

The Kosova war, 1999

The national question in Yugoslavia

By Barry Finger

Workers' Liberty 55, April 1999

THE INDEPENDENT Stalinist regime of Tito retains an allure for broad swathes of the left, not only for a championing a form of "workers' management", now generally discredited as largely fraudulent, but also for having pioneered a resolution to the thorny national question on a progressive basis.

That this should continue to find some resonance at this late date is truly remarkable, given the rapidity with which the old Yugoslav state federation unraveled and given the revival of the particularly ugly form of Serbian chauvinism which has kept the region in turmoil for the past decade. A more accurate perspective would reveal that the resurgence of all kinds of separatist movements – from republican nationalism to Serbian semi-fascism – was nourished and exacerbated by the bureaucratic political and social monopoly of Titoite Stalinism which officially recognised nationality as the only possible and legitimate source of difference in Yugoslavia.

Post-war Yugoslavia consisted of several southern Slavic nations and as many as 15 Slavic and non-Slav national minorities. Unitary in its original structure, but officially described as a federal state consisting of six republics and two autonomous regions incorporated into the Serbian republic, early Titoite politics emphasised greater centralisation and subordination to the federal party and state leadership.

The problem of national equality, in the 1953 constitution, de-emphasised the autonomy of the republics and officially looked forward to the merger of cultures into a single Yugoslav melting pot, where peoples were severed from their pasts. Minorities were pressed to assimilate into the dominant national culture. Paramount in these considerations remained the concern that the political regime would be imperiled if national tensions increased, which was precisely the inevitable result of such heavy-handed manoeuvrings.

Later when the first inevitable signs of



discontent finally erupted, Tito shelved this crude attempt at national amalgamation and discovered the virtues of "divide and conquer". The various national groups were set against one another so that the aspiration of the one served to frustrate that of the others. This controlled release of national aspirations operated to deflect hostility from the social system and its ruling class, redirecting it towards other ethnic populations. It therefore served to atomise and harmlessly diffuse opposition from below.

The Croatian bureaucracy in the late 1960s, for instance, was pitted against the Serbians, with Tito and a few federal leaders reserving for themselves the role of impartial judge. Croatian nationalists were consequently eliminated in the early 1970s, balanced by an even more sweeping removal of their Serbian opponents. Both local leaderships were invariably and predictably replaced by minor and more obedient bureaucrats. This rule by manipulation necessarily bred the universal suspicion that each nationality was indirectly ruled by whatever national bureaucracy temporarily had the ear of Tito and the federal regime.

The Tito regime, in any case, could not answer national pressures with an extension of democracy. Yet without democracy, real national reconciliation and the individual motivation needed for true socialist plan-

ning were quite simply inconceivable. It instead kept national hostilities simmering by extending the market and by increasing the powers of the republics without democratising the party/state.

These reforms themselves, perceived as a capitulation to the more wealthy republics of Croatia and Slovenia, reversed the modestly redistributive tendencies that had previously characterised federal investment, development and allocation policies. Bureaucratic decentralisation transferred control over the surplus from the centre into the hands of the constituent republican bureaucracies. These mechanisms had the divisive effect of enhancing inequalities thereby arousing suspicions that certain wealthier nations were officially sanctioned by these arrangements. The local Stalinist autocrats that rose to the fore pursuant to these reforms were merely miniatures of their socially narrow and culturally stifling federal counterparts.

With the 1974 Constitution these developments were codified insofar as the only recognised source of distinction among

Party leaders was now based on their alleged defence of local ethnic economic and social interests. Leaders required nationalist support as a counterweight to federal pressures, but had to tread lightly in invoking nationalist ardour without provoking ethnic unrest. Favour with Tito for any clique remained tethered to its demonstrated and "unique" abilities to keep nationalist passions under control.

The shift in bureaucratic power did not and could not promote a broader understanding among nations and greater solidarity. Indeed, there were no federal — any more than there were democratic — institutions where workers of different nationalities could meaningfully participate in developing mutual confidences based on the pursuit of common interests. As the party became more and more confederal, the repressive powers of the centre could no longer, with the demise of Tito, contain the centrifugal forces which Yugoslav Stalinism had unleashed.

Oppose intervention? In the name of what?

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THE OLD Yugoslav state broke down because, over the last decade, aggressive Serb chauvinism provoked and alarmed the smaller peoples, Croats and others, of the Yugoslav Federation.

At the heart of the chaos into which Yugoslavia has now dissolved is the predatory expansion of the Serbian state, led by neo-Stalinists whose regime has a great deal of popular support. They utilise people such as the Serbs in the territory claimed by Croatia to serve a drive which is essentially a drive to create the largest possible "Greater Serbia". It is a primitive form of imperialism, whose real content is summed up in the phrase which expresses their policy for non-Serbs: "ethnic cleansing".

Nationalism and chauvinism inevitably breeds... nationalism and chauvinism.

The Croats were pushed and provoked by the Serbs. But when Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia, large numbers of Serbs — substantial majorities in some parts of the territory of historic Croatia — were cut off from other Serbs and trapped as a helpless minority in an alien state.

In the Croatian state set up under German patronage during World War Two, as many as half of the Serbs in Croatia — perhaps 3/4 of a million men, women and children — were massacred by Croat chauvinists, the Ustashe.

While Serb state leaders such as Slobodan Milosevic whose policies through the 80s led finally to the destruction of Yugoslavia, were, chauvinists, people motivated by the desire to aggrandise Serbia, the Serbs in independent Croatia did not have to be chauvinists to resolve to fight rather than submit to outright Croatian rule. They needed only to remember the not too distant past and look around them at the efforts being made to revive Ustashe banners, uniforms and catchcries in the new Croatia.

Thus while millions in Croatia — to stick to the one example — felt the understandable need for separation, they could not achieve independence without oppressing and threatening others. And not only in Yugoslavia. The whole of the Balkans is a crazy pavement of peoples and fragments of peoples interlocked and overlapping, and standing in the way of each others' full autonomy.

From this it followed that maintenance of a broad federal structure was the best possible way for the peoples of Yugoslavia to arrange their affairs. But the structures broke down; the central state apparatus became

** The editorials and unsigned pieces in this collection were written by Sean Matgamna

increasingly a tool of Serb domination, serving Serb expansion. Everything dissolved into the bloody chaos of ethnic and national wars which is now raging.

Despite all the crimes of the Croatian chauvinists, the Croats' right to self-determination became the major issue between Croatia and Serbia; socialists have to uphold that right, championing the minority rights of the Serbs within Croatia but denying to Serbia any right to use those minorities as a pretext for trying to conquer as much of Croatia as they can.

The Serb chauvinists were as aggressive against Kosova and Slovenia where there were no big problems of an oppressed Serbian minority as against Croatia.

Yugoslavia today may offer a picture of their own future to many other ethnically interlaced groups of people, including the occupants of large parts of the former Soviet Union.

Within this situation there is a growing demand for Western — UN, NATO — intervention to bring an end to the fighting. It is by no means certain that there will be Western military intervention. If there is, it is unlikely to bring peace or create a political framework within which the peoples of the former Yugoslavia can coexist. What military intervention would most likely amount to is action to stop Serbia expanding further, and to “freeze” the current carve-up of Bosnia. Already, anti-Serb sanctions are being mounted.

Is the conflict turning into something like the build-up to another edition of last year's war against Iraq? The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait quickly became the occasion for a savage Western war against Iraq.

Should socialists “defend Serbia” from “imperialist aggression”?

If there is Western military intervention it will be a police action to avert chaos on the borders of the immensely powerful European community: it will be a limited police action. If the cluster of wars now going on are allowed to burn themselves out, they will go on for a long time, many thousands will die, hundreds of thousands and maybe millions will be “ethnically cleansed” into refugee camps, and “Greater Serbia” may become a lot greater than it is now.

As socialists and anti-imperialists, we have no confidence in the Western capitalist powers: we warn against relying on NATO or UN intervention; we advocate working-class independence. But in the name of what alternative would we denounce and condemn, and demand an immediate end, to a limited police action by the big powers?

On the ground that everything that “impe-

rialist” Western European states do is *ipso facto* “imperialist” and wrong, even if it has desirable results? This is not Marxist or working class politics but absurd “oppositionism”, nihilism.

On the ground that “outside” intervention is always wrong? What meaning can such a “principle” have in face of the bloody ethnic melée which is engulfing the peoples of Yugoslavia? Why has Serbia more “right” in Bosnia than a UN army acceptable to the majority of Bosnians would have? That reasoning is absurd.

On the ground that neo-Stalinist Serbia is a “socialist” or “workers’” state? It is nothing of the sort, but even if it were, then that would not require of socialists that we back Serbian imperialism, with all its inevitable slaughters and “ethnic cleansings”. Such a position would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of a decades-old “tradition” of kitsch Trotskyist “defencist” policies for the Stalinist states. It is sheer nonsense, on every level.

Or should we oppose a big power police action because we believe the destruction of Serb power, the prevention of the consolidation of the Greater Serb state is the real goal of Western “imperialist” intervention? For certain, the Western powers will only intervene militarily, with all the accompanying costs, dangers and precedents, to serve their own interests.

There are powers with imperialist ambitions to gain semi-colonies and spheres of influence in Yugoslavia and the whole area round the Black Sea.

The UN, the EC, and NATO will not, however, lend their banners to Greek or Turkish ambitions! Germany will not vote for a UN operation which is a cover for neo-colonial action by the US — as the Gulf war against Iraq was, to a large extent — and no other power is strong enough to be able to use the UN and NATO banners as its own. Indeed that is the reason why there has been no military intervention, and may well yet be none: the intervention will not give any big power a colony, or a sphere of influence, that it did not have before. From a capitalist point of view, it will have no advantage beyond stabilising the region for normal business, and they may have great difficulties even doing that.

That is why the governments so eager to send troops and weapons to the aid of “poor little Kuwait” are so cautious about Bosnia.

To be sure, the Western powers would probably be happy to kick Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbian neo-Stalinists into history's abyss, and that might give some of them an added reason to intervene. But even a big war on Serbia might not do that, as

Saddam Hussein could tell them.

Their main interest if they intervene will be to secure peace on the European Community's borders and 'stability' in Europe.

Absurd too is the idea that Western capital — in the first place German capital — needs military occupation to secure its domination in the former Eastern European Stalinist states. It has no such need.

The normal workings of the market — the sheer economic power of the West Europeans — make their domination in the East a certainty in the years to come — unless the working class should take power there. Right now the working class is in no condition to take power. Military intervention will just add to their costs, not facilitate West European capitalist penetration of the former Russian Empire.

If US and West European capital tries to play the international policeman on the EC's borders, we should counterpose to it something better. What exists in Yugoslavia now is worse. We are against the existing capitalist states, but we do not want to replace them with something worse: chaos is a lot worse.

The best outcome from the Yugoslav

chaos would be for the working class in the various conflicting peoples to come together, settle accounts with their own chauvinists and tin-pot imperialists and restore a federation, this time under the control of the workers.

