

Yugoslav Civil War Nationalism & Counterrevolution

The historical tragedy of the collapse of the Soviet Union has been paralleled in the Balkans with the bloody demise of the Yugoslav federation. In both the USSR and Yugoslavia the destruction of the bureaucratized workers states has produced a myriad of smaller formations, in various stages of consolidation as capitalist states. The banner of the movement toward capitalist restoration across Eastern Europe has been that of bloody nationalism, linking demands for the reintroduction of the market with competing and usually irreconcilable territorial aspirations.

The vicious nationalist struggles that have torn Yugoslavia apart are a reactionary regression for the peoples of the Balkans. Leninists recognize the right of nations to self-determination and the right of all peoples to self-defense. Yet the axis of the conflicts in the Balkans today pits rival proto-capitalist regimes against each other in fratricidal struggles to enlarge their domains at the expense of their neighbors. Working people have no stake in such squabbles.

The age-old national hostilities, long submerged by the Titoist federal state, are threatening once more to drown the region in a tide of blood. History proves that there is nothing inevitable about this poisonous nationalist warring. For decades after the founding of the multi-national Yugoslav deformed workers state, there was a tendency toward the integration of peoples in a region whose name has historically been synonymous with inter-ethnic strife and carnage.

Serbs, the largest single nationality, were predominant within the Yugoslav federation and constituted 70 percent of the officer corps of the federal military. In contrast to the overtly national-chauvinist nature of Soviet Stalinism—organized around the domination of the Great Russian bureaucracy—Stalinism in Yugoslavia always had a genuinely federal character. The partisan army, led by Josip Broz Tito, which successfully resisted the Nazis during World War II, included members of every nationality. The ruling Yugoslav League of Communists (LCY) consciously attempted to defuse nationalist antagonisms. With the decay and collapse of the federal state, the peoples of the Balkans, who for decades have lived together in relative peace, are again caught in a tragic cycle of irrational bloodletting.

Yugoslavia and Albania were the only two countries in Europe where Stalinist parties came to power after the war without the direct intervention of the Soviet army. This allowed them a measure of independence that none of the Soviet clients in Eastern Europe possessed. Yugoslavia's insistence on determining its own foreign policy led to a break with the USSR in 1948. Tito quickly turned to the American and German imperialists for economic "aid." The imperialist powers were happy to oblige in order to deepen the split between Belgrade and Moscow and gain leverage over the Yugoslav economy. Between

1948 and 1962 Yugoslavia received some \$2 billion in economic and military assistance from the U.S. (*Politische Berichte* No. 6, 15 March 1991).

For years propaganda from Belgrade trumpeted the "Yugoslav" road to socialism as distinctive and successful. The rule of the Yugoslav Stalinists was generally more relaxed than either their Soviet or Chinese counterparts; there were fewer restrictions on freedom of speech and even some narrow scope for worker participation in workplace decision-making. Yet the essential contradiction between property forms on the one hand, and the rule of a parasitic bureaucracy on the other, eventually destroyed the Yugoslav deformed workers state.

Yugoslavia's ruling bureaucratic caste sought to maintain its political monopoly and privileged lifestyle by conciliating imperialism, while pursuing its own national interests at the expense of those of the international working class. Yet the collectivized property upon which the rule of the Titoist bureaucracy ultimately depended was undermined by the restorationist social forces engendered by the pressure of world imperialism.

The profound economic contradictions that produced the current explosion of nationalist warfare result from four decades of Stalinist misrule and economic bungling. After initially following Stalin's hyper-centralist USSR, Tito began to decentralize economic control in the early 1950s under the rubric of workers self-management. While this accentuated centrifugal tendencies in the economy, those tendencies were partially checked by the maintenance of central control over investment. The economy expanded at an average annual rate of 8 percent through the 1950s and early 1960s.

Zig-Zags on the "Yugoslav Road"

In 1965, as productivity began to slow and the trade deficit and inflation grew, Belgrade introduced a major market-oriented "reform" aimed at allowing the market to determine prices and investment. Foreign firms were allowed to acquire up to 49 percent ownership in Yugoslav enterprises, which were permitted to retain their earnings and determine investment and wages. Investment funds, previously allocated through the central planning institutions, were disbursed through banks, which were supposed to invest where the rate of return was highest.

