meagre savings. Pensions for elderly people are paid late and not in full. Children all over Serbia have not been to school for the past two months.

The worst time for the family was when the first graphite bombs were used and the electricity failed. Not only power but also water pumping facilities are affected when this occurs. Nevertheless, they are not giving in nor do they expect the government to bend on their behalf. Anyway, the authorities have become better organized than ever before and the electricity problems are sorted out quite quickly and efficiently.

There is no shortage of food. Unlike many people in the West, Serbs do not live on a diet of fast-food. The country's fields are properly husbanded and fresh produce is widely available from peasant markets. Cars and buses are running, no doubt fuelled by the large amount of illegal petrol that is reaching the country.

The BHHRG also visited the Mufti of Belgrade who lives next to the city's only mosque. Despite the fact that the war is (ostensibly) being fought on behalf of Muslim Albanians the Mufti thinks it an attack on all Muslims as well as Serbs: "We understand American politics from what went on in Sudan, Afghanistan and Somalia. We understand now better than before". Like many people he also attacked Clinton as an "immoral cowboy".

There are 200,000 Muslims in Belgrade. The community never had any problems with the local population during the war in Bosnia but now the Mufti pointed to damage caused to the buildings around the mosque by anonymously thrown bomblets. Several Kosovan Albanians were in the courtyard of the mosque having attended evening prayers. They said they had left the province because of the bombing but declined to be named or photographed when asked by the Group.

People are fully aware of what is happening in Kosovo but would argue about the causes of the tragedy there. This means that they are criticized by Western commentators for being heartless. However, the remorseless nature of the bombing (sirens warning of an attack wail twice a day) and the unpredictable way the bombs fall mean that people's minds are, understandably, directed towards their own plight. Although Serbs have often displayed a

tendency to self-pity they have a case when they point out that c.200,000 Serbs were expelled from the Krajina in 1995 without a similar outpouring of indignation. Bitterness about the treatment of the Krajina Serbs often flares up. A hard-working representative from the Yugoslav Red Cross pointed out that Kosovan refugees in Montenegro were receiving aid to the value of 300DM per month last year whereas neighbouring Krajina Serbs got c.30DM worth of goods.

In December 1997 members of the BHHRG visited refugee camps in Belgrade housing Krajina Serbs. The living conditions were primitive - there could have been nowhere to hide in the event of bombs falling. It has come as no surprise to learn that such refugee settlements have been the subject of attacks from the air, for instance at Majino Maselje on 21st April.

Perhaps people in Serbia fail to focus properly on the fate of the Kosovars because they are deeply suspicious about the war and its motives. They feel that it is about something more than just Kosovo. This perception is common in neighbouring Bulgaria and Romania as well. Conspiracy theories abound but they all come back to the common theme that the West, the United States in particular, wants to 'take over'. Unfortunately, if such a situation was to come about there would be a large mass of disaffected and resentful people in the Balkans for the victorious allies to quell.

Report on the humanitarian situation by the Yugoslav Red Cross

On 8/5/99 the Yugoslav Red Cross reported that since the bombing started on 24th March more than 700 civilians have been killed and 6400 have been injured. Obviously, this does not take into account what has happened since including the dreadful casualties that resulted from the NATO bombing at Korisha on 13th May.

The largest number killed or wounded are from Aleksinac, Surdulica, Dakovica-Prizren, Orahovac, Cacak, Grdelica gorge, Kragujevac, Koris, Valjevo, Nis, Kragujevac and Belgrade. Many of the wounded will be invalids for the rest of their lives. An inevitable consequence of the bombing is that a large number of people have lost their homes. The largest number of private apartments destroyed are in Aleksinac, Surdulica, Nis, Novi Sad, Cacak, Cuprija, Prokuplje, Kursumlija, Kraljevo and Belgrade.

The destruction of factories and places of work has left 500,000 people without jobs. If their families are included, this means that c.2m people will be affected by this economic catastrophe for the foreseeable future.

In Novi Sad more than 90,000 people are without running water as pipes were destroyed when the bridges were bombed. Added to this are the difficulties of transport and communication. The destruction of the heating plant in Novi Belgrade will leave that part of the city without heat in the winter if it cannot be repaired (or reconstructed) before then.

Hospitals have been hit and patients killed; health clinics are destroyed in the bombing. The clinic in Aleksinac, for example, which served over 60,000 people was wiped out. Disruption of electricity means that high-tech. equipment (scanners etc.) in hospitals are unusable. Medicines are in short supply.

Children have not gone to school since the war began and many schools have been bombed. Children are also among the victims some dying in horrific circumstances.

500,000 live below the subsistence level, mostly pensioners. The Red Cross fears that their means to operate soup kitchens will not stretch to the numbers they fear will be in need of them, particularly when winter comes. Pensions are paid late.

There are large numbers of internally displaced people both in Serbia proper and Kosovo - the Red Cross says there are c. 1.2m. Fear of bombing has caused over one million people to relocate to the country or to stay with friends. Added to which are the existing 500,000

refugees from Krajina some of whom (11,500) went to Kosovo and have endured displacement twice now. Within Kosovo itself the Red Cross estimates that 250,000 people are internally displaced.