Short of that, socialists should want an end to the bloodshed and chaos. We have no confidence in the big capitalist powers and do not call on them to intervene: but if the West does intervene socialists can not side with Serbia and become "defencists" for Greater Serb imperialism.

Socialists should not declare, explicitly or implicitly, that the best thing is for the Yugoslav conflict to take its course with the strongest coming out at the end on top of the bloody pile.

Those socialists who adopt this posture because they want to be "anti-imperialists" will prove in their own way the basic truth that there is no consistently revolutionary politics without thought, clarity and Marxist theory. It will unfortunately, be a negative proof. This "anti-imperialism" is not anti-imperialism at all but support for the weaker and more primitive imperialism — Serbian imperialism!

Who will save the Kosovars?

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"An individual, a group, a party or a class that is capable of 'objectively' picking its nose while it watches men drunk with blood, and incited from above, massacring defenceless people is condemned by history to rot and become worm-eaten while it is still alive.

"On the other hand, a party or a class that rises up against every abominable action wherever it has occurred, as vigorously and unhesitatingly as a living organism reacts to protect its eyes when they are threatened with external injury — such a party or class is sound at heart."

L D Trotsky, February 1913 [On the Balkan Atrocities]

"The socialist who aids directly or indirectly in perpetuating the privileged position of one nation at the expense of another, who accommodates himself to colonial slavery, who draws a line of distinction between races and colours in the question of human rights, who helps the bourgeoisie of the metropolis to maintain its rule over the colonies... instead of aiding the armed uprising of the colonies; such a socialist deserves to be branded with infamy, if not with a bullet."

L D Trotsky, Manifesto of the 2nd

Congress of the Communist International, August 1920.

ON THE evening of Wednesday 24 March NATO launched the first of a still continuing series of air strikes in the rump Yugoslav state. Their stated reason was to put a stop to the Serb chauvinist drive against ethnic Albanians, who form 90% of Kosova's people. The immediate consequence of the bombing was an enormous escalation of the Serb drive against the Kosovars. With the demonic energy of starved wild beasts released from a cave, Milosevic's ethnic cleansers attacked the Kosovars.

Within a week, more than half of Kosova's two million ethnic Albanians had been uprooted or killed. In Kosova's capital 200,000 people were driven out at gun point, and Pristina became a ghost town.

It almost beggars belief that the consequences of its bombing offensive were not anticipated by NATO. For NATO continues to oppose self-determination for the Kosovars. NATO remains committed to the Rambouillet Agreement. Under this, Kosova remains in the Serb state, with Serbian policemen to maintain "security", and 1,500 Serb soldiers on its borders. NATO is "intervening" from the skies to control the "internal" affairs of a

state, “Yugoslavia” (Serbia), whose stability it considers essential and to whose continued possession of Kosova it has solemnly committed itself!

This is what Clinton said in a speech broadcast to the Serbian people: “The NATO allies support the Serbian people to maintain Kosova as part of your country.” This could commit eventual occupation forces to repress the Kosovars! They fear that independence for the Kosovars will encourage others to secede from their Balkan states and thus whip up a new storm of instability. This makes NATO as much of an enemy of Kosovan independence as Milosevic, and a potential partner of Milosevic’s in a deal at the Kosovar’s expense.

But NATO will not kill and disperse 90% of the population of Kosova. For the Kosovars, the immediate difference between NATO and Milosevic and between autonomy [even in a truncated Kosova] and being killed or driven out of Kosova is no small one: it is a matter of life and death — death for an unknowable number of persons and for the Kosovar ethnic Albanian people as an entity.

Everything NATO has so far done suggests blundering incoherence and political and military incompetence. Clinton and Blair deal in gesture politics. They may well, even after so much experience of him, have misunderstood and underestimated what the serious Serb chauvinist and “nation builder” Milosevic would do. Clinton and Blair and the people around them are politicians for whom principles are carefully crafted sound-bites and catch phrases; commitment is working hard to get elected and, once elected, saying and doing anything it takes to win high office; historical perspective is thinking of the next election; and action is mimicry and gesture. They combine pursuit of state interest and high politics with pseudo-democratic gestures and Palmerstonian poses, not, like the mid-nineteenth century Prime Minister Palmerston, with gunboats, but with rockets and bomber planes. They possess (not quite) godlike technology and power that allows them to make war without the political liability of high casualties on their own side. These are people from whose mouths the words of the much-quoted US general in Vietnam, who “had to destroy the city in order to save it”, would flow smoothly and in whose consciences it would sit easily and cause little self-doubt.

The crudity of their tools is a pointer to the crude botching and butchering of the political solution they may produce in the final deal with Milosevic. Alchemists, amateurs, witch doctors of world government, they throw bombs at the Serbs, most of whom

don’t know the scale of Serbia’s slaughter and ethnic cleansing in Kosova. They do not, as consistent democrats would, ally or seek to ally with either the Serbs or Kosovar people; they do not seek to facilitate self-emancipation of either Kosovars or Serbs. The Rambouillet Agreement provides for dispossessing the Kosovars of the arms they have and their submission to Serb armed forces. They refuse to arm the Kosovars. They deploy a crude and savage weapon, bombing for the wrong political goals, at best, the Balkan status quo, at worst for a carve-up Kosova deal with Milosevic. The Serbian economy may be thrown back decades.

Yet, though it is necessary, it is not enough to say this and similarly true things about those who are now intervening in the affairs of the Yugoslav state, and their tactics and goals.

There can be no reasonable doubt that though the bombing gave him his cover, Milosevic had long planned and was already carrying out a “cleansing” offensive against the Kosovars, and would, bombing or no bombing, have found occasion to escalate it. The idea that sustained bombing of Serbia can’t affect what happens in Kosova is self-evident nonsense. The question is whether by the time it takes effect, there’ll be any Kosovars left in Kosova, except the less than 10% of the population that is Serb.

But from what point of view is it possible to oppose NATO and, in fact, side with Serbia? Those who shout “stop the war” mean stop only one part of the war: for Milosevic will not listen and obediently stop his war against the Kosovars. Those who give this a “revolutionary” gloss by talking of the socialist duty of “defeatism” are primarily defeatists in relation to the Kosovars. They are the heralds and allies of Serbian triumphalism. If this is an inter-imperialist war, then Serbia represents an expansionary dark ages tribalist imperialism and NATO modern civilisation, intervening not to conquer Serbia but, as would-be world policemen, to stop the wiping out of the Kosovars. There is even some reason to think that US and British liberal “gesture politics” has led to action that the NATO establishment would not otherwise have taken.

Many points of view merge to make up the anti-war movement. They twine and combine to reinforce each other.*

1. Pacifism — war is never justified. The inglorious conclusion is: leave the Kosovars to their fate. They have an urge to minimise the horror of Serbia’s genocide. In effect, most of them wind up to one degree or another as Serbia’s apologists. Their anti-war effort is one of Serbia’s military assets.

2. Stalinist and quasi Stalinist attitudes. "Yugoslavia" is "progressive", it has a "workers' state tradition", Milosevic calls himself a socialist. This point of view draws on old reflexes and instincts of loyalty to the USSR and its bloc: the Kosovars should be dealt with as harshly as necessary. This is a hard, blinkered, unteachable pro-Serbia element.

3. Anti-Germanism, overlapping Little Englandism and hostility to European unity. Tony Benn embodies this viewpoint especially. This view mixes reminiscences of World War Two with resentment of Germany's renewal.

4. "Anti-imperialism" — against one side only. Here it is to side with the Dark Ages Serb ethnic imperialism. In fact it is not anti-imperialism at all but sectarian anti-capitalism. "Imperialism" inheres in advance capitalism, and therefore in NATO, irrespective of its policy or the policy of its opponent. The truly imperialist element in NATO's attitude to the Kosovars, if it comes out in an attempt to enforce a deal with Milosevic at the expense of the Kosovars, will have the support of the "anti-imperialists".

5. Anti-Americanism. Socialists have no reason to support the pretensions of the US, or NATO, to be the world's cop. But the anti-Americanism tapped into by the "peace campaign" is an old stagnant pool left behind by the Stalinist flood tide: it is, to change the image, the negative fossil imprint of blocism, after the Stalinist bloc has disappeared! It is deprived of any sense except incoherent anti-capitalism.

6. Insular indifference to the fate of the Kosovars.

The mixing together of these elements in a broad "peace movement" to "stop the war" (that is, leave Serbia a free hand) creates immense confusion. It works like too much booze against rational discussion.

One of two things: either Kosova and the fate of the Kosovars is the central issue here, or NATO's bombing is. If the Kosovars and the Serbian attempt to kill or drive out over 90% of the people of Kosova are central, then NATO must be seen in relation to this, not the other way round.

We say that the axial issue is Kosova! The Kosovars have the right to make any alliance they can get, with NATO or with the devil, to save themselves from destruction. But the left does not have to and should not follow them and mimic them.

The left should not extend political credence and credit to NATO. We cannot do anything other than condemn Milosevic and want his defeat. Such defeat will not lead to the subjugation of the Serbs: Milosevic's victory will lead to the annihilation of the

Kosovars. That alone is enough to determine our attitude. One did not have to positively support the North Vietnamese regime to be pleased that in 1978 they invaded Cambodia and stamped out the murderous Khmer Rouge regime. Or need to be a supporter of the Indira Gandhi's regime in India to be glad that India invaded the former East Pakistan in 1971 and put an end to the genocidal drive of the West Pakistanis against the Bengalis.

To say stop bombing now, without demanding Yugoslavian (Serbian) troops out of Kosova, the arming of the Kosovars and independence for Kosova is to give up on the Kosovars. If bombing stops will the ethnic cleansing stop? The opposite is likely to be true — it will escalate. We say arm the Kosovars!

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: it is to misunderstand both reality and the responsibilities of socialists for us to urge positive measures — troops, for example — on NATO. If they land troops it will be for their own reasons and not ours.

*The reader will find all of these elements and more in the SWP pamphlet, *Stop the War*. (Unsigned, it is reputed to be the work of the shameless academic Alex Calinicos). This is surely a classic of its kind. It is full of misrepresentation of reality, of lies of omission and lies by arranging facts so as to prevent the reader putting them in their proper relationship to each other, hiding the important things in the clutter. It minimises the enormity of Serbia's drive against the Kosovars, presenting such things as an everyday affairs in the world, rooting and building their own hypocrisy now, on the foundations of the habitual hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, which of course they denounce. It quibbles pedantically: is this "genocide"? It shouts down straw men, piously insisting that this is not another holocaust (by the way, who worth listening to has argued that it is?) or Milosevic another Hitler. They use detailed comparisons of Hitler's factory-style slaughter with Milosevic in a way that can only be intended to minimise what is happening in Kosova and "exonerate" Milosevic. A classic piece of work, in the Stalinist tradition — the sort of thing George Orwell analysed in *Politics and the English Language*. The SWP has a chameleon history of adopting attitudes and positions and "aspects" of other tendencies and traditions. For example, its notion of the revolutionary party was pioneered in Britain by the Healyite WRP. It is now, it seems, moving into CP territory. This campaign seems to be somebody's brainstorm, based on the delusion that, with pamphlets like this, and Socialist Worker's coverage, you can lie a big anti-war movement into existence. It is eerily like, but infinitely worse than, the strange events of

1992, when, amidst general working class defeat and the lowest level of industrial militancy in decades the SWP briefly reacted to an upswing of public indignation — a lot of it middle class, some of it Tory — at the Tory government's treatment of the remaining coal miners by calling for an all-out general strike to bring down the government!