These market "reforms" subverted the economic basis of the deformed workers state. Investment dropped in the more economically backward regions of the country: Kosovo, much of Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. The growing disparities between Yugoslavia's constituent republics fuelled the revival of national antagonisms. The attempt to introduce market mechanisms simultaneously created a layer of wealthy petty-bourgeois entrepreneurs, with connections to foreign

capital, who aspired to widen their field for exploitation. The emergence of this social stratum exerted a powerful attraction on a section of the LCY bureaucracy, and contributed to the resurgence of petty-bourgeois pro-capitalist nationalism.

In the early 1970s, alarmed by the growth of such elements, the regime changed course and attempted to repress the restorationist forces that its economic liberalization had unleashed. There was an unsuccessful attempt to reverse many of the changes introduced in 1965 without abandoning the attempt to marry market forces and socialized property. But the rate of growth of the Yugoslav economy continued to fall. Annual net growth fell from 6.5 percent in 1970 to 3.6 percent by the end of the decade. Meanwhile, imports outstripped exports by close to 100 percent.

The regime attempted to paper over these problems with massive borrowing on the international market: between 1970 and 1980 the Yugoslav foreign debt ballooned from \$2.4 to \$11 billion. Debt service drained valuable resources into the pockets of the international financiers, thus deepening the economic crisis. By the 1980s the Yugoslav economy was contracting. In the later half of the decade net growth in labor productivity was falling by one percent a year.

In 1983, alarmed by the deteriorating economy, the federal government's "Commission on Economic Stabilization"—under supervision from the International Monetary Fund—adopted an austerity program promoting those enterprises that could compete on the world market. This further exacerbated tensions within the federation, as Croatia and Slovenia, which had the bulk of the enterprises capable of producing goods for export, began receiving a disproportionate share of economic resources. Despite the LCY's attempts to develop the more backward regions through a system of transfer payments, the disparities continued to grow. By 1990 in Slovenia, Yugoslavia's wealthiest republic, per capita income was roughly \$7,000—seven times that of ethnically Albanian Kosovo.

Yugoslav Road Deadends

By the late 1980s the Yugoslav federal system and the central state authority were on the brink of a complete breakdown. Real personal income per capita had fallen by 25 percent during the decade. The financial system was in tatters, with annual inflation reaching 2,000 percent. In January 1990 the Yugoslav League of Communists held an "extraordinary" fourteenth congress, where it abandoned its 45-year monopoly of power and then effectively dissolved itself into its different national components.

Ante Markovic, the last federal prime minister, attempted to hold Yugoslavia together by ignoring the paralyzed LCY and seeking to use the federal government's nominal powers to fast-track capitalist restoration. His 1990 austerity reform package aimed at slashing government subsidies and freeing up enterprises to sink or swim on the international market.

Markovic succeeded, briefly, in reducing the rate of

inflation by tying the dinar to the German mark. Other "reforms" included allowing foreign capitalists to buy Yugoslav banks and enterprises outright, and to repatriate their profits. The effects of these measures would have varied widely from one republic to another. In Montenegro it would have bankrupted an estimated 80 percent of enterprises, in Slovenia only 10 percent. But events overtook Markovic's attempts to restore capitalism within a federated Yugoslavia, and the disintegration of the federal state set the stage for a different road to capitalist restoration.

As central authority crumbled, the processes of economic fragmentation necessarily accelerated. Republics were freed to engage in vicious competition against one another by an increasingly impotent federal government. To finance their activities the republics simply printed currency. Tariff barriers sprang up between republics as Serbia imposed a 50 percent duty on goods manufactured in Croatia and Slovenia. Industrial output contracted by 23 percent in 1990, and fell as much again in the first half of 1991. Since that point, with the outbreak of hostilities between Serbia and Croatia, reliable statistics have ceased. But the economic situation has continued to deteriorate rapidly in most of the republics.

Federal Government Disintegrates

The collapse of the economy accelerated the disintegration of the rickety federal political structure. Throughout 1990 one republic after another proclaimed that its laws took precedence over those of the federal authorities, and began withholding payments to the central government. Elections held in Slovenia and Croatia, in April and May 1990 respectively, returned anti-communist slates pledged to win independence from the Serbian-dominated federal state.

