

## Dossier: socialists and wars

Four wars between 1982 and 2001 posed new questions for socialists, both about changes in the world system over recent decades and about our basic political concepts. This dossier introduces some of the issues raised by the Kosova war of 1999, the US-Iraq war of 1991, and the British-Argentine war of 1982. The Afghan war of 2001 was discussed in *Workers' Liberty* 2/2; an analysis of the Socialist Workers' Party pamphlet on the Kosova war, *Stop the War*, was carried in *Workers' Liberty* 2/1.

Introduction to the dossier on Kosova

## Babel–socialism in the light of the Kosova war

By Sean Matgamna

THERE IS a story in the Bible about the Tower of Babel. Humankind starts to build a high tower to climb up to the heavens. Offended by this presumption in creatures He has created to be His helpless supplicants and playthings, God punishes them. Where before there had been only one language, humankind wakes up one morning speaking many — all the languages of the earth. God had ensured that the combination of divided humanity in such enterprises as building a tower up to heaven will be impossible in the future.

Thus the old story-makers tried to account for the existence of many languages in the one human species.

The 20th century has done something like that to the anti-capitalist left. Clear-seeming and once more or less precise terms — “democracy”, “imperialism”, “socialism”, “revolution” — now convey nothing that is clear without additional explanation. Our language of politics is decayed. All the key terms now have many, many meanings; and, therefore, most of the time they have no clear meaning.

Concepts which have been stretched and reshaped, and then stretched, redefined and reshaped again and again to cover many different and contradictory realities, clog our minds and cloud our eyes.

Where different languages have clearly defined meanings for words, translation is possible. Where language has rotted and eroded to such an extent that most of the key words have lost precise meaning, understanding and communication, are impeded, often to the point of impossibility. That is one of the reasons why the left is divided into mutually uncomprehending segments. Our capacity to think coherently about politics, history, society, ourselves and our history is enfeebled and often destroyed.

The response of the bulk of the British pseudo-left to the Balkans war of spring 1999 showed what this can lead to in all its moral and political ugliness and ulti-

mate political futility. Concerned to be "anti-imperialist", they spent the 11 weeks of the war making one-sided and mendacious war propaganda for the Serbian gangster-Stalinoid state attempting genocide in its internal colony, Kosova. What they did between March and June 1999 constituted as enormous a fall from socialist politics and socialist morals as that perpetrated by those socialists who in 1914 supported their own governments in World War One.

In its day, Stalinism dragged large numbers of the people who wanted to fight for democracy, equality and working-class emancipation into the most shameful betrayals of those causes

Today the old Stalinist parties are, almost everywhere, reduced to small and discredited grouplets. The major exceptions, such as the Communist Parties of France and South Africa, are really now just social-democratic parties with a peculiar history. The ground has been cleared for the regrowth of authentic communism.

Yet the soil on which we must rebuild is still poisoned. How very badly poisoned was shown in the Balkan wars of 1999. Kosova was the great sin-fall of the post-Stalinist and anti-Stalinist left.

Attempted genocide in Kosova; bombing "on behalf of" the ethnic Albanians that gave them no protection from the uprooting, burning, raping and murdering Serb forces of occupation; yet nothing but NATO's relentless airborne destruction raining down on Serbia to stop the complete and final "cleansing" of the Albanians from Kosova; other than NATO, no hope at all that those driven over the borders or into the high hills would ever return — those were the elements of the complex situation which in the 11 weeks of war plunged the left into the greatest moral and political crisis which it has experienced for decades.

A large chunk of the anti-Stalinist left believed that they could do their duty just by denouncing NATO for hypocrisy. "No to NATO" was all, or almost all, that needed to be said. In the agitation of, for example, the SWP, there was a complete absence of concern for the Kosovar Albanians. Their conception of working-class politics had been narrowed down to mere negative anti-imperialism. From independent socialist analysis of events they retreated into a catchpenny agitation where the only purpose of analysis is to bat back the bourgeoisie's apologetics.