Diary of a union conference

By Patrick Murphy

Workers' Liberty 55, April 1999

FRIDAY 2 APRIL. Arrive at the NUT Conference in Brighton expecting a lively and constructive weekend. Teachers are deeply angry about the Green Paper proposals for performance related pay. Yet it is hard to think about anything but the unfolding crisis in Kosova. The previous week I had been to an involved discussion on the issue. This conflict is not reducible to the well-worn slogans — “the main enemy is at home”, “stop the war”, etc.

Politics starts immediately with a Socialist Teachers Alliance (STA) meeting. The main issue is, rightly, the Green Paper, but I am approached by some comrades who hope to put the war on Conference agenda. This process requires a petition to suspend standing orders, with 200 signatures. That wins the right to argue on the conference floor for a debate. Two thirds of the delegates must then vote for the suspension. The motion I am shown heavily condemns the war, but my main concern is that it advocates Kosovan rights. It does, but in too low and too subordinate a key.

Later that night. I am preoccupied with the tactics required to fight the Green Paper. I am running between two left meetings (STA and Campaign for a Democratic, Fighting Union)... When I get to the second STA meeting, it is obvious that things have moved on considerably on Kosova. The chair announces that the SWP are very keen to push for a discussion and would like this to be a joint effort. They only have one condition: there must be no mention of self-determination for Kosova! A WL comrade moves an amendment, to support independence for Kosova. It is seconded by a Socialist Party comrade and supported by Socialist Outlook.

The leading figure in the STA, Bernard Regan, argues three equally ridiculous propositions: that we must give way to the SWP

here, that their tactical judgement might be right; that we might get broader support without reference to Kosovar rights; that independence was different from self-determination: who are we to say what the Kosovars want? He was really saying that the Stalinists on the NEC, and their supporters in Conference, would be less likely to support a motion which championed the Kosovars. The meeting, not very big by that time, voted against including support for Kosovan independence.

Saturday 3 April. Despite the enormity of the bread and butter issues this year, the war debate ripples on. One of our comrades asked the SWP's most senior NUT person why they had insisted on dropping self-determination for Kosova from the motion. Up until this week, he assured her, it was their position to support Kosovar rights. However, that was now an abstraction: the Kosovars had been driven out; there was no Kosova to speak of and probably never would be. It was chilling in its frankness. It sits very awkwardly with the SWP's support for the Arab Palestinians' “right” to all of present day Israel. I suspect the real motive, as ever with the SWP, is organisational rather than political. It cannot have escaped their attention that the anti-war protests, such as they are, consist overwhelmingly of Serb chauvinists and old Stalinists and fellow travellers who think the break-up of Yugoslavia is (a) a terrible thing and (b) all the fault of Germany and western imperialism. Support for the Kosovars doesn't go down well with this audience and that's a far more important consideration than the rights of a faraway people of whom, as Neville Chamberlain said of the Czechs at the time of the Munich surrender to Hitler, the SWPers know nothing.

Meanwhile, the London-based clique at the head of the STA have got themselves all het up about an insult thrown at their beloved leader by WL's Industrial Organiser, who said to Regan, privately, that his position was “chetnik”. The incredible preciousness of this — we are routinely called “unionists”, “pro-imperialists”, etc. — leads me to conclude that a smokescreen is being created to avoid proper discussion of the substantial issues.

Sunday 4 April. Every so often something happens to reassure you that you have got things right. This morning I am given a leaflet which reminds me why I wanted nothing to do with a broad coalition of all those opposed to this war. The leaflet has a number of bold headlines. The third catches my eye: “Stay out of Serbia's civil war”. Incensed, I go back to the woman. “What exactly is Serbia's civil war?”, I ask. Puzzlement and an answer

which amounts to "you must have seen the news". Of course I have, but why does she describe what is going on as a civil war? How would I describe it, she asks? As a war of conquest and genocide by Serb imperialists, I suggest. She searches the leaflet for some reference to Kosovar rights like she would be pleased to find it, and then gives up, declaring that she cannot defend it.

Feeling a bit unsatisfied with her lack of fight, I tackle her colleague, someone I know will defend it, one Hank "the tank" Roberts, NUT Secretary in Brent. Hank believes no state should be needlessly divided up by nationalists: he is against Wales separating from England and, when I press him, against Kurds separating from Turkey or Iraq. A hopeless case. I come away more convinced than ever that no left worth the name would support an anti-war campaign on the same basis as these people, the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist).

Later that night. The SWP insist that they should have the speeches moving and seconding the suspension (and the motion if it is discussed), reneging on a prior agreement with the STA. The STA cave in...

Monday 5 April. The attempt to suspend standing orders fails to get a two-thirds majority. Would it have been more likely with support for the Kosovars? I think so. There is no way of knowing and, in any case, that isn't the point. Immediately after encouraging the conference not to allow time to discuss it, the leadership take up 15 minutes of debating time with a statement on Kosova by the Deputy General Secretary, Steve Sinnot — bland, empty, delivered in a tone appropriate to a report on the union's budget.

Later that evening. At the SWP fringe meeting on Kosova. Alex Callinicos adds to the sense of unreality by questioning whether it really is reasonable to describe what is happening to the Kosovar Albanians as "massacre", "mass murder" or "genocide" or whether these are just the lies of western imperialism. Hearing this I remember the earlier argument, that there is no Albanian Kosova left, as everyone has been driven out. So what, if not the Serbian drive against them, has forced these people to such a desperate state that they would leave home in their thousands?

Is a left which sees this genocide and yet fails to place the rights of the Kosovars at the centre of their concerns a left worth having? This weekend I have looked, not for the first time, at many of my fellow socialists and thought: if this was all there was on the left I would want no part of it. It is not only a matter of the left we have, but of the left we

can and will rebuild!

The left and the Balkans conflict

Workers' Liberty 55, April 1999

THREE PEOPLE around a table in a backstreet pub between Kings Cross and Euston stations in London. They have come from the Friends Meeting House on Euston Road, where Tony Benn MP, the one-time Catholic bishop Bruce Kent, the journalist Paul Foot, and others, have spoken against NATO's bombing of Serbia. The three are old college friends who have not seen each other in a long while.

Tony: That was a hell of a meeting, eh? It's many years since we've had an overflow meeting like that! Footsie and Bruce Kent were in great form. And Benn is fantastic!

Kate: I thought it was a dreadful meeting, Alice in Wonderland stuff — the Kosovars were scarcely mentioned. Nobody said clearly that the great crime now is Serbia's genocidal war on the Kosovars. Nobody talked about them or their rights. A man from outer space dropping in on that meeting would get a radically false picture of what's been happening in the Balkans. At the overflow meeting Alex Callinicos, one of your leading SWP comrades, Tony, blamed NATO for what's happening to the Kosovars! Even if the bombing of Serbia was useful to Slobodan Milosevic in launching the "ethnic cleansing", to put the main blame on NATO is bonkers. Because Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939 we blame Britain for the Holocaust? I was a bit surprised that you haven't gone the whole hog and called for "NATO out of Kosova!" instead of calling for the withdrawal of the real occupying army, Serbia's.

Tony: That would be plain stupid: NATO is not in Kosova. Your problem is that you're soft on imperialism!

Kate: Your problem is that you are siding with Serbia-Yugoslavia!

Linda: Actually, Kate, on the way to the pub I rang Stan in Glasgow, where there was an anti-war demonstration this evening. The SWPers there were chanting "NATO out of Kosova!"

Kate: Yes? Then I'm incapable of imagining a viable bit of *reductio ad absurdum* that isn't instantly overtaken by reality: these days the so-called "left" is satire-proof.

Tony: Obviously they were anticipating events.

Kate: Everyone knows that the Scots left is

more advanced than the English!

Tony: Look: “the main enemy is at home!” — as in Luxemburg’s and Liebknecht’s slogan in World War 1. We don’t live in Yugoslavia or Kosova: we live in a NATO country that is bombing Serbia. Our job is to oppose this Government and this war. We can’t affect events in Kosova; we can maybe, effect what Britain does. We can organise the youth — there could be a big anti-war movement, like that against the Vietnam war.

Linda: I think, Kate, that you are just soft on NATO and imperialism. The bombing is a crime against humanity! Any bombing would be. We can give a lead to thousands of people angered by it. There are tremendous opportunities for the left in this situation!

Tony: “NATO out of the Balkans” makes sense in that perspective!

Kate: This is the politics of the lunatic asylum! Naturally, we neither trust NATO nor give it support: we must warn people that NATO has backed Serbia keeping its grip on Kosova since the current Yugoslav crisis started in 1988; remind them of how NATO maintained an arms embargo to stop the Bosniacs defending themselves against Serb “ethnic cleansing” and how murderous the supposed “safe havens” there proved for the Bosniacs; and warn them that NATO is likely to rat on the Kosovars now too.

We must expose the cynical big power interests behind the NATO action and point out that it is not arming the Kosovars so that they can defend themselves. NATO has been consistently against Kosovan self-determination, and even more so the independence they clearly now want. No trust in NATO, bombs or troops! But the greatest crime being perpetrated now is not NATO bombing, but the mass murder and the driving out of the ethnic Albanians by the Serb state and its Kosovar-Serb accomplices. Already, more than half the Kosovars have been killed or driven out. To “forget” about that is a political crime! Our first and foremost responsibility is to side with the Kosovars. To side with the Serbs beggars belief! Yet that is clearly what concentrating on denouncing NATO comes down to.

Tony: The main enemy is at home! Liebknecht knew...

Kate: So you think this, like the First and Second World wars, is a war between imperialist camps?

Tony: No, it is not, obviously. Yugoslavia is not an imperialist country.

Linda: I’m not even sure it is a capitalist country.

Tony: Britain and NATO are imperialist powers and that’s decisive. The enemy is at home. When they make war we oppose it.

The details don’t matter! We ally with anyone who agrees with that all-defining point.

Kate: We are on a point of principle opposed to everything the Western European powers do? If what Serbia is doing in Kosova is not imperialism, what is it? When Serbia first seized Kosova in 1913, Trotsky described Serbia’s role as imperialist. Even if you choose to say that Serbia’s role in Kosova is something other than imperialist, why and on what principle is that something — call it what you like — a lesser evil than imperialism. We are — in principle? — opposed to all war?

Tony: What should we do? Back NATO? Back the bombing?

Kate: We must maintain, or rather develop, the working class as an independent political force. Right now that means making the left consistently independent. It can’t mean siding with the Serbian state. It can’t mean ignoring the issues in dispute! It can’t mean pretending that the Kosovars don’t exist — or that they don’t matter!