In July 1990 the Serbian LCY, under the ultra-chauvinist Slobodan Milosevic, fused with its own mass front group and changed its name to the Serbian Socialist Party. Five months later it managed to get elected by using its ability to set the rules, running on a social-democratic program and downplaying its historic connection to Tito's LCY.

Milosevic has made a political career out of Serbian chauvinism. In July 1990 his government revoked the autonomy of the overwhelmingly Albanian province of Kosovo, dissolved its provincial parliament and began a reign of police terror. Strikes were outlawed and ethnic Albanians replaced with Serbs throughout the administrative apparatus. Albanians who wanted to keep their jobs were forced to sign statements pledging loyalty to Serbia. Some 60,000 Albanian workers who refused to sign have resigned or have been fired.

The brutal suppression of the Albanians in Kosovo proved to be the first of a series of inter-ethnic conflicts that have since convulsed the region. The attacks on Kosovo and Vojvodina (a region in northern Serbia with a large Hungarian minority) provoked an outcry against Serb expansionism throughout the other republics. The Slovenian government openly denounced Serbian chau-

vinism as well as Milosevic's tactic of mass mobilizations of Serb minorities in the other republics.

Right-wing Extremist Croatian HDZ vs. Reactionary Serb Nationalists

The Serbs have no monopoly on reactionary national chauvinism. When the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) assumed office it dismissed all Serbs from governmental posts. It also revived the symbols of the pro-Nazi Ustashi government of the 1940s that killed hundreds of thousands of Jews, Roma ("gypsies") and Serbs during World War II. The HDZ regime promptly renamed the Square for the Victims of Fascism in the Croatian capital of Zagreb the Square of the Croatian Giants. Members of the Serbian minority, which make up 12 percent of the population of the Croatian republic, were ordered to sign an oath of loyalty to the new regime.

As tensions escalated between Zagreb and Belgrade in the run-up to the outbreak of war, Serbs in Croatia were randomly snatched off the streets by police for interrogation; Serbs who owned property in Croatia were slapped with punitive extra taxes. In response, the Serbian population in Croatia began to talk of seceding. In 1990, as Milosevic was suppressing Kosovo, the Zagreb regime in turn outlawed a proposed referendum on autonomy for the six counties in which Serbs are a majority. In March 1991 Serbian leaders in Krajina, backed by Milosevic, proclaimed a "Serbian autonomous region" within Croatia. In Krajina and Slavonia, in eastern Croatia, Serbian paramilitary guerrilla units went into action in an attempt to carve out enclaves within Croatia.

At the end of June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from the federation. The Slovenes secured their independence by successfully beating off the federal army the next month. A few months later the Croatian and Muslim populations of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared their intention to secede as well. The European Community (EC) and the U.S. recognized Bosnia-Herzegovina in April. This was followed by the eruption of intercommunal fighting as the Serbian minority, backed by the Yugoslav army, attempts to secede from the newly independent republic.

The conflict between Croatia and Serbia began in earnest in August 1991, after months of escalating clashes. Numerous cease-fires negotiated by the EC were broken by both sides. For a time it seemed possible that the Yugoslav federal army might play some kind of quasi-independent role, balancing between and counteracting nationalist tensions. The army high command had even made noises about the need to protect Yugoslavia's "federal and socialist society." But as the ethnic tensions mounted during 1991 many senior non-Serb officers were replaced by Serbs, puncturing illusions in the "federal" character of the Yugoslav army. It had become, before all else, the agency of Serbian nationalism. During the conflict in Croatia it did not hesitate to target civilian population centres. The Croatian militia was outmatched and the Serbs soon gained control of roughly a third of Croatia, including the port of Dub-

rovnik.

Working people of Yugoslavia have no interest in the victory of either of the murderous nationalist formations in this conflict. The rapidly deteriorating living standards of workers have produced significant opposition within Serbia. Milosevic has attempted to suppress opposition to the war, but thousands of Serbian soldiers have deserted or have gone into hiding to avoid being dragooned into the squalid conflict. Last October Montenegro, Serbia's closest ally, came out against the use of its reservists in the campaign against Croatia.