It was right and necessary to preach distrust of NATO; to remember that NATO had backed Serbia keeping a grip on Kosova since the current Yugoslav crisis started in 1988, and in the 1995 Dayton Agreement; to remember that NATO had maintained an arms embargo to stop the Bosniacs defending themselves against Serb "ethnic cleansing"; to recall how murderous the UN "safe havens" in Bosnia proved for the Bosniacs; to warn that NATO, with its hypocritical, big-power double-standards and pursuit of self-interest, might rat on the Kosovars now too; that NATO had been consistently against Kosovar self-determination. No trust in NATO bombs or troops!

But it was preposterous to speak and act as if the greatest crime were NATO bombing, not the mass murder and expulsions being inflicted on the ethnic Albanians by the Serb state and its Kosova-Serb accomplices. When more than half the Kosovars had been uprooted and driven out, to "forget" about that was a political crime. The first responsibility of socialists and consistent democrats was to side with the Kosovar Albanians and champion their right to exist and live in peace and freedom from Serb-state occupation of their homeland. In that situation, to concentrate on denouncing NATO came down to siding with the Serbs.

Other recent events have thrown the same sort of picture of the pseudo-left onto the screen of working-class history. During the 2001 war in Afghanistan, and in the movement to stop the USA's war with Iraq, sections of the left have blurred the distinction between themselves and political Islam. But Kosova was singular, probably unique. In the name of reflex "anti-imperialism", the pseudo-left became pro-imperialist! It made propaganda (with perfunctory criticism) for a primitive Serb-

imperialist regime at the moment when it was engaged in an attempt at genocide against the Albanian population of Kosova. Reflex “anti-imperialism” turned into the politics of the lunatic asylum!

It was a situation in which no-one could rely on old reflexes alone. There was no “anti-imperialist” political painting-by-numbers kit to help you work out a coherent policy here. The issues had to be thought through concretely, the facts and possibilities related to democratic and socialist priorities and first principles. The articles in this dossier record and discuss the experience of the British left.

## II

**I**N THE Balkans war, NATO—whatever its motives, its blunderings and its indifference to the human cost of its way of going about things—was engaging in a limited police action on the European Union's borders to force Milosevic to desist in Kosova and, ultimately, to accept a settlement that would restore autonomy to Serbia's internal colony. Though NATO, or the USA, might have been glad of a chance to flex their military muscle, there was no possibility of hidden old-style imperialist objectives, no chance that Serbia or any other country would lose its independence as a result of NATO's actions. There was even some reason to think that US and British liberal “gesture politics” had led to action that the NATO establishment would not otherwise have taken and against which old NATO hands like Britain's Dennis Healey had spoken out at the beginning.

NATO and, specifically, the USA, are the long-standing enemy for the mainstream left. The left's instinct was naturally to oppose NATO. But, in the actual circumstances, from what point of view could we oppose specifically what NATO was trying to do in Kosova? In the name of what immediate alternative could NATO be opposed? In the name of what could a pro-Serbia “anti-war” campaign be conducted? What would be the political content of an “anti-war” campaign?

In the circumstances, to shout “*Stop the war — stop the bombing*” in Britain meant stop only one part of the war. If NATO stopped, Milosevic would intensify his war against the Albanian Kosovars. On the other hand, by agreeing to stop that war, Milosevic could have ended NATO bombing at any time — as he finally did. “Stop the war — stop the bombing” was explicitly the demand that NATO must stop attempting to coerce Milosevic into halting his genocidal war. It was implicitly to side with Milosevic on the issue in dispute between Serbia and NATO: Kosova.

Those who gave this a revolutionary gloss by talking of the revolutionary duty of “defeatism” were primarily defeatists for the Albanian Kosovars. Concentrating on opposing NATO's war, they could not but be the advocates, heralds, distant allies and propagandist outriders for Serbian ethnic triumph in Kosova. Flatly to denounce NATO's war, and only NATO's war, was, in the circumstances, to take Milosevic's side and line up with those engaged in attempted genocide — that is, to side with Serbian ethnic imperialism not against NATO but against the Kosovars.