Tony: You can’t be more independent than when you flatly oppose your “own” government’s war drive!

Kate: Depends. If you make a principle of saying “yes” when they say “no” and “no” when they say “yes”, then you aren’t independent at all — you are only a negative reflection of whatever the ruling class policy is.

Independence consists first of all in making an independent working-class analysis and judgement. You abandon that duty if you define yourself always by mechanically inverting what the ruling class is and does. You become utterly dependent; the independence your “oppositionism” seems to give you is entirely an illusion! You can’t always say “yes” to their “no” and “no” to their “yes”.

Tony: So what in what NATO is doing do you say “yes” to?

Kate: Put like that — nothing! The old cry of the Marxist movement “not a penny for this system” is our basic approach. We are “the party of intransigent opposition”. Within that fundamental approach we examine the issues honestly and concretely. Even Old Labour right-wingers like Denis Healey and some Tories have pointed out that the bombing can’t possibly achieve its stated objectives, stopping the genocidal drive against the Kosovars. For some, the conclusion is that ground forces too are needed.

Tony: You advocate ground forces? You’d support their deployment? You’d give political credence and trust to NATO — in Britain, to the Blair Government! That is surrender to imperialism! I’d rather support Serbia than

Blair and NATO!

Kate: We shouldn't support or give credence to any of them. But neither do we give support or credence to NATO's opponents — who in this case are worse, tribalist butchers out of the Dark Ages! We should build the so-called "Third Camp" of the working class and the oppressed.

In the first place, now, that means an honest appraisal of the issues. You can't honestly appraise anything if you start out with the belief that you must negate, invert, your own ruling class policy, turn their policy inside out, support its opposite, give aid and comfort to its enemies — to a Slobodan Milosevic or a Saddam Hussein — because they are its enemies, no matter what they are or what they do.

Linda: The first thing is to organise a broad coalition against the war...

Kate: No — the first thing is to work out what's going on! Otherwise the "Marxists" will — as at tonight's meeting — wind up in an incoherent rotten coalition with pacifists like Bruce Kent, anti-Germans like Tony Benn, still fighting World War 2, and Stalinists like the Morning Star and Arthur Scargill! The real pioneers of the attitude your organisation now takes, Tony, is the Stalinist Morning Star, which reports everything from Slobodan Milosevic's point of view.

Linda: It is not the first time, you know, that Germans have bombed Serbia!

Kate: No: and you think that sort of rhetoric can decide the question, eh? What is NATO's policy?

Linda: They want to carve up the Balkan peninsula into tiny and impotent states, so they can dominate them: divide and rule! They fear that a big Yugoslavia would not be biddable. They resent the fact that Milosevic still calls himself a socialist. They fear what Scargill's Socialist Labour Party paper called "the workers' state tradition" in Serbia-Yugoslavia. They deliberately broke up Yugoslavia: German recognition of the Croatian secession was the first blow. They are aggressors, interfering in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia. Kosova is an internal Yugoslav affair! Yugoslavia has a right to defend its sovereignty and integrity.

Tony: In isolation, we might sympathise with the Kosovars: now they are playing into the hands of imperialism and reaction.

Kate: The politics of the madhouse! Of course the big capitalist powers want stability in the Balkans so that capitalism can thrive there. Everything else you've said is nonsense. There are about 10 million Serbs in Yugoslavia. The EU would feel threatened by a bigger, concentrated Serb population in a

larger territory? Why? How? War is politics by other means: what has been the big bourgeoisie's policy in Europe in the last half-century? To unite Europe. It is more united now than at any time in the last 1,500 years. The EU wants stability on its borders; of course capitalists want to exploit the Balkans and that is their central quarrel with Milosevic: the great de-stabilising force in the region throughout the '90s has been Serb chauvinism. In fact, all the big Western powers strongly favoured maintaining the Yugoslav federation until they began to see it as plainly unviable in 1990-91. They supported Milosevic when he suppressed autonomy in Kosova. Germany started urging EU recognition of Croatia only after more than 90% of Croatia's people had voted in a referendum to secede: the recognition itself came only after Serbia had invaded the newly-independent Croatia. Germany, the EU and the USA want states as big as possible and as stable as possible in the Balkans. They object to Milosevic not because he is a regional "strong man", and certainly not because he is any sort of a socialist, but because he is an erratic, unreliable and destructive strong man, cynically playing with plans for a Greater Serbia which cannot succeed. The idea that they need in the Balkans tiny impotent states makes no sense here. The capitalist powers do not need to physically conquer Yugoslavia to attain their basic capitalist goals: occupation would be expensive and risky. Short of a socialist revolution or a retreat to siege economics the Balkan states will naturally become fringe states of the EU — as Croatia and Slovenia already have.

Linda: The "Yugoslav" (Serbian) regime still calls itself socialist. It has a "workers' state tradition".

Kate: And NATO needs to go to war over that? Using its economic strength, European capitalism could quickly and peacefully put paid to any remnants of Stalinism in Yugoslavia. If Stalinism represents a "workers' state tradition", Milosevic is surely in that tradition, and adding to it! The idea that Europe and America are now waging a war of imperialist conquest is preposterous! Of course they are policing the Balkans, but...

Tony: They are establishing the right to bomb who they like, where they like, when they like. Capitalist world policemen! Why should we accept that? It will be used against the working class and socialists, too.

Kate: We should not accept it; but to side positively with the Belgrade regime against it is to commit moral and political suicide. An historical analogy: Britain abolished the slave trade — not slavery, but the international trade in slaves — in 1808. On the high

seas the powerful British navy enforced the ban against all nations. It was 30 years later before they abolished slavery in their own territory. The cotton industry, the leading technological power of the industrial revolution, continued until the 1860s to depend on US cotton grown by slaves, who were normally worked to death in less than a decade. What replaced the slave trade in the US was special slave-breeding stud farms for the provision of slaves. Certainly Britain used the abolition of the slave trade to assert its incontestable control of the high seas. The British navy would “rule the waves” until after World War Two. And of course they were hypocrites, continuing to have slavery in their prosperous West Indies colonies while suppressing the slave trade. Britain was at war with revolutionary France and, briefly, in 1812, with the revolutionary USA. Yet Britain did suppress the slave trade. Was that good or bad? Me, I’m glad, whatever their motives, that they stopped the slaving ships!

Tony: But NATO is an imperialist power!

Kate: NATO represents advanced capitalism! What specifically is its “imperialist” goal in the Balkans? Alright, they want stability in the Balkans so that capital can be safe there. If, in pursuit of that, they stop, or even limit, the slaughter and uprooting of the Kosovars, I’ll be glad of it. I won’t forget who they are and what they represent — and I’ll not trust them or preach trust in them. But I’ll be glad.

Tony: You’ll be glad that European capitalism is strong enough to prevent chaos on its borderlands? That is a conservative policy. Chaos is the midwife of revolution!

Kate: Out of ethnic wars, tribal wars, akin to wars of the Dark Ages, can come nothing but blood and bitterness and working class division. They can help generate revolution? Not our revolution! The working class must make that revolution: working class unity across the national divides is necessary. These wars — and of course, the Serbs in certain areas have been, and may again be, victims too — poison the working class. That is why a programme of consistent democracy is essential to the working class of the whole region: self-determination, a Balkan federation of the peoples, full rights for all the regional minorities, and absolute equality of rights for all. That is a basis for working class unity to fight for socialism!

Linda: You look to European capitalism to create the best conditions for the Balkan working class to advance? In World War 1, defence of “gallant Serbia” and poor little Belgium were the excuse on one side, and the need to defeat Tsarism on the other: you can’t go by the local issues! You must take in world politics. Whatever about the little local

issues, the decisive thing is to be defeatist towards our own government and its allies.

Kate: Forget the “little local issue”? It depends! Do you know that Lenin during World War 1 wrote that if an event like the savagely repressive German occupation of Belgium could be taken in isolation from the fact that, taken as a whole, the war was a war between two imperialist cartels to re-divide the world, then socialists would favour action even by capitalist states to redress the wrong done to the Belgians? Of course, in practice, the German invasion of Belgium and Northern France could not be taken in isolation.

Tony: Exactly! Neither can this.

Kate: So it is a case now of two imperialist cartels whose conflict overshadows the “little local issue” of destroying the Kosovar people? You side with one of them!

Tony: You are too literal!

Kate: Be as free and unliteral as you like: explain!

Tony: This is NATO self-aggrandisement: that is decisive, not the Kosovars. To focus on arming the Kosovars or independence for Kosova is to play into NATO’s hands. As Alex Callinicos said in *Socialist Worker*, a big Albania will also destabilise the region: “An Albanian national army, hardened by war and enjoying mass support in refugee camps throughout the Balkans, could threaten the integrity of half a dozen states throughout the region.”

Kate: Well, for all your talk of being the most vehement against everything the big powers do, there you echo the fundamental thread of their policy for the last 11 years: the smaller nations in ex-Yugoslavia should above all settle down, be quiet, not demand too much, and not cause trouble (and Milosevic should not provoke them quite so sorely that trouble becomes unavoidable). And it is, I’m sorry, as imperialistic, as disdainful of the rights of the oppressed peoples, as any argument you will find on any side in this whole affair. So much for your anti-imperialism!

In fact, the reason for your focus on denouncing NATO is not that this is a conflict of two imperialist blocs, a conflict within and by which the local issues are shaped and defined and overshadowed for us. It is that you are always defeatist towards advanced capitalism, whatever the issues. This is a pre-Marx attitude to capitalism — a prehistoric sectarianism that in practice here leads you to support Dark Ages Serbian imperialism!

Tony: You are saying capitalism can be progressive?

Kate: In so far as socialism is objectively possible, and measured against that, capital-

ism is utterly reactionary. But capitalism possesses the world: it has not stopped developing and not everything it does is reactionary or regressive. In its own exploitative, bureaucratic way it has more or less united Europe. If NATO stops genocide in Kosova, I will be pleased. I won't give it credit in advance for the best imaginable outcome of its intervention, or forget its record, or give it my support instead of promoting the "third camp" of independent working class politics. I will not change my basic assessment of NATO. And only a political idiot or an historical illiterate would tell the Kosovars they can trust NATO not to do a deal with Slobodan Milosevic at their expense.

Linda: So why don't you join those advocating NATO ground troops?