Yugoslavia: No Longer a Workers State

Much of the ostensibly revolutionary left have supported Tudjman's counterrevolutionary Croatian regime; others have responded with confusion and agnosticism. Today there are openly pro-capitalist regimes in all the major fragments of what was once Yugoslavia. Moreover, the federal state structure has collapsed and economic coordination between the republics has ceased. Neither Yugoslavia as a whole, nor any constituent part of it, survives as a deformed workers state. There are of course remnants of the old state structures, but the state itself, as an entity dedicated to the defense and preservation of a collectivized economy, is gone.

The governments of Slovenia and Croatia, which declared independence in June 1991, were overtly pro-capitalist. They represented clear breaks from the republican fragments of the Titoist LCY they had defeated in the 1990 elections. The demoralized residue of the old Stalinist order was dispersed by the purging and restructuring of the republics' apparatuses. The new regimes based themselves on police forces and militias established in political opposition to the federal army. Clearly these new rightist regimes constitute nascent bourgeois states.

Milosevic initially opposed the secession of Slovenia and Croatia and claims continuity with the old Yugoslav state. For this the Serbian "strongman" is occasionally portrayed by the bourgeois media as one of the last "communists" in Europe. Croatian president Franco Tudjman has sometimes tried to paint the conflict with Serbia as a struggle against "communism." But this is so absurd that even the Croatian rightists of the HDZ do not push it very hard. They know they are fighting Serbs, not communists.

Milosevic's regime, unlike those in Croatia and Slovenia, was not founded in such open political and military conflict with the Stalinist past. There is considerable organizational continuity between the LCY and the Serbian Socialist Party. Furthermore, Milosevic's demagogic approach and rhetoric are conditioned by the presence of a political opponent, Vuk Draskovic, who as leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement has a substantial right-wing following. This does not change the fact that Milosevic is a capitalist-restorationist at the head of a capitalist-restorationist regime. He does not pretend to be anything else.

The axis of capitalist restoration within Yugoslavia has been nationalist polarisation, and the pro-market Milosevic has embraced this nationalist poison with as

much vigor as any other political figure in the region. This is evidenced by his willingness to ally with the proto-fascists of the Chetnik Serb militias. Milosevic took power within the Serbian LCY in the mid-1980s on a program of chauvinist opposition to the federalism of the Titoist wing of the party. Like Tudjman and every other aspiring would-be capitalist politician in Eastern Europe, he promises to establish a market economy without social pain.

The consolidation of a new bourgeois state power is less complete in Serbia than in Croatia and Slovenia. The Yugoslav army, although allied with Milosevic, remains somewhat independent of his regime. Yet no government or military personnel has attempted to defend collectivized property. Serbia's war on Croatia was a war to carve out a *capitalist* Greater Serbia. With the disintegration of the crucial federal tier of economic planning, all the signposts on the road to forging a new Serbian nation-state point to capitalism and free-market austerity. All significant elements of the Serbian bureaucracy have abandoned hope of maintaining their privileges through a planned economy.

For most of its history Yugoslavia was not a Soviet satellite, but Yugoslav Stalinism found a niche living off the tension between imperialism and the USSR. The end of the Soviet Union means that niche no longer exists. The apparatchiks of the Serb republic know that their best hope lies in carving out a Serbian capitalist nation-state, integrated into world capitalism.

One of the circumstances that permitted the establishment of the deformed workers states in Eastern Europe after World War II was the economic and military supremacy of the Soviet Union in the region. In 1992, with the collapse of the USSR, the world is a very different place. The idea that, amidst the current chaos and the broad, powerful movement toward capitalism across Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe as a whole, a new, specifically Serbian, deformed workers state has been constructed, is hard to take seriously.

LRCI: Consistent Stalinophobes

The League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI), headquartered in the offices of the British Workers Power group, is among those left organizations that fail to comprehend the scope of recent events in the Balkans. Despite the destruction of the Yugoslav state through vicious nationalist war and bourgeois counter-revolution, the October 1991 issue of *Workers Power* (*WP*) claimed that: "Despite the pro-capitalist nature of the national governments and the decades of market reform Yugoslavia remains, for the moment, a degenerate workers' state." This was implicitly reiterated in the January issue, which referred to the "Bonapartist bureaucracy" in Serbia and called for the "overthrow of the bureaucratic and bourgeois governments" in the region.