In all the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, Serbia has operated 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. That was the guiding idea of Belgrade policy in Kosova throughout the 20th century: in the wars of 1912-13, in the 1920s and 30s, and in the mid 1950s, though for various reasons they never managed to carry it through to completion. Serbia has behaved as a primitive ethno-imperialist state. Serb imperialism was akin to the tribal imperialism of the Dark Ages — and to the general pattern of Russian imperialism in the 19th century and up to 1917. Even if we grant that Serbia was not to be classified as imperialist: in what way was this non-imperialism not worse than NATO and the societies whose instrument NATO was?

### III

THE RESPONSES of the left fell into three broad categories. Each of the broad categories had sub-divisions.

[1] The first broad category comprised those who said that the central question was Kosova. Serbia was on no level faced with subjugation or the loss of any of the rights it was entitled to claim for itself. This broad group sub-divided into:

a. Those who supported NATO's bombing; or wanted NATO ground troops too; or (*Red Pepper*) wanted an immediate stop to bombing, and NATO ground troops instead.

b. Those revolutionary socialists, like ourselves, who saw the NATO states and their armed forces as organs of class rule, and their own role as that of political propagandists working to prepare the working class to overthrow that state. Recognising the realities in Kosova, and wishing for the defeat of the Serbian state in Kosova, we nonetheless refused to endorse or take responsibility for NATO, or express any degree of confidence in NATO. NATO would act, or not act, in line with the interests of the ruling classes of NATO's states. Therefore, we argued, calls for NATO to pursue this or that tactic had no power to affect what happened. We argued for independent working-class politics, in the first place, by independent assessment and criticism of both NATO and Milosevic.

[2] The second broad category was those who said that the central questions were "NATO imperialism", "the war" and "the bombing". They came together to form a campaign to Stop the War — NATO's war. In effect, this was an actively pro-Serb movement. Its main organisers worked to ensure that it was, rigorously voting down proposals at their anti-war meetings to add to their programme the demand for the withdrawal of the Serb army from Kosova. Their street protests against the war included raucous and large contingents of Serb chauvinists. In the good old anti-war days of the 1960s and 70s, when we shouted "Victory to the Vietnamese NLF", and many chanted "Ho, Ho, Ho-Chi Minh, we will fight and we will win", they would have gloried in the slogan "Victory to Serbia," and maybe chanted an appropriate ditty: "Ho, Ho, Milosevic, love that murd'r'in' son-of-a-bitch!"

Many points of view merged to make up this pro-Serbia, anti-war movement, combining and overlapping to reinforce each other. They were, broadly:

i. Pacifism — war is never justified. The conclusion: leave the Kosovars to their fate.

ii. Stalinist and quasi-Stalinist attitudes. (Milosevic's Socialist Party was the old Stalinist party.)

iii. Anti-Americanism.

iv. Anti-Germanism.

v. Purely negative anti-imperialism.

vi. Incoherent and sectarian anti-capitalism that forgot what socialists counterpose to capitalism.

vii. Indifference to the fate of the Kosovars. That was common to, and a serious part of, all the other strands.

[3] There was also an "oxymoron tendency", so to speak, which sought refuge from the dilemmas outlined above by wishing them away with an incoherent pastiche of the contradictory stances of the first two categories. They raised the slogans of the stop-interfering-with-Milosevic peace campaign — "Stop the Bombing", "Stop the War" — but combined it with "Independence" or "Self-Determination for Kosova". This combination of two basic positions could not make sense as long-term programmatic propaganda. The slogans so easily combined on patient paper flatly contradicted and cancelled each other out.