Kate: Because NATO will do what it does according to the perceived needs of the big capitalists and their governments. Socialists should not take responsibility for these decisions, or rely on them. The idea that we can tell the great capitalist powers to act as we, a united working class led by genuine socialists, would act in Kosova is the idea that bourgeois regimes can substitute for the working class, or that the limited and sometimes inadvertent and always twisted "good things" it does will only happen if we will it, "call" for it, prefigure it in our slogans. It is a fantasy of directing affairs rooted in and, psychologically, generated by our real weakness. I understand the psychology that calls on the capitalist powers to do what we are too weak to do: it is the same psychology that in the past led so many would-be Trotskyists to develop delusions in the Stalinist parties and bureaucratic states. Watching the agony of the Kosovar people naturally leads some to shout out "instructions" to the rulers: essentially it is an ineffective cry of protest and, logically, a belief in word magic. It is like the shouts of the mother who from a distance helplessly watches her child stepping out in front of a speeding car. It is a call for saviours from on high. Its only effect is to express our real weakness and add to it a political confusion — about what our role must be and what revolutionary socialist politics is — that will keep us weak. They will not influence events one way or the other — at best they will put a better propagandist gloss on what NATO would do anyway and win some socialists to support NATO. You anti-NATO pro-Serbs are the mirror-image twins of those who call on NATO — two sides of the same coin. You both represent aspects of the disintegration of socialism and of the lack of an independent working class outlook. We must recreate and rebuild a working class socialism against

both these currents. We won't do it by calling on NATO — or Stalinist formations — to do what we are too weak to do.

Tony: Being pro-NATO is working class socialism?

Kate: Pro-Serbia now is anti-imperialist?

Tony: Well, actually it is!

Kate: But you didn't protest when I argued that this is not an inter-imperialist war like World War I. That this is not a war in which the "little local issues" cannot guide your orientation. Serbia-Kosova is the issue in this war. The proper critique of NATO is that it is not a reliable tool to stop genocide, and, indeed, that by its component states' cynical power-politics over the last 11 or so years, and by incompetence or indifference, it has so far helped Milosevic in his barbarous drive against the Kosovars.

Tony: It does not have to be an inter-imperialist war. It is an imperialist war. NATO is imperialism. The main enemy is at home. We must be defeatists.

Kate: And never mind the Kosovars?

Tony: The SWP pamphlet *Stop The War* says they have virtually disappeared anyway as an entity. To go on about "Independence for Kosova" is to make propaganda for NATO's war effort.

Kate: But this is a war between two imperialisms.

Tony: Backward Serbia is an imperialist state? It is the equal of the NATO powers? You need to say that to excuse your pro-NATO stand! When are you going to join up and do your bit for "gallant little Kosova"?

Kate: No, they are not equal. Serbia is a primitive and backward ethno-imperialist state. It does not operate by the export of capital but by the export of people; not by the seizure of colonies and peoples for exploitation but by the seizure of territory to be cleared of its population and "planted" with Serbs. This is imperialism, too. This was the general pattern of Russian imperialism in the 19th century and up to 1917.

Before the Second World War Trotsky regarded Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as imperialist states because within them Czechs and Serbs oppressed a number of national minorities. Imperialism in history is not just monopoly capitalism or military-expansionary Stalinist bureaucratic collectivism. There are many others. History knows many different forms of imperialism. Serb imperialism is Dark Ages ethno-imperialism! It is reactionary compared to advanced capitalism! That is one reason why the pro-Serb left is absurd, as well as disgracefully indifferent to the Kosovars.

Tony: So you support the "progressive" imperialism against the "Dark Ages imperial-

ism”?

Kate: No, but I don't oppose western imperialism by supporting the Dark Ages imperialism! Unlike you I refuse to indulge in negative fetishism guided by a mechanical and mindless negativity towards “our own” rulers to the extent that nothing else matters. I don't feel obliged to “defend” Milosevic and his imperialism because I am against NATO. I had thought your SWP support for Saddam Hussein was the lowest you could go: but even the Butcher Saddam doesn't quite measure up to the purposefully and relentlessly genocidal Slobodan Milosevic.

Tony: I'd thought that your support of Israel against the Arabs was the lowest you could go: I too was wrong.

Kate: We support the Palestinian Arabs' right to a fully independent state, side by side with Israel. I find an interesting contrast between your attitude to the Palestinian Arabs and the Israeli Jews on one side and to the Kosovars on the other. Of two million Kosovars, perhaps a million have been killed or driven out. The process continues. You don't seem too bothered. Your leaders — the unspeakable Callinicos at the SWP's National Union of Teachers Conference fringe meeting, for example — publicly encourage their audience to treat the truth about the fate of the Kosovars as imperialist war propaganda.

Fifty years ago, five Arab states invaded the Jewish territory, Israel. Some of them were officered by British soldiers. All of them were clients of Britain, carrying out British policy. The Israelis beat them back, and against all the odds — including a British and American embargo on arms for the Israelis — won. If the Jews had lost they would have been driven out or killed or forced to accept a restored British protectorate. In the course of the war 700,000 Arabs were driven out or fled; not many fewer Jews were soon driven to Israel out of the Arab countries. We say: two states in Palestine. You are to this day prepared to support even a Saddam Hussein if he will wipe out the Jewish state. You take your moral stand on the fate of the Palestinians who were expelled or who fled, and of their descendants. Yet the Kosovars — who are still being killed and driven out even as we speak — seem to mean nothing to you. And you take offence when we say you have a specifically hostile attitude to the Jews!

Everything is arbitrary, subjective, governed by calculations of organisational advantage — when not subject to the operation of obscure “principles” rooted not in politics but in Tony Cliff's psyche!

Tony: Tony Cliff at least is not on the side of the British Government!

Kate: Neither am I. I am on the side of

independent working class politics: consistent democracy, working class unity across the national and communal divides — and socialism.

Tony: The central slogan has to be “Stop the War”/“Stop the Bombing”. That's the way to build a movement against the Government and NATO.

Kate: No. The central slogan has to come from our independent democratic-socialist immediate programmatic position and our working class historical perspective: consistent democracy — “Independence for Kosova” and the slogans that express it concretely, “Yugoslav army out of Kosova; Arm the Kosovars.”

Tony: And NATO?

Kate: “No trust in NATO bombs or troops”. That politically is what needs to be said: we can't be armchair generals about the details; we should not make pro-Serb state propaganda.

Tony: You have to be concrete.

Kate: Yes! The problem with your slogans is that they ignore the real central question, the Kosovars; you reflect Serb state propaganda and make pro-Serb state propaganda. You judge the war on its details not on its politics. Marxists don't orientate according to who fired the first shot or on specific military details, but on the politics of the war. We would not let such “details” as incidental war atrocities decide us against Serbia if the overall political character of the war were different. Demands for or against specific military actions can easily become foolish amateur generalship and they can also be politically disorientating. We do not derive our attitude from this or that incident or tactic on either side, but from an overall assessment of the politics of the situation. Any support or appearance of support for genocidal Serb imperialism should be ruled out. The absence in your slogans and propaganda of any defence of the Kosovars is the greatest obscenity on the “left” since the Stalinists whipped up widespread support for the Moscow Trials!

Tony: Are you against the NATO bombing of Serbia?

Kate: Bombing, despite what they claim, is a crude weapon. Inevitably innocent Serbs will suffer and die. Of course we are against the bombing! Of course we are against war. But we are, before anything else, against Yugoslav troops in Kosova. To go on as you do against NATO bombing and not to call for Yugoslav troops out of Kosova is crude pro-Serbian state propaganda. If it is “anti-imperialism”, it is grotesquely selective anti-imperialism. If it is a protest against the general horrors of war, again it is grotesquely selec-

tive, because of your silence about the greatest horrors here, the Serbian drive to expel or kill over 90% of the population of Kosova. Selective anti-imperialism, selective pacifism, all justified by catchpenny "build-a-broad-movement" opportunism — that's not socialism!

Tony: You echo the bourgeoisie!

Kate: To say the opposite of what they say, always — that is the rule of working class politics? Independent judgement according to our programme and perspectives — that is our rule. In the most profound and self-destructive sense you "echo" them. In politics you are them, but turned inside out!

Learn from history? No, repeat it!

By Lucy Clement

Workers' Liberty 56, July 1999

IT'S 1943. We're at a socialist meeting. I won't tell you whose meeting it is just yet. Four years into the Second World War. For two years the Nazis have been systematically killing Jews. They've organised the slaughter into a modern industry. Trains from all over Europe deliver cattle truck-loads of Jews to the death factories. Of those who survive the journey some — all children under 12 — are killed immediately. The others are worked and starved and beaten near to death. Then they're gassed.

British imperialism, at war with Germany, decides to do what Jewish groups have been asking for. They bomb the rail approach to Auschwitz. And more — they systematically bomb railway lines across Germany.

Back to our meeting. The speaker stands up, to considerable applause from the assembled comrades.

"Comrades. There is one thing above all else that we must say tonight. Stop bombing German railways! Stop this bloody war!"

Cheers from the front row.

"It's a war about British imperialism. Britain and her ally America are responsible.

"The British ruling class are a disgusting bunch of hypocrites. Churchill: no way! Britain helped boost and stabilise Hitler in the '30s. If Britain had taken in enough Jewish refugees before the war, there would be fewer Jews on mainland Europe. Britain, even now, is stopping the Jews getting into Palestine, killing and interning those who do. Britain is the same — and worse — than the

Nazis!"

A neatly orchestrated spontaneous chant of "Churchill, no way!" arises from the floor.

"And why are they really bombing? Not because they want to save anyone from the gas chambers! Because the railway lines are important to their military campaign. The humanitarian motive is just a mask. How do we know the Jews are really being killed? It could just be bourgeois war propaganda. Hitler isn't Genghis Khan — to say so is an insult to every one of the victims of that genocidal Mongolian monster. There was only one Genghis Khan!

"Of course the ruling class say Hitler is a genocidal maniac. They would say that, wouldn't they? Before Britain declared war on Germany, Hitler hadn't attacked a single Jew. British imperialism has killed a lot more people than Hitler has — it's Britain and America that are responsible for what Hitler's doing to the Jews.

"And these imperialist governments are killing German civilians. Last week, the bombers 'accidentally' killed 50 Jews. The week before, 100. Some saviours! They are destroying the German economy, bombing Germany back to the Stone Age.

"Socialists must say to the Jews — Don't be tools of British imperialism! Wait for the German opposition to stop Hitler and join us in a principled campaign. Unite around the slogans: Stop the Bombings! Stop the War!"

Rapturous applause. One hundred and seventy copies of top-selling pamphlet *Stop the War* sold to the eager punters. Several young people join the party.

Who organised this marvellous meeting?

Take your pick... Might it be the CPGB? The Anti-Anti Nazi League? The Socialist Workers' Party? The League of Unprincipled Bands Against (One) Imperialism? The Socialist Labour Party? The Who-Cares-If-It-Helps-Build-The-Party Party?

Moving on, we have contributions from the floor. Just a few, mind — wouldn't like to encourage debate.

A comrade stands up. He addresses the meeting, broadly accepting the policy of the first speaker. But he likes to think he's the sophisticated type. So he dresses his policy up. "Stop bombing rail lines", he says, but "Save the Jews" too. "Bombing kills Jews too!", "Bombs will only help Hitler", "Leave Hitler to the German opposition", "Yanks out", "Socialism is the only answer", "Britain keep out of Europe". All the possibilities nicely covered. Oxymorons R-US?

And he was from... the Socialist Party? Fuckwits for International Socialism? Amchair Generals for Pleasant Wars? Workers' Power? Incoherents Against

Compromise? Morons for Marxism?