Their faulty position is bad, but their programmatic conclusions are worse. The LRCI sees no contradiction between claiming that Milosevic is heading a rump workers state and supporting the openly counterrevolutionary Croatian and Slovenian nationalists:

"At present those trying to construct working class unity

in the face of the descent into murderous chauvinism have to start by recognising the legitimate right of Croatia and Slovenia to self-determination and secession. That means their right to resist the Serbian backed attempt to keep them in the federation by force."

—*Workers Power*, October 1991

In November *Workers Power* shifted its line, without explanation, and announced that "workers should at present take no side in the war between Serbia and Croatia;" but the common thread running through their positions is the refusal to defend what they apparently believed was still a "degenerate workers' state" based in Belgrade. The LRCI has a record of abject refusal to defend workers states against counterrevolution. Last August the LRCI lined up with Boris Yeltsin and the capitalist restorationists against the Stalinist coup in Moscow. Ten years earlier *Workers Power* stood shoulder to shoulder with Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II in defending Lech Walesa's openly counterrevolutionary *Solidarnosc*.

Workers Power's "Trotskyism" is purely nominal. While professing a defensist attitude toward working-class property, it lacks the political spine to side with the Stalinists against popular counterrevolutionary movements. If a deformed workers state existed today in Yugoslavia (or any part of it) it would be in a desperate situation. It would face further loss of territory and productive forces, and an extremely unfavorable domestic and international correlation of forces. It would be vitally necessary to defend it against pro-capitalist forces. This would not include support to nationalist pogroms against Croats or anyone else, but unlike the centrists of the LRCI, who place the right of national self-determination above the defense of proletarian property, Leninists support the right of workers states to forcibly retain territories against bourgeois-separatist movements. In the Balkans today there is no deformed workers state left to defend, or—from the point of the view of the fair-weather Trotskyists of the LRCI—to *fail* to defend.

The LRCI's defensism is limited to opposing direct imperialist involvement: "Any imperialist intervention, under whatever guise, will be aimed at guaranteeing a capitalist Croatia and delivering a final death blow to what they see as 'communism' in Yugoslavia" (*WP*, October 1991). It seems that the LRCI's opposition to capitalist restoration depends on the *agency* of counter-revolution. If a counterrevolutionary movement has sufficient popular support, then the LRCI is prepared to go along with it. Despite their formal renunciation of Tony Cliff's third-camp politics, *Workers Power* retains the essence of the Stalinophobic methodology of its parent.

Spartacist Incoherence

Meanwhile, the ex-Trotskyists of the International Communist League (dominated by the Spartacist League/U.S.) have responded to the Balkan events in the same incoherent fashion as they did to the demise of the USSR. The Spartacists' refusal to side with the anti-Yeltsinite coup last year compelled them to deny the significance of the victory of the counterrevolution. This,

in turn, leads them to claim that nothing definitive has taken place, and to assert that a degenerated workers state still exists on the territory of the former USSR. As of this writing they are continuing to raise the slogan of “workers political revolution,” which Trotsky developed for the bureaucratized Soviet workers state, but which is thoroughly disorienting when applied to the nascent *capitalist* state which Yeltsin now heads.

In its 9 May 1991 issue, *Workers Vanguard (WV)* speculated about a bloc with the Yugoslav federal military against the pro-capitalist Croatian forces, but had second thoughts when the nationalist wars erupted. In the months that followed *WV* denounced the various nationalist formations, but did not venture any new characterization of Yugoslavia or its constituent parts. Thus, at least by omission, their position appears to resemble the LRCI’s: some or all of Yugoslavia remains a deformed workers state, but they take no side in the federal army’s struggle against the openly counterrevolutionary forces of Tudjman.

Oppose UN/Imperialist Intervention!

The European imperialists would like to see stability in the Balkans, and fear that a full-scale civil war could ignite conflicts involving minorities which overlap into Austria, Albania, Greece, Hungary and Bulgaria. A few weeks before the failed August coup in the USSR, the Soviet bureaucracy told the EC to keep its hands off Yugoslavia, and warned that military intervention could lead to an “all-European” conflict (*Financial Times*, 7 August 1991). With Yeltsin in control, the major capitalist powers no longer have to worry about the Russians.