"Stop the Bombing" was an immediate demand on a defined agency, NATO. That

could not but mean giving Milosevic a free hand in Kosova to drive out the Albanian people, the people whose right to self-determination was simultaneously being championed. One slogan — the immediately applicable one — could not but have led to the immediate destruction of the people to whom the other, longer-term slogan, had relevance. The prerequisite “slogan” was: “Survival for the Albanian Kosovars!” If they had raised that, or even seriously thought about it, their oxymoronic compound of slogans would have been impossible. The immediate anti-NATO demand cancelled out the very possibility of the rest. The first part of the strange mix was directed against the only force that could, there and then, ensure the survival of those for whom self-determination was advocated. This solution to the difficulties satisfied only those who would not think it through. Thus, for example, Alan Thornett in *Socialist Outlook*, sycophantically praising the great “anti-imperialist” work of the SWP’s pro-Milosevic, anti-war campaign, and simultaneously supporting self-determination for the beleaguered Kosovar Albanians.

A number of generally respect-worthy European Marxists had this position — notably *Lutte Ouvrière* and the majority of the LCR in France. In Britain the oxymoron tendency consisted of a number of small groups with little presence and without influence. They half-saw the dilemmas and the alternatives but jumbled them together incoherently. Saying everything, they said nothing specific. Their unworkable attempt to straddle both basic camps ended up stressing the anti-imperialist, anti-NATO slogans as primary, because those were the “immediate action” demands.

## IV

WHAT OF the pro-NATO elements in the left? They had the merit of thinking about the real issues and responding as politically and morally serious people to the issues in the conflict. They were animated by a praiseworthy urge to be responsible. They believed they had to choose and advocate the “lesser evil”, NATO action to stop the destruction of the Kosovars. They were misled into the delusion that by urging on NATO they were discharging that responsibility. In fact they gutted themselves of working-class political independence for a mere exercise in mimicry, as inconsequential to the Kosovar Albanians as the witch-doctor dressing up in green is to the coming of spring.

NATO could not conceivably act or fail to act on their say-so. But what might be done on their say-so was to convince others to support NATO, or, in recoil, to support Milosevic, because they would see that as the only alternative to endorsing the long-hated NATO.

The concept of “critical support”, essential for Marxists in relating to workers’ struggles under inadequate or very bad leadership, bourgeois or petit-bourgeois led national liberation movements, and democratic battles, makes no sense in relation to NATO. Working-class socialists could not conceivably “intervene” in NATO’s war to push its democratic element further and vie for leadership. In any “critical support”, the “criticism” was without grip and the “support” politically disarming. It could only cut against the central task of working-class socialists — building an independent, “Third Camp” of the working class and oppressed peoples.

Otherwise, we spread the fantastic delusion that for the left, or the working class, to “call” for what the powers that be will do only for their own reasons, in their own way, and within their own limitations, is to help bring what we desire into existence. In fact we only ruin our own ability to act as an independent force, however small, and to contribute to shaping the future. No-one can shape the future just by investing hope in, or “calling for”, whatever is the “lesser evil” in ruling-class policy at a given time.

The fundamental difference between the pro-NATOers and the (Third Camp) revolutionary socialists was the different attitudes of revolutionaries and reformists to the state. To us, it is a class state which even when it does something worthwhile, for its own reasons and with its own methods, is not our state; to them, it is something above classes that, with enough pressure, can be influenced to do good.

Marxists preach working-class independence. We are not afraid to look at lesser evils. We know that we cannot preach independent working-class socialist politics to intelligent people except on the basis of an honest assessment of reality. We cannot do it by requiring people to close their eyes to options and alternatives within bourgeois-dominated political and military reality now.

That "close your eyes" ways of being "revolutionaries" is the approach that for sixty years has rendered the kitsch-Trotskyist press habitually more stupid than the serious bourgeois press! My conclusions are already drawn up. Details don't matter!