Enough fantasy! Let's get real. It's now November 1939. This is a real meeting, or near enough. On 1 September 1939 the German Army invaded Poland from the West. On 3 September Britain declared war on Germany. Two weeks later, Stalin sent his army in from the east. The German and Russian soldiers met as the friendly allies the Stalin-Hitler pact (August 1939 to June 1941) had made them, and divided Poland between themselves.

Our meeting is that of a small political party, which for four to five years has been frantically agitating against Hitler and Hitlerism, advocating an alliance of the USSR and the British Empire against Nazism and German imperialism.

But now they've changed sides.

"Who started this war? Britain! Britain declared war first: Britain is the war-monger! Hitler, now that he is an ally of the USSR, only wants peace.

"Germany is a victim of the Versailles Treaty, dictated in 1919 by the imperialist victors of World War One. Now, those imperialists make war to destroy Germany.

"They don't give a damn about Poland! They should make peace!

"We must organise the broadest possible peace movement against this war.

"Poland? What Poland? Poland is already done for, finished. There is nothing left to fight about!"

This is a meeting of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Stalin's "Communist" Parties throughout the world made propaganda that Hitler was greatly wronged and only wanted peace. They were determinedly defeatist in Britain. The story about the Poles being finished, so what was there to fight about, comes from the historian Brian Pearce (*Labour Review*, April-May 1959), a member of the CPGB at the time.

Around that time, also, an enterprising anti-war activist managed to talk to a hospitalised German bomber pilot. The *Daily Worker* headlined the report: "Germany does not want war, says pilot".

Karl Marx famously commented that history tends to repeat itself: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

The Whitehall Theatre would be proud to present the British "Left".

The end of the war

Editorial, *Workers' Liberty* 56, July 1999

AFTER 11 weeks of NATO bombing, Yugoslavia (Serbia) has surrendered. NATO went to war to force the Rambouillet "agreement" on the Serbian regime. Rambouillet proposed to restore autonomy within the Serbian state to Kosova, whose population is more than 90% ethnic Albanians,

That would be a very great improvement for the Kosova Albanians. Rambouillet was, however, not primarily pro-Albanian. Rambouillet aimed 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. Once Albanian resistance began to take the form of guerrilla warfare, NATO's concern was that the increasingly savage Serb oppression of the Kosova Albanians could destabilise much of the Balkans.

For most of a terrible decade, 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 and that Serb soldiers and police would control Kosova.

They started bombing Serbia in the expectation that Milosevic would cave in quickly. Perhaps they even saw the bombing as a matter of giving him an excuse to cave in quickly. On past experience in Croatia and Bosnia, Milosevic was a man they could do business with. The Serb drive against the Kosovars had been going on for many months. Ostensibly it was directed against the KLA, but increasingly it took on the character of ethnic cleansing against the whole population. That was both NATO's reason, because it signified that things were on the brink of getting out of control, and NATO's excuse. It was both the real reason, or part of it, and the "good reason".

NATO may well have calculated that Milosevic would defy a few days, or even a

couple of weeks, of bombing. They may well have expected that Milosevic would use that time for a brutal drive against the KLA. But plainly they thought that a few days, or a week or two, of bombing would be enough to bring Milosevic to heel. Had they believed otherwise, they would not necessarily have made better preparations to protect the Kosovars: most likely they would not have started bombing.

In previous wars, most spectacularly in Vietnam, heavy high-tech bombing from the air could not stop a relatively "low-tech" enemy on the ground. From the start, some establishment critics said that the bombing could not possibly achieve the stated goal, protecting the Kosovars, without a simultaneous invasion by NATO ground troops. Evidently Milosevic thought likewise.

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 the two million Kosova Albanians. The noise of the exploding NATO bombs in Serbia came to be the hellish background music to the catastrophe that engulfed the Albanians.

Wrong-footed by Milosevic, NATO could neither retreat by stopping the bombs nor up the ante by immediately dropping ground troops into Kosova. Once Milosevic refused to capitulate after a short spell of bombing nothing but large numbers of ground troops could have shielded the Kosovars; and NATO remained fundamentally concerned not with the security, rights and interests of the Kosovars, but with securing stable conditions in the Balkans for the "imperialism of free trade" and with asserting US power. NATO chose to wage a long high-tech air war, with minimal NATO casualties; to concentrate on bombing the Serbian economy back decades, while the Serb chauvinists went on doing their awful work in Kosova: mass killings, rapes, burnings, the driving out of many hundreds of thousands of Albanian people.

NATO remained what it always had been. As we wrote in *Workers' Liberty* in April: "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. Our camp was the "Third Camp" of the working class and oppressed peoples aspiring to liberation.

Yet, if NATO had stopped the bombing after the first few days, when catastrophe started to engulf the Kosovars, that would have given Milosevic a tremendous victory and guaranteed him a free hand to crush and disperse the people of Kosova. He would not have needed to fear a harsh reckoning in the

near future from forces inside Serbia.

Undoubtedly the bombing did drive the Serb opposition — most of them nationalists, indifferent or hostile to the Kosovars — into solidifying with Milosevic against the enemy in the sky. And what if Milosevic had won an easy victory over NATO and realised the old Serb nationalist dream of driving the Albanians out of Kosova? That would have been for him what Egypt's US gift of "victory" over Britain, France and Israel, at Suez in 1956, was for Egypt's Abdul Gamel Nasser. It would have raised him above challenge by any opposition in the calculable future; immediately, it would have meant extirpation for the Kosovar Albanians.

The future of the Kosova Albanians, if they were to have any future in Kosova, depended on the outcome of NATO's air war.

Now that the war is over, NATO politics, expressed but simultaneously obscured by its military action, will come to the fore again. Nevertheless, to claim 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.

In April's WL 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. That desire has been consistently expressed in US and European Union policy towards ex-Yugoslavia since 1987, when Milosevic started his drive to tighten Serbian control over Kosova and create as much of an ethnically homogenous Greater Serbia as he could. Now we denounce NATO on a further count: its public acceptance in advance that the Serb population of Kosova will be driven out.

At the start of Milosevic's recent "ethnic cleansing", they were less than 10%. We do not know how large a portion of the Serbs living in Kosova were actively involved in the assaults on their Albanian neighbours. Most likely, many were. But the ethnic rule of thumb is, for consistent democrats, no acceptable measure of anything on either the Serb or the Albanian side. The idea that all Serbs are guilty should be regarded with the same hostility as we regard Milosevic's attitude to the Kosova Albanians.

That Kosovar Albanians and the KLA will feel "it's our turn now", and try to act on it, is only another facet of the murderous ethnic antagonisms that led to the horror in Kosova. Those socialists who backed the Kosovars against Milosevic can have no part of it. Socialists must insist: democracy, not

revenge!

II

THIS STILL-unfolding tragedy is one of a long series of ethnic conflicts and wars in Balkan history. As the wars produced in Croatia and Bosnia by the break-up of Yugoslavia showed earlier in this decade, there are no good and no bad peoples in these wars. At each turn of events the oppressors change roles with the oppressed. The central problem is that which Trotsky, a war correspondent in the Balkans during the wars of 1912 and 1913, described like this: the borders of the states are drawn across "the living bodies of the nations". Today, that is still true. The peoples have a deeply felt — and often deeply frustrated — sense of ethnic-national identity. The working class socialist answer to this situation was worked out as long ago as 1910, at a Conference of Balkan socialists in Belgrade.

The 1910 Conference statement read: "To free ourselves from particularism and narrowness; to abolish frontiers that divide peoples who are in part identical in language and culture, in part economically bound up together; finally, to sweep away forms of foreign domination both direct and indirect that deprive the people of their right to determine their destiny for themselves."

Trotsky commented: "The positive programme that follows from this is: a Balkan federal republic."

The Communist International endorsed this programme, linking it to an immediate struggle for socialism. They did not propose to brush aside or suppress national aspirations, but to drain the chauvinist poison out of them by a consistently democratic arrangement of their affairs, and the maximum ethnic-national self-rule within the Balkan Federation.

Superficially, Tito's Yugoslavia seemed to be a realisation of that programme in a part of the Balkans. In the late mid-'40s the Stalinist rulers of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia even made some efforts to unite their countries; it appeared that the inclusion of the Albanian state in Yugoslavia and its union with Kosova would lead to the creation of a separate Albanian Republic inside Federal Yugoslavia. Russian interference, and then the open break between Tito and Stalin (mid-1948) put an end to all that.

In fact, it is pure illusion to think that Tito's Yugoslavia was a mini version of the Balkan Federation of the 1910 and Communist International programme. Even bureaucratically, in its later, looser, form, the Stalinistic Tito regime did everything from on top, like the Stalinists they fundamentally

were. In Kosova, in particular, rule from Belgrade was always imposed by superior force, never freely chosen by the people of the area.

The main point for an understanding of the ethnic-national conflicts of the '80s and '90s is that Yugoslavia did not approach its national problems in a democratic spirit on any level; it did not allow maximum self-determination for its component peoples. The 1910 programme has not been tried and failed because of some deep unreason in the people; it has never been tried.

Within the six Yugoslav Republics and two (sometimes) autonomous regions, Kosova and Vojvodina, the boundary lines within Yugoslavia still cut through "the living bodies of the nations". Most of the Republics had national minorities, without any form of self-government — the Serbs in Croatia, for example, and the Albanians in Montenegro and Macedonia. Behind this arrangement lay the idea that the existence of such interlacings — with minorities dependent for their rights on the good will of the central government — would bind Yugoslavia together, like jutting bits of a jigsaw puzzle locking into other pieces.

Where the 1910 conference and the Communist International had proposed to render the threat of the ethnic-national antagonisms non-toxic by giving each nation and fragment of nation maximum freedom, thus also building a common democratic respect for the freedom of others, Tito's Yugoslavia did no such thing. The Titoite state was created by conquest from within by the Partisan Army which Tito and his lieutenant had created after mid-1941 to fight the German and Italian occupation. Ethnic-national aspirations were not satisfied, but bureaucratically balanced and set off against one another and frozen in a police state. They unfroze, to revive, and be revived, when an economic crisis triggered by Yugoslavia's interactions with international capitalism exploded in the 1980s.

The virulent revival of Serb and Croat chauvinisms in the late 1980s triggered and licensed other nationalisms. The Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia, who should long ago have had self-rule, were mobilised in the cause of building a Greater Serbia. How? By way of a primitive imperialist expansion that aimed to replace — "cleanse" — the population of an area and plant it with Serbs. A devil's carnival of bloody-handed chauvinism spread across wide areas of former Yugoslavia.

III

WITHIN YUGOSLAVIA, Kosova always had a special place: it was what Ireland was for centuries to England, an internal colony. Trotsky called the Serb occupation of Kosova in 1912 an act of imperialism. The Albanians in Kosova were subjected to massacres in 1918 and 1919-20. Many were driven out to Albania and Turkey. They were subjected to forced Serbification; their own language, literature and history was suppressed. That was their fate in the Serb Empire from the end of the First World War. They suffered an identical fate for more than half of the life of Tito's Yugoslavia.