Yet, politicians and NATO spokesmen repeatedly deny that the war is directed at civilians. The opposite is true: this is a war directed largely at civilians. State and military facilities that were bombed had long been emptied and their destruction made no difference whatsoever to Serb military capabilities. At least some NATO representatives admit the truth. Lieutenant General Michael Short, NATO's top air-war commander, told the *New York Times* (reported in *The International Herald Tribune*, 14/5/99) of his desire to hit civilians: **"I think no power to your refrigerator, no gas to your stove, you can't get to work because the bridge is down-the bridge on which you hold your rock concerts and you all stood with targets on your heads. That needs to disappear at three o'clock in the morning"**.

The thinking behind such brutal bellicosity is that the citizens of Serbia will bend under such attacks and throw out the Milosevic regime. This appears unlikely to happen. However, many are afraid that such a clumsy and ill-thought strategy will only strengthen the hands of extreme nationalist politicians, like Vojislav Seselj, when the war ends. Even journalists on the pro-government newspaper *Politika* voiced these concerns. No doubt, the (rich) NATO actors in this conflict sit back and think that they can buy whatever political dispensation they want in the long run with their usual techniques: offering bribes and other inducements to prospective 'democrats'. Whether such a policy works in the future remains to be seen. Both Nis and Cacak have opposition mayors. NATO's bombardment of these cities – some of the most intense in the war – cannot have been particularly helpful to their future political fortunes.

A just war?

The war has been justified on purely humanitarian grounds but, in fact, it is a more complex conflict which reaches into the the future political and strategic complexion of south Eastern Europe as a whole. While ordinary people in the West are unaware of this even shop keepers and taxi drivers in the Balkans debate the implications.

Consider the following:

- Despite the comparisons with Hitler now used to describe Slobodan Milosevic, he was until recently courted by politicians from the US and Western Europe. Dayton negotiators, like the US's Richard Holbrooke, made it plain that they preferred his company to that of the other leaders in the Bosnian crisis, Franjo Tudjman and Alia Izetbegovic. Many of the players in that war, including Holbrooke but also Britain's former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd and Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini returned after 1995 to do business with the man now described as 'the butcher of Belgrade'.
- As for the war in Bosnia itself, at least 60,000 people were killed and 2 million were displaced during the conflict. All attempts to assist the weaker side – the Bosnian Muslims – were met with obstruction including any attempt to lift the UN-imposed arms embargo. Supporters of the current war acknowledge the discrepancies in the international community's approach to Bosnia and Kosovo but justify their recently-acquired robustness by saying 'it [Bosnia] must not be allowed to happen again'. However, it is open to argument that NATO has learned from its past mistakes how not to make new ones..
- The desire to sideline and ultimately eliminate the Milosevic regime began to seriously take effect a year after Dayton. But demonstrations in Belgrade during the winter of 1996-7 failed to overthrow the government. And although the Western-sponsored election of Milo Djukanovic in Montenegro in 1997 was encouraging, many feared public opposition would erupt inside the small republic if it sought to break with Belgrade. Too many people in Montenegro wanted to keep their ties to the Federation.
- Meanwhile, in Kosovo itself 6 people were killed in 1996. In 1997 rumours abounded that the KLA a shadowy organization with ties to Albanian leftist groups in the Switzerland and Germany was preparing to launch an armed struggle. The US was

rumoured to be promoting and financing it from an early stage. Many, including the moderate Albanian leader, Ibrahim Rugova, (and some Western journalists) speculated that this was Milosevic-inspired disinformation. Others saw it as the natural response to the Ghandi-esque policies of Rugova which had failed to deliver full independence.

- During 1998 the violence worsened. Policemen, Serb officials and even Albanian “collaborators” were killed by KLA snipers and, according to the UNHCR, 90 Serbian villages were ethnically cleansed in the course of the year. Reprisals were taken against those considered to be members of the organization. This involved the use of scorched earth tactics whereby houses (in the case of Kosovo this often turned out to be large compounds) were burned down to flush out the terrorists. However, compared with Bosnia, where thousands were killed in a week during the early part of the war in 1992 only 1700 Albanians (mainly fighters) 180 Serb policemen and 120 Serb soldiers were killed in Kosovo last year. The regime in Belgrade has not been stupid: it knew that it was being provoked into massive retaliation and refused to respond in the required manner.
- The killings in Kosovo were still the West’s best hope of provoking the fall of the Milosevic regime even though the conflict was of low intensity compared with many other places in the world. By February the parties gathered at the chateau of Rambouillet in France to discuss peace. At the last moment, when it looked as though some agreement might be reached the Americans handed the Serb delegation an annexe to the final document demanding freedom of movement (and much else) to NATO troops and personnel not only in Kosovo but throughout the whole of Yugoslavia. No sovereign state would have accepted such terms. Naturally, they were rejected not just by Milosevic but by a vote in the Serbian parliament. The scene was set for the air campaign to begin.
- Perhaps the diplomatic players believed their own propaganda. Christopher Hill, the US ambassador to Macedonia, was confident that Milosevic would cave in before the first bombs fell despite being told by well-informed Serbs that this was not going to happen. It is unsurprising in these circumstances that the NATO allies were unprepared for what followed.