The case for a "Third Camp" position against the NATO powers who were trying to stop genocide is that only international working-class solidarity can win the self-determination for the Kosovars and the free alliance of peoples in the Balkans which is the minimum democratic basis for the region, and that such solidarity must be built starting from now. That case cannot be made by requiring those whom we try to convince of its correctness to close their eyes to current reality. Otherwise, exposure to the facts will inevitably "unconvince" them and send them back to the camp of the bourgeoisie, forswearing all future "dogmatism" and "utopianism".

NATO stopped genocide in Kosova. It would have been wrong in principle and disorienting in practice to give it credit in advance for the best outcome of its intervention in Kosova, or to forget its record, or to give it positive support in doing what it did for its own reasons, and in its own way, not ours. The responsibility of socialists was to promote independent, working-class politics — in the first place, honest reporting and honest assessment of the issues and of the roles being played in the conflict.

Nor could we be armchair generals. Marxists have never orientated according to who fired the first shot or on specific military details, but on the politics of which a war is the continuation and military expression. 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.

Not to say the opposite of what the bourgeoisie say always, but independent judgement according to our programme and perspectives — that is the rule of working-class politics. In the most profound and self-destructive sense those who made a negative fetish of NATO "echoed" the pro-NATOers. In politics they *were* them, turned inside out! Turned into propagandists for the worse camp — that of the would-be ethnic cleansers.<sup>1</sup>

Strong socialist forces, able to affect events, can only be built by maintaining an independent political stance. There is no other way. Calls on the ruling class to substitute for the socialist movement we must rebuild will not influence events one way or the other — at best they will put a better propagandist gloss on what NATO does and would do anyway, and win some socialists to positively support NATO. That will cut against the development of independent, socialist politics.

Anti-NATO pro-Serbs were the mirror twins of those who called on NATO to act for them — two sides of the same coin. Both represented aspects of the disin-

tegration of socialism and of the absence of an independent, working class outlook. Socialists have to work to recreate and rebuild a working-class socialism against both these currents. We won't do it by calling on NATO — no more than in the past by "calling on" Stalinist formations — to do what we as yet are too weak to do.

V

**W**E DO not need to follow the example of the old story-makers and invent a tale to account for the sorry state of the left which was revealed by the Balkan crisis. The records tell too plain a story. It is possible to point out the main forces that have reduced so much of the pseudo-left so often to the incoherent babbling of militant-sounding gibberish.

In the first place, Stalinism, which froze the verbiage of Marxism and changed most of the signs and meanings, arbitrarily banishing or ascribing meanings.

Then, the immense confusions of post-Trotsky Trotskyism, faced with accounting for the huge growth of that unprecedented socio-economic formation, Stalinist bureaucratic collectivism.

Then, the immense changes in capitalism — for example, the achievement by the former colonies of political independence, but in most cases without economic power, in a world dominated by the economically strong.

The history of revolutionary Marxism, of scientific socialism, is the history of relentless struggle against Babel-socialism. The writings of Marx and Engels, for example, are full of it.

At the end of the blood-soaked 20th century, everything socialistic was still confused, chaotic, ill-defined. Those who want to restore socialism as a coherent view of history and society, and as a rational humanistic faith to fight for, must overcome chaos, and distinguish our socialism clearly from what became known as "socialism" in most of the 20th century.

Socialism was the great clean, un-won truth of the 20th Century; "socialism" was the foulest lie of the 20th Century.

Socialism promised freedom; "socialism" brought slavery.

Socialism without democracy greater than anything known before is a contradiction in terms; "socialism" was incompatible with political and social mass self-rule at any level.

Socialism means the end of wage slavery; "socialism" brought a savage intensification of labour exploitation.

Socialism is the end of all exploitative ruling classes; "socialism" was the rule of an exploitative ruling class which, as Trotsky put it at the end of the 1930s, concentrated in itself all the worst traits of all the ruling classes of history.

Socialism means the cutting down of the state's repressive functions and its power, the beginning of its withering away; "socialism" was the rising up of a totalitarian state to the exercise of unprecedented power over society and everything in it.