The Kosovan territory was conquered, like all of Yugoslavia, but more so, and occupied by the Partisans in 1945. There was another massacre. Partly because the dissident Titoite Stalinists feared that the Kosovars could be used as agents of the Albanian state, which supported Stalin's Russia in the post-1948 conflict with Yugoslavia, everything that had happened to the Kosovar Albanians in the 1920s and '30s was repeated in the '50s and '60s. About a quarter of a million of them were forced out, to Turkey, in the mid-'50s.

Then, from the late '60s, as a result of mass student action and changes in the Tito regime, to the late '80s, Kosova's Albanians experienced a brief Golden Age. The 1974 constitution gave Kosova all the attributes of a full Republic, except the name and the notional right to secede which it bestowed. Yet the arrangements were full of contradictions.

The clumsy bureaucratic nonsense that characterised the Tito regime's national policy even at its most benign, was shown clearly in the fact that the Albanians in Macedonia and Montenegro remained cut off from Kosova, though they were contiguous with Kosova, by arbitrary administrative decision; all of them remained cut off from the adjoining Albanian state. Rather than give the Kosovars the status of a full Republic, they kept it as an autonomous — but no longer subordinate — part of the Serb Republic; real Kosovar Albanian self-rule within this clumsy arrangement demanded that Serbia's "autonomous region" be given considerable rights of veto over decisions of the Serb Republic. As if to illustrate Karl Marx's dictum that a nation which oppresses another can never be free, this frustrated the self-rule of the Serbs in the Serb Republic!

The age of Kosova Albanian self rule ended with a brutal Serb drive to turn Kosova back into a direct-rule internal colony.

IV

SOcialists have responded to the war in three ways. Some have seen Kosovar national rights as the main issue. Others have seen the Kosovars as irrelevant or subsidiary elements in a conflict between Serbia and imperialism. A third group has tried to amalgamate the first two approaches. In Britain the radical or would-be revolutionary "anti-imperialists" united with pacifists, with Stalinists (who think Serbia is the last surviving "socialist" state in Europe), with anti-EU people, anti-Americans and anti-Germans, to form a peace campaign around the slogans "Stop the Bombing! Stop the War!"¹

But how, on what basis, was the war to be stopped? From what vantage point were they opposing the bombing? It was plain that the war could be stopped by Serbia ceasing its terror against the Kosovars — plain, except to those who nonsensically claimed, in order to fit their agitation into old models, that the war was about NATO using a national-minority problem as a convenient excuse for colonial or semi-colonial conquest of Serbia. But what did it mean to call for "Stop the bombing" while flatly opposing Kosovar self-determination, or saying in the small print that Kosovar self-determination was desirable but improbable and anyway secondary?

In a war, one side of which was doing what the Serb state was doing in Kosova, what did it mean to focus a campaign around a military-technical slogan telling the other side to stop doing the only thing they are doing? It means to throw what weight you can muster on Milosevic's side — the side of Serbian imperialism! It implied the belief that NATO bombing of Yugoslav property in which the Belgrade regime claims 1,500 civilians died, is a far greater evil than the deliberate slaughter of unknown, and probably vast, numbers of Kosovars, and the driving from their homes of most of the two million others!

"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 front rank organisers, 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 clearly expressed: "Victory to Milosevic". They bolstered their case by agitation, some of it well-founded but most exaggerated, about the horrors of the NATO bombing. The SWP turned Socialist Worker into a Serb war-pro-

paganda sheet. SW refused to publish letters from SWP members raising the question of Kosova.

V

ALL “DO this! Do that!” military-technical comments on a war imply an overall analysis, even if the analysis is not understood or the implications intended. That is why Marxists never take sides, or refuse to take sides, or extrapolate general assessments, from specific events or tactics in a war according to such criteria as: who fired the first shot? Who has invaded whose country? Who won the last battle? Who is most savage in pursuit of victory? Which side is our own capitalist government on? We are not always for the defeat of our own capitalist government, irrespective of who they are fighting or why. None of these “case by case” responses will allow you to make sense of a war: frequently they will lead you to radically misunderstand what is really going on. If you are honest about it, they will lead you to zig-zag wildly, a kite in the changing winds of the war.

Marxists proceed differently. We ask who is fighting this war, and why? What objectives are they fighting for? What really led to this war? What is the overall international context of the war? If war is the continuation of politics by other means, of what politics is this the continuation?

For example, in World War One, Austro-Hungary, egged on by Germany, started the war, with an ultimatum to Serbia; Germany invaded Belgium and northern France. Prussian militarism did commit atrocities. For example when a civilian fired a shot at the German troops marching into Louvain, the German army, as reprisal, deliberately destroyed the medieval cathedral there and a library of ancient, rare and precious books! Fully a quarter of the population of Serbia was wiped out during the World War.

Going from “case to case”, issue by issue, the parties of the Socialist International could not but divide into antagonistic groups reacting differently to part of the picture — their “own” part. Germany’s invading troops were in northern France and in all of Belgium. The Germans could not but fear the looming threat of invasion by barbaric Tsarist Russian invasion. The Russians — the once-great Marxist Plekhanov, for example — saw a German victory as threatening Russia with reduction to the status of a colony, and so on. It was necessary to go beyond part-views and to take an overall political view in order to see how the parts fitted together. It was necessary to take not many national, partial, viewpoints but a common, overall,

international working class viewpoint. It was only in that way that the local specifics could be properly understood and assessed. Only in that way could the overall reality which dominated the specifics be seen.

A very good case could, Lenin argued, in isolation from the whole international situation, be made for action to rescue “poor little Belgium” and “gallant little Serbia”. In certain circumstances socialists would support capitalist international action to drive the Germans out of Belgium.

“The German imperialists have brazenly violated the neutrality of Belgium, as belligerent states have done always and everywhere, trampling upon all treaties and obligations if necessary. Let us suppose that all states interested in the observance of international treaties should declare war on Germany with the demand that Belgium be liberated and indemnified. In that case, the sympathies of socialists would, of course, be with Germany’s enemies. But the whole point is that the Triple (and Quadruple) Entente is waging war, not over Belgium: this is common knowledge and only hypocrites will disguise the fact. Britain is grabbing at Germany’s colonies and Turkey; Russia is grabbing at Galicia and Turkey, France wants Alsace-Lorraine and even the left bank of the Rhine; a treaty has been concluded with Italy for the division of the spoils (Albania and Asia Minor); bargaining is going on with Bulgaria and Rumania, also for the division of the spoils. In the present war waged by the governments of today, it is impossible to help Belgium otherwise than by helping to throttle Austria or Turkey, etc! Where does “defence of the fatherland” come in here? Herein lies the specific feature of imperialist war, a war between reactionary-bourgeois and historically outmoded governments for the purpose of oppressing other nations”. (Socialism and War, 1914).

“We must speak the truth to the ‘people’ who are suffering from the war; that truth is that no defence can be put up against the sufferings of wartime unless the government and the bourgeoisie of every belligerent country are overthrown. To defend Belgium by means of throttling Galicia or Hungary is no ‘defence of the fatherland’”. (The social-chauvinists’ sophisms, 1915).

In the real situation, two great imperialist blocs were at war. There were “Belgiums” and “Serbias” and “Irelands” on both sides: to rescue the “Belgium” or “Ireland” on the other side you had to consent to the slavery of the “Serbia” or “India” on “your own” side.

The political method used by the “Stop the bombs, stop the war” camp to judge this war was that of the “social chauvinists” (“social-

ists in words, chauvinists in deals", as Lenin wrote) in World War One!

Instead of making a concrete picture according to the method outlined above, they made a fetish of being against NATO and ignored everything else, including the attempt to destroy the Albanian Kosovars. (And some of them, the SWP, made dishonest propaganda for Milosevic, even about what was being done in Kosova). They mounted their campaign on military-technical "demands" — demands which implied an analysis — and wound up as a propaganda resource for Milosevic and Yugoslav ethnic imperialism.

Now it would be just as wrong to make a fetish of Kosova. You might have to regard Kosova as a subordinate detail, if NATO's goal was to conquer Yugoslavia, using Kosova as its "gallant little Belgium". Is that what has been happening? There is not the slightest possibility of that. NATO's objective is to get capitalist order and stability on the south-eastern fringe of the EU. Throwing their weight about, trying to be the world's policeman — that is imperialist? Only in a certain context largely absent here.

Lenin understood that there is no such thing as a revolutionary slogan that is purely negative. You need to say, not just shamefacedly imply, what you are for, and why: you need to put it in political context. Because they did not do this, the SWP in the "peace campaign" wound up as public apologists for Slobodan Milosevic, using methods that were, in technique and substance — in their shameless lying and one-sidedness — startlingly like old Stalinist apologies for the USSR. Where old Stalinists (and current supporters of "Milosevic the socialist") wind up in such a position by way of a pixillated positive support for Serbia's "camp", these "Trotskyists" wind up in Milosevic's camp by blinkered negativism towards the other side.

Their eyes fixed on NATO, they walked backwards into the company of Slobodan Milosevic and his genocidal Dark Age-imperial project on Kosova. Such an attitude is a peculiar form of British chauvinism — negative, back to front, upside down chauvinism, but nevertheless a chauvinistic narrow, albeit negative, focus on one's own state.

VI

A CENTRAL FACT of life is that 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 "Marxist" "anti-imperialists" look to even a Milosevic to "give NATO a bloody nose". And why their socialist mirror image, the armchair

generals of the shamefaced "Victory to NATO" camp, wound up agitating for ground troops in Kosova.

When NATO puts in ground troops, or bombs, or whatever, it will do it for ruling class reasons, not ours. It will act to carry out not our political programme, but theirs. The idea that it can be otherwise, is fantastic wishful thinking: the idea that socialists should abandon their own political independence for a fantasy, a mere dream of influencing the ruling class to act contrary to their own nature and in accordance with ours. The "victory to NATO" socialists are, in the circumstances, less repulsive than the "victory to Milosevic" "Trotskyists". Both, however, are but different poles of the decomposition of international socialist politics into the chaotic confusion laid bare in this war.

The job of consistent socialists, political pioneers of a renewed mass working class socialist movement, is not to cover for Milosevic and demonise NATO, or play the same role the other way round. It is here and now to make propaganda for independent working class politics and to engage in the class struggle.

In conflicts like that of the Balkans, our responsibility is to tell the truth, advocate consistent democracy — a democratic Balkan Federation, organised in a network of self-determining, ethnic-national entities. This is an essential part of the programme that will help unite the working class across the national-ethnic boundaries, and teach them how to drain the blood-filled rivers of hatred, contempt and ethno-centricity that murderously divide them now.

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 different 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.

In this war, Workers' Liberty has represented independent working class — socialist — politics against both the morally and politically disgraceful proponents of an anti-imperialism of idiots, the "Victory to Milosevic" socialists, and against those who though the role of socialists was to support and advise

Blair and NATO

We judged the issues from an overall political assessment of what was going on. We criticised and denounced NATO's politics; we will go on doing that during the working out of the peace settlement in the Balkans. We saw Kosova as the central issue — so we are glad that Milosevic has not won.