With such confusion and a cavalier belief in the likelihood of Serb capitulation at the last minute, NATO went to war. Despite attempts by CNN among others to talk up the conflict by showing what purported to be the large movement of refugees from Kosovo in the preceding months few appeared to have moved out of the province before March 24th. There were no camps before then. After the bombing began huge numbers of refugees flooded out of the province.

The rest is history.

The South East European Federation

The dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 displeased the West as did the emergence of little nations with their motley collection of individual ethnic minorities. Officials at the US Department of State began to envisage a renewed federation – something more ambitious than the former Yugoslavia because it would include countries like Romania, Albania and Bulgaria. In fact, it would resemble something very similar to the Stalin Dimitrov Plan scotched by Tito in 1948.

According to the idea’s proponents, such a federation would work more effectively if it was composed of ethnically pure units. So, Bosnia itself was destroyed as a multi-ethnic state and put together again as an uneasy federation of ethnically-based groups. Croatia still has Serbs in Eastern Slavonia but complaints about the treatment of this minority persist – even if they have been put on the ‘back-burner’ while Croat cooperation is sought in the Kosovo war. Anyway, Croatian nationalism has been even less popular with the international community than the Serb variety. Although the Milosevic regime was responsible for waging war on these two countries during the early nineteen nineties the West never tried convincingly to stop this happening.

Further south, multi-ethnic Macedonia weighed down by the influx of ethnic Albanians into its territory is threatened with disintegration and there are signs that the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria is flexing its muscles. Watch for a possible change of borders there. Both Romania and Albania have minorities that could secede from the central authorities.

The fomentors of such a policy need to deal with weak and pliable states. This Serbia has failed to be. Although the Serbs will often resort to elaborate historical myths and tiresome nationalistic rhetoric they are less likely to be pushed around, as has been amply proved. In fact, the West's bullying has actually toughened Belgrade's stance on Kosovo. Whereas before 24th March 1999 many people would have abandoned the province they now see it is as being inextricably tied up with their own survival.

Of course, the US desire to reinvent the former Yugoslavia is also tied to economic considerations including the ambition to control oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia and the Caucasus region via the Black Sea. Whether the Russians, who have been somewhat supine in the Kosovo conflict, will also accept such acts of economic imperialism remains to be seen.

Repercussions

Hundreds of thousands of people have been rendered homeless and many others maimed and killed as a result of the West's political machinations and military blunders since 24th March 1999. NATO leaders' pronouncements that this conflict is about human rights seems to be a cruel and dishonest fig leaf put forward to hide strategic ambitions in the Balkans.

Unhappily, the Hague War Crimes Tribunal is unlikely to be a forum for objective justice, as presently composed. Far from promoting the rule of law the Tribunal is controlled by NATO countries: the chief judge is American, the chief prosecutor Canadian. Until NATO took sides in this conflict this was not necessarily a flaw of the Tribunal but now its impartiality must be questioned.

This means that no one from a NATO country is likely to face prosecution for war crimes – such as alleged breaches of the Geneva Convention. However, the words of Major-General Curtis LeMay who spearheaded the bombing of Japan in World War 11, including the dropping of the first atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki could be prophetic: "I wasn't particularly worried about getting the job done. I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal". It remains to be seen who will win this war and what the response of countries like China will be to the outcome.

Even if the conflict stops with a carefully crafted NATO 'victory' the region will remain unstable with more wars – between Albanian and Albanian, for example – possible. The followers of Ibrahim Rugova and those of the KLA are already deeply distrustful of one another – the former are alleged to control large sums of money collected as taxes from the Albanian diaspora over the past few years. The KLA, according to the *Wall Street Journal* (20/5/99) would dearly like to gain access to these funds. Either side could be joined by Albanians from Albania proper who support one side or the other as well as different political formations in Albania itself.

And, far from having their hands burnt, it is also likely that the period of reconstruction that will, inevitably, follow the conflict will offer Western governments fresh opportunities for meddling in the internal politics of Serbia and the rest of the Balkans. Large numbers of consultants, analysts and experts will descend to 'rebuild' the country - and its neighbours. There will be rich rewards for those who do what the donors want. A major sticking point for Western politicians in the past has been Serbia's failure to enter into the right kind of business deals; all these issues will be on the table again.

In other words, there is little optimism that much good will come out of the tragic war over Kosovo. Other places have been watching events in the Balkans with interest. For example, a Polish diplomat publicly stated that neighbouring Belarus 'met all the conditions' for a similar invasion by the West. And during the recent presidential campaign in Slovakia, people have

been told by state and private media that if they vote for Vladimir Meciar the country will meet the same fate as Yugoslavia. In the Caucasus region there is unease about the future of disputed regions like Nagorno Karabakh.

The question is: will the United States and its allies have the stomach for taking on any more adventures of this kind? If they do, the world could face the nightmare predicted in George Orwell's *1984* with small, low-grade wars going on all the time while people become dehumanized, impoverished and ultimately reduced to meaninglessness.