

# Bosnian War and the Left

## Balkan Barbarism

Since the destruction of the Yugoslav deformed workers' state and the emergence of pro-capitalist governments in its former republics, the Balkans has seen the revival of a phenomenon that had for many years been thought to be a thing of a dark and distant past. Bloody inter-ethnic wars, the forcible expulsion of whole communities from regions where they had lived all their lives, massacres of villagers belonging to the "wrong" ethnic group—the reemergence of all these things has shaken belief in the inevitability of progress. One of the central tenets of Western bourgeois liberalism and social democracy, that the collapse of Stalinism and the triumph of the market would bring a new era of political freedom and economic prosperity, has been shattered, as rival nation builders launch bloody wars of territorial expansion, destroying the lives of millions of people in the process. It is a sanguinary reminder that capitalism is a system whose nation-states were forged over the corpses of millions of victims of "inferior" nationalities.

The aspiring bourgeois nation builders of the Balkans are only carrying out, over the corpses of the former workers' state, the same bloody national consolidation that their imperialist big brothers completed centuries ago. The difference is that, in the epoch of imperialism, rather than forging modern, "civilized" nation-states, the result will be backward semi-colonies ruled by reactionary bonapartist cliques. It all makes a mockery of the U.S. State Department theoretician Francis Fukuyama's contention that the collapse of Soviet "communism" meant that history had come to an end, and a new era of peace and harmony was at hand.

Many individuals who recently considered, or may still consider, themselves opponents of capitalism have been affected by the massive rightward backwash from the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. More than a few liberals, who once liked to think of themselves as opponents of imperialist intervention, now call on the U.S. and NATO to take up arms for "progressive" purposes: against the Haitian junta, against Saddam Hussein and against "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia. This was epitomized in Britain by the conversion of Fred Halliday, a prominent New Left spokesman in the 1960s and 70s, to an apologist for George Bush's war against Iraq. It also resonates in the chorus of demands from American radlibs and British social democrats that Clinton intervene in the Balkans by bombing the Bosnian Serbs to help the Muslims.

In the U.S., the interventionist pack is led by the British-born Christopher Hitchens, a columnist for the *Nation* magazine, who until recently billed himself as a staunch opponent of American imperialism. He is joined by Bogdan Denitch, America's leading social democrat and himself a Serbian. Even Alexander Cockburn and Noam Chomsky, who inhabit the left fringe of the rad-lib spectrum, have called for a UN peacekeeping force in

Bosnia, as if the "blue berets" could, or would, act independently of the U.S. and other imperialist powers.

But first prize for post-cold war knavery must surely go to Tim Wohlforth, the erstwhile screaming maniac of American pseudo-Trotskyism, who is now enjoying a second incarnation as a mild-mannered social democrat. Wohlforth writes:

"We must favor international intervention, including military action, in Bosnia. This should be truly international action carried out through the U.N. Yet the reality is that such U.N. initiatives require American support and an American content. We need to work toward the establishment of a permanent United Nations peace force to act in similar situations around the world."

—*In These Times*, 26 July 1994

During his inglorious career as Gerry Healy's American majordomo and leader of the Workers League, Wohlforth demonstrated a cavalier disregard for the truth whenever it conflicted with the organizational exigencies of the moment. Perhaps today he has actually convinced himself that, after the downfall of Stalinism, the imperialist tiger will suddenly begin to act like the lamb of mercy. But such fantasies in the end only add up to a rationale for the fact that Wohlforth and his ilk lack the political backbone to stand fast against the prevailing reactionary winds.

### B-52 Liberalism and the 'Revolutionary' Left

The rapid shift to the right by social democrats and liberals has affected much of the ostensibly revolutionary left. One manifestation of this mood is the "Workers Aid for Bosnia" (WAB) campaign organized by various British left groups. This campaign has struck a real chord in sections of the British working class, many of whom are rightly appalled at the carnage in the former Yugoslavia and want to "do something" about it. Thus in 1993 WAB attracted support from striking workers at the Timex factory in Dundee, Scotland who organized an aid convoy "From Timex to Tuzla." Such actions by trade unionists are an expression of a real internationalist impulse. But these workers are being misled by a campaign whose left social-democratic politics are designed to obscure the fact that this war is a barbaric result of capitalist counterrevolution in the Balkans. What is worse, the campaign does not fight against, but actively panders to, the sentiment in favor of imperialists "doing something" by bombing the Bosnian Serbs.

Thus the British-based rump of Workers Aid, dominated by Cliff Slaughter's Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), has raised the slogan "Open the Northern Route [to Tuzla]." This amounts to a call for the British and other UN "blue berets" to blast their way through Serb-held territory to allow the Workers Aid convoys through. Meanwhile, the International Workers Aid, dominated by European sections of the United Secretar-

iat of the Fourth International (USec)—particularly Britain’s Socialist Outlook and the French Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR)—is no better. Its slogan, “Open Tuzla Airport,” (closed by Serb bombardment), is also directed at imperialist/UN forces.

The British Workers Power group (WP), leading section of the centrist League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LRCI), takes a characteristic Janus-faced position with regard to Workers Aid. WP does not actually endorse the campaign because “it has...issued propaganda differentially hostile to the Serbs, and has even evinced political support to the pro-capitalist Izetbegovic Bosnian government” (*Workers Power*, No. 170, September 1993). But they support the activities of the campaign nevertheless. This allows them to posture as left critics of WAB on occasion, without counterposing themselves to the rampant social-democratic/liberal illusions upon which the campaign is based.