Yet even so, the imperialists were divided over how to respond to events in the Balkans. Britain, France and the U.S., wary of German expansionism in the region, did their best to maintain some sort of federation. Some of the EC imperialists are also concerned about the potentially destabilizing implications of support to “national liberation” rhetoric. The British do not want to establish precedents for the Scots nationalists or the Republicans in Northern Ireland. The French are concerned about the Corsicans and the Spanish are worried about the Basques and Catalans.

But as the conflict between Serbia and Croatia deepened, it became clear that there was no hope of any federal solution. After a series of failed attempts to arrange a cease-fire, the German imperialists, who fondly recall the fascistic Croatian client state of World War II, eventually forced the EC to recognize the breakaway states. Germany also favored military intervention on behalf of the Croats—although preferably without German troops. On this score too they have had their way, with the United Nations providing a fig-leaf for imperialist intervention.

The 14,000-strong UN “peacekeeping” force is made up of cops and soldiers from the imperialist powers and their lackeys—including 900 Russians. Imperialist intercession will not resolve the bitter national antagonisms in the region. In the long term it can only have reaction-

ary consequences. It is the duty of Marxists to oppose the UN intervention, and fight to keep the imperialists’ bloody hands off the Balkans.

For a Multi-National Leninist Party!

At this point the immediate prospects for the region are bleak. The only way out of this descent into a sectarian bloodbath is through uniting working people *across* national lines and against the lethal logic of bourgeois nationalism. Revolutionists must oppose Milosevic’s attempts to carve out a Greater Serbia, while simultaneously opposing the Croatian reactionaries’ attempt to oppress Serbs and other minorities within a reborn Ustashi state. The restoration of capitalist property and the consolidation of a welter of Balkan regimes, each of which uses the oppression of its fellow nationals beyond its borders as an excuse to carve out more *Lebensraum* at the expense of its rivals, poses a deadly threat to all the peoples of the region.

Tragically, the multi-national deformed workers state Tito forged has collapsed. At this point there is no force on the ground that, even in a deformed way, represents the interests of the working class. For the moment working people on all sides are caught in the murderous logic of nationalist pogroms. Yet not everyone in the former Yugoslavia is accepting the fratricide without protest. In June there were sizeable demonstrations in Belgrade by Serbian women opposed to losing their sons in what they saw as a pointless exercise. Revolutionists must seek to use such sentiments as points of support in the struggle to turn back the tide of reactionary bourgeois nationalism and capitalist restoration.

Like their comrades in the rest of Eastern Europe, the working people of the Balkans are already learning that capitalist restoration means hunger and privation for many, so that a handful of parasites can get rich. What is vital is that the workers generalize and draw the lessons of their experience. They must reject the counsels of the nationalists who call for more bloodletting, and instead, organize to overthrow the regimes that are leading them deeper into the mire. The enemies of the working people of each nation are not the workers of the other Balkan nations, but their “own” pro-capitalist nationalist leaders and the loan-sharks and property speculators who are the pioneers of a future neo-colonial ruling class.

Marxists oppose all forms of national oppression. But the current nationalist conflicts throughout the former Yugoslav federation are for the most part struggles over territories with heavily interpenetrated peoples. The victory of one people must entail the oppression of the others. In such situations Marxists take a position of *revolutionary defeatism*. What is absent in the Balkans today is the nucleus of a revolutionary leadership, with a program to focus the inchoate anger against the ravages of capitalist restoration and barbaric nationalist warfare into class-conscious action.

Revolutionary internationalism is the only alternative to communalist mass murder and capitalist immiseration. The solution to the complex problems posed by the intricate mosaic of peoples that covers much of the

Balkans can only be equitably resolved through the creation of a voluntary socialist federation of the peoples of the region.

To combat the nationalist pogromists it is necessary to create workers militias committed to opposing communalist terror from every quarter. The workers of the

former Yugoslav federation must oppose every step toward the establishment of the market, and fight for the restoration of a centrally planned economy—but this time, one based on workers democracy, not Stalinist commandism. ■