Socialism was the triumph of a rational, humane morality, replacing class society's morality of the jungle and of petrified superstition with the moral principles of consistent, comprehensive human solidarity; "socialism" knew only of the morality of the slave market, and of the venal courtier, at all the levels of "socialist" society.

Socialism is the victory of reason against the murderous unreason of class society; "socialism" raised irrationality to the pitch of nightmare.

Socialism is reason in revolt; "socialism" was reason in captivity to a church-state, with its Pope-Caesar and his cardinals, bishops and local priests, and thus socialism under "socialism" was at the mercy of all its historical enemies: scholasticism, papal infallibility, superstition — of official, arbitrary, a-priori truth that

banished reason from science, education, the economy.

Socialism is republican liberty and equality; "socialism" was an absolute monarchy whose King, as Trotsky justly observed, could honestly say "society, c'est moi".

Socialism organised revolutionary political parties in which discipline in action was prepared and assessed by freedom of thought, of criticism and of dissent; "socialism" created monolithic sect-parties without freedom of thought or criticism or dissent, parties organised not according to the needs of the class struggle and of reason but by the Jesuit rules of self-blinded hierarchy and obedience, and kept in line by ideological terror and sometimes by physical terror as well.

Socialism meant increasing liberty from the state; "socialism" inaugurated a state-worship akin to that of fascism.

Socialism was a coherent, developing view of history, of social evolution and of socialism itself as the heir of capitalism in history; "socialism" disarranged all the ideas, perspectives, meaning-charged words of socialism, shuffling them and reshuffling them into indecipherability and arbitrary, shifting meanings, interpreted by a hierarchical caste of state-licensed priests.

Socialism is socialism; "socialism" was Stalinism.

Socialism is the victory of the working class in the class struggle against the bourgeoisie; "socialism" was the victory of the bureaucratic Stalinist ruling class in the class struggle with the workers.

Socialism, as distinct from "socialism", was, for uncounted millions in the 20th century, the common name of widespread yearning, striving, aspiring hope for a better civilisation; an historically higher civilisation in which there would be production for use in an economy organised to serve human need and not, as under capitalism, human beings organised under the whip of necessity to serve capital.

Socialism, as distinct from "socialism", is democracy extended outwards and downwards from the political heights all through society and the economy — in a world with no racial, national, religious, sexual or class oppression: a world with neither slave nor ruling brigand. But "socialism" came to be the name of political and social tyranny. Even where there was economic progress, that "socialism" fell behind bourgeois civilisation when it destroyed the gains of centuries in culture and human rights — working-class political and social rights in particular.

The place of socialism was, for decades, filled by Stalinist "socialism". European Stalinism is dead, but socialists, including the heirs of the anti-Stalinists, live still in the grip of the moral, political and intellectual chaos created by Stalinism.

The moral and political crisis of the left is fundamentally a confusion of ideas, of identity, of an unexplored history and of our language of politics. Stalinism made that language one of words that convey feeling and crude alignment, not thought; ascribed, not real, characteristics; wishes, not truth.

In the Balkan crisis the language of even anti-Stalinist socialism was reduced to gibberish.

1. There was a strange subtext in the publication of the main organisers of the anti-war movement. Alex Callinicos said in *Socialist Worker* that a big Albania, Kosova joined to Albania and maybe parts of Macedonia, would 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.

For all their pose and talk of being the most vehement against everything the big powers do, there the SWP echoed the fundamental thread of the big power policy for the previous 11 years: the smaller nations in ex-Yugoslavia should, above all, settle down, be quiet, not demand too much, and not cause trouble. (Also, that Milosevic should not provoke them quite so sorely that trouble became unavoidable). It was, behind all the postures, as imperialistic, as disdainful of the rights of oppressed peoples, as any argument you will find on any side in this whole affair. So much for anti-imperialism!