### **‘Multi-ethnic’ Bosnia— A Reformist Pipe Dream**

The reformist and centrist left attempt to justify their support to the predominantly Muslim Bosnian government in the current war by pointing to its pronouncements at the time it declared independence from Yugoslavia. The Bosnian president, Alija Izetbegovic, came out with a lot of rhetoric about “multi-culturalism” and “multi-ethnicity.” *Socialist Outlook*, newspaper of the British USec section later began to whine about the betrayal of these hopes by the Bosnian government:

“The Izetbegovic government has indicated that it is willing to accept the concept of a ‘Muslim’ state. This is a big retreat from the multi-national, multi-religious Bosnia envisaged in the ‘platform of the Presidency’ published in Sarajevo, 26th June 1992. Izetbegovic has also talked about the need to create a ‘Muslim’ army. This weakens the fight for Bosnian independence.”

—*Socialist Outlook*, No. 53, 27 November 1993

But Izetbegovic’s real designs (as opposed to his calculated liberal rhetoric) were always clear enough for those who took the trouble to find out. A letter in the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Policy* from Michael Mennard, a former member of the U.S. foreign service, reported that Izetbegovic is the author of a tract entitled “The Islamic Declaration: A Programme for the Islamization of Muslims and the Muslim Peoples.” According to Mennard:

“...Izetbegovic’s work is diametrically opposed to his multicultural dream. For example, Izetbegovic speaks assertively about ‘the incompatibility of Islam with non-Islamic systems. There can be neither peace nor coexistence,’ he emphasizes, ‘between the Islamic religion and non-Islamic social and political institutions.’ So much for a multicultural and multireligious society.

“Moreover, Izetbegovic, the protagonist of a unified Bosnia, also says: ‘The upbringing of the people, and particularly means of mass influence—the press, radio, television and film—should be in the hands of people whose Islamic moral and intellectual authority is indisputable.’ Nothing is said about what the Croat and the Serb members of the media can expect. Convert to Islam to keep their jobs?”

“The bottom line is that Izetbegovic never renounced any of the above statements. Whenever asked about it, he

refused to comment.”

Izetbegovic, a consistent pro-capitalist nation builder, understands that a bourgeois nation-state is usually built upon a single nationality, and *necessarily* oppresses other nationalities. This in marked contrast to the cynical and/or naive USec reformists, who believe it is possible to have, in the words of Peter Gabriel, “Games without frontiers, war without tears”!

Genuine multi-ethnic bourgeois states are very rare. The United States, for instance, contains components of virtually every nationality on the planet. But, although there is a definite hierarchy among ethnic groups in the U.S., immigrants have historically been pressed to shed their national cultures in favor of a new, American identity.

There are two small multi-ethnic states in Western Europe: Switzerland and Belgium. Three quarters of the Swiss population is of German ethnicity, with a sizable French-speaking minority, and small groups of Italian and Romansh speakers. It took centuries of wars of conquest, on the one hand, and amalgamation/association between small separate mini-states or cantons, on the other, to create the Swiss confederation. The consolidation of the Swiss multi-ethnic state was a product of the epoch of progressive capitalism.

As for Belgium, its foundation was very much on the basis of Catholicism, which was the binding that held together the French-speaking Walloons and the Dutch-speaking Flemish against Protestant Holland. Belgium is a product of the failure of the Dutch reformation to extend itself to the southern Netherlands and drive out the Spanish monarchy. The French Revolution freed Belgium from the Spanish Hapsburg’s Austrian successors, and laid the foundations for a Belgian bourgeois state, based on a common, largely Catholic, identity. Belgian national independence was won through a national liberation struggle against the reactionary union with the Dutch imposed by the victors of Waterloo. This occurred in conjunction with the revolutionary struggles that erupted in 1830 in France.

The Belgian and Swiss states were forged as genuinely multinational bourgeois states, and not on the basis of the national oppression of one people by another. They were among the highest achievements of the epoch of progressive capitalism. But to expect such things to be duplicated in the epoch of capitalist decay is a reformist pipe dream. The counterrevolutionary destruction of the Yugoslav workers’ state, which unleashed the current round of nationalist conflicts in the Balkans, was a giant backward step in the social sphere. The multi-national character of the Belgian state is currently under attack with the rise of the ultra-rightist Flemish “Vlaams Block” based on Dutch-speaking separatism. This is an ominous development; it shows that the historic achievements of the bourgeoisie are not secure in this reactionary period.

### **Stalinophobia and Nationalist Cheerleading**

Behind the reformist and centrist capitulation to “Bosnian” nationalism and illusions in the potentially “progressive” role of imperialism in the new Balkan wars, are

two political tendencies shared by many centrists and left reformists. One is Stalinophobia, i.e., a refusal to distinguish the social gains of the deformed and degenerated workers' states from the reactionary bureaucracies that ruled them, and hence a refusal to defend collectivized property against capitalist restoration. The various pseudo-Marxist groups displayed their Stalinophobia when they applauded the breakup of the Yugoslav deformed workers' state. The second is a classic New Left position on the national question in situations of interpenetrated peoples (i.e., ethnically mixed populations). It consists of a belief that some peoples are inherently "progressive" because they are oppressed, and that other peoples—the oppressors—are inherently reactionary, and therefore unworthy of any national rights or guarantees. This way of thinking is evident in the inclination of the centrist/reformist left