In the immediate circumstances, NATO victory is the lesser evil. But we do not bow down to the immediate circumstances and the lesser evil. We could not, did not and do not positively support NATO.

We reject the delusion that somehow we could or can now persuade NATO to act as an effective political surrogate for the independent working class force which, alas, has yet to recreate itself and which can only be recreated by socialists consistently advocating working class political answers rather than supporting ruling class "lesser evils".

For the Kosovars, NATO's victory is better than Milosevic's; for the Serb people it does not mean the loss of anything socialists and democrats can support them in claiming.

"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

1. At the start of the war, Workers' Liberty thought "Stop the Bombing" made sense. Bombing could not achieve its supposed objective, defence of the Kosovars. But the Serb drive to clear out the whole Albanian population of Kosova, killing large numbers of them, changed the meaning of that slogan.

We need positive as well as negative politics

Workers' Liberty 57, September 1999

IF SOCIALISTS operate in politics according to worked out positive principles, then they will generally be consistent. Should circumstances arise that compel them to

seemingly veer from those principles, then they will explain themselves in terms of the base-line principles involved, or of some higher principle.

For example, socialists believe that peoples should be self-governing — that, for instance, where the compact majority wants it, Ireland has a democratic right to be free of British interference. But suppose that the British working class has taken power and a hostile Ireland is used as a base for attacking the British socialist workers' state? Defence of that state would be far more important than Ireland's national rights, and British (and Irish) socialists might choose — temporarily — to violate the democratic right to Irish self-determination in the name of a higher principle, working class self defence. Lenin's Bolsheviks had fought for Poland's right to self-determination, sincerely championing the Poles' right to secede from the Tsar's empire. In 1920, when they had beaten back invading Polish armies, they chased them across the border and took the Red Army as far as Warsaw.

What if you operate in revolutionary socialist politics in accordance with the belief that "tactics contradict principles" (the question is from Tony Cliff of the Socialist Workers Party, justifying that organisation's decision in 1971 to embrace the politics of opposition to the European Union which it had for many years denounced as nationalist and chauvinist)? Essentially, that positive principles don't matter much. Then, you will wind up extrapolating your operational positive principles from your negativism towards capitalism. They will be imposed mechanically on you. Instead of a comprehensive picture of reality and intelligent attempts to apply independently held principles, you will have a one-sided political picture focused on that part of the reality that allows you to express your negativism. "More substance in your hate than in your love", so to speak. You will lose independence on all big questions and become a mere negative imprint of those you hate and oppose. Not guided by positive principles, you may choose to stand back, refusing to "take sides", where there is no energising anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist negativism. To an observer who does not understand your nature, you will seem to make crazy zig-zags.

For example, Serbian armies are invading Croatia, or Bosnia — in Bosnia they are "ethnic cleansing" Muslims, slaughtering and destroying. Serbia has most of the arms of the old Yugoslav state; the Bosnians do not and, moreover, they are subject to an international arms embargo. Do you defend the Bosnians' right to self-determination and

side with them, denounce the arms embargo, indict the Serbs? No: you write articles saying that, for socialists, each side, each nationalism, is as bad as the other, and they are all to blame. Where Lenin acutely argued that "the nationalism of the oppressed is not the same as the nationalism of the oppressor", you say "Yes, it is", adding that the massacred are as bad as those who massacre, the "ethnically cleansed" as bad as their murdering "cleansers".

In Trotsky's appropriately disgusting image for it, you complacently "pick your nose" and remain "objectively" aloof in face of state-sponsored ethnic slaughter. You sagely comment that the victims of ethnic chauvinism today will, if they get the chance, change places with their persecutors. Your answer to the conflict? Socialism! Now! Immediately!

That was the SWP's approach to events in ex-Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1990s. The democratic programme of working class politics adopted by the Balkan socialists as long ago as 1910 — for a democratic Balkan federation in which each of the participants will have the maximum national freedom consistent with the national freedom of others — was for them a voice from the tomb of pre-Stalinist socialism. Yet the Balkan socialists' politics — the early Communist International took them over — were rooted in reality. They were tools elaborated by socialists concerned with positive advances, with living, suffering peoples, for whom socialism had to be made by a working class that had found political ways of freeing itself from nationalism and chauvinism. Thus, the emergence of such formulas as that of a Democratic Balkan Federation — a proposal that would in the right circumstances allow the workers of the embattled people and fragments of peoples to imagine a viable national freedom within coexistence with other peoples. Thus it would enable the socialists amongst them to begin to unite across the blood-filled communal and national ditches.

But our sectist friends, positive about nothing, except for the socialist final goal, are uninterested — they are determinedly, fixatedly negative. They are anti-capitalists of the primitive, say-no-when-they-say-yes-and-yes-when-they-say-no school; and they are "anti-imperialists" above all else. When Serbia starts to clear out and kill off the Albanian people of Kosova (more than 90% of the population), and NATO, for its own reasons and in its own extravagantly brutal and incompetent way, mounts a police action to compel Milosevic to stop — then the essentially depoliticised negativists know where

they stand. They are "against imperialism". Which imperialism? Milosevic's primitive geno-imperialism? They are against NATO! It is not imperialism they are against, but NATO. Politics? For Marxists, war is politics by other means: what are the politics here? Politics? Who cares about politics? We are "against the war". Which war? Serbia's genocidal war in Kosova? No — NATO's war! They are above all "against the bombing". They mount a "Stop the War" campaign — feeble, but that was not for want of trying — allied not only with pacifists but also with the *Morning Star* neo-Stalinists who are uncritical partisans of Milosevic.

By way of depoliticised negativism against advanced capitalism and NATO, they back themselves into positive support for Milosevic. They make propaganda — the pamphlet *Stop the War*, for example — which, by deliberately minimising what the Serbs are doing in Kosova, is effectively cover-propaganda for attempted genocide.¹ Having no positive programme of their own, except a disembodied future "socialism", they wind up recoiling from NATO into de facto acceptance of the *Morning Star*'s programme and... Milosevic's.

For the three months of the NATO-Serb war *Socialist Worker* turned itself into a vulgar, pro-Milosevic, war propaganda sheet on behalf of Serb imperialism in Kosova; they excluded mention of the Kosova Albanians except to insist that "NATO" was lying about what was going on in Kosova, and minimise it by indignant, pedantic refutations of exaggerated claims by government ministers and newspapers that the Serb drive against the Albanians was the equivalent of the Holocaust. In meetings all over the country they fought against adopting slogans about Kosovan Albanians' rights. They achieved the difficult feat of being marginally less critical and less "objective" in their "reporting" than the *Morning Star* was.

The nearest equivalent in the history of the British labour movement to *Socialist Worker* in these three months is the pro-Hitler "anti-war" propaganda made by the *Morning Star*, then called the *Daily Worker*, between October 1939 and the government suppression of the paper in mid-1940, when a German invasion seemed imminent (From August 1939 to June 1940, Hitler was allied to the USSR).

Where *Socialist Worker* should have taken sides, in Bosnia, in the early 1990s for example, it was aloof, sectarian and politically abstentionist. Where it should have taken sides with the Kosovan Albanians, it refused to and in a passion of hysterical negativism towards advanced capitalism and NATO

wound up actively and positively — see *Stop the War* — on Milosevic's side, that is on the side of Serb imperialism as it attempted genocide against the population of Serbia's colony, Kosova.

It would be difficult to imagine a more decisive, or more horrible, demonstration that socialists need positive politics — that is independent working-class socialist politics — on pain of letting reflex negativism turn them into reactionaries. Without positive politics rooted in an analysis of the whole of your reality, independent working class politics is impossible. To be merely negative, no matter how oppositional and r-r-revolutionary it sounds, is in fact to turn yourself into the imprint of whoever you are against. It is the opposite of independent politics.

This book², which came out after the end of the war, in June 1999, is a collection of pieces by various people from *Socialist Worker* over 10 years. It has the general politics described above. But it has comparatively very little from *Socialist Worker's* coverage of recent events. The overall impression is a misleading one of balance — too much, sectarian, balance and “nose-picking” objectivity, in fact. From this collection, which will circulate for years, you will get no inkling of *Socialist Worker's* crazy three months as unrestrained war propagandists for Milosevic, as he was trying to clear Kosova of Albanians. The book, so to speak, seals off that period.

If this rich, disruptive and spectacularly unprincipled sect is allowed to flush its three month record of Serb geno-imperialist apologetics down the memory hole, it will be a loss to socialist understanding. The record needs to be remembered, and the lessons of it learned.

1. See *WL* Vol 2, number 1.

2. *The Balkans, nationalism and imperialism*, edited by Lindsay German. Bookmarks, London, 1999.

Appendix: A plague on both houses?

Socialist Organiser 510, December 1991

“SOME OF the left are tempted to take sides... But... neither of the nationalisms currently tearing Yugoslavia apart has anything to offer the mass of the people.” With those words (in Alex Callinicos's “Comment” column, 23 November), *Socialist Worker* washed its hands of the war in Croatia.

Callinicos declares that “all the different peoples of Yugoslavia should have the right to self-determination, the right to form their

own separate states freely”, but argues that in the war between Croatia on one side, and Serbia and the Serb-dominated federal army on the other, both sides are wrong.

He points to the failure of Croat leader Tudjman to disassociate himself from the fascist and murderously anti-Serb Ustashi, or to offer any guarantees to the Serb minority which is 12 per cent of Croatia's population.

These are certainly important factors in the situation. Support for Croatia's right to resist Serbian conquest must be coupled with support for the rights of the Serb minority in Croatia. And, as long as it remained possible, socialists should have argued against Croatia's secession and for keeping some federal framework in Yugoslavia: given the intricate intermingling of peoples, the break-up of Yugoslavia could never have failed to produce horrors.

Nevertheless, federal Yugoslavia is dead. And on all the evidence, the war in Croatia is not primarily about the rights of the Serb minority there, or equally about that and about Croatia's rights.

The pattern over the last several years has been for Serbia — the strongest nationality in Yugoslavia, and the one dominating the federal army — to make ever more aggressive moves for Serbian domination. That pattern was established well before the war in Croatia.

The Serbian government extinguished local rights in Vojvodina (an area of mixed population) and Kosova (an area where the great majority are Albanians). It used great violence in Kosova.

The Serb-dominated federal army tried to use force to stop the independence of Slovenia, a republic which has no significant Serb minority.

The Serbian war in Croatia has driven deep into areas which have clear Croat majorities.

All these facts mean that socialists cannot avoid siding — however critically, and with whatever qualifications — with Croatia.

Socialist Worker's usual line on national conflicts is to look for the “good”, oppressed nation and then pose as the most gung-ho, aggressive and “revolutionary” champions of that nation against “bad” oppressor nations. That, for example, is how SW approaches the Israel/Palestine conflict.

The war in Croatia cannot be fitted into that approach. Neither the Croats, historically often “pro-imperialist”, nor the Serbs, clearly aggressive and dominant, fit the role of “good nation”.

Unfortunately, SW has chosen to retreat to abstract socialist abstention rather than rethink its general approach to national conflicts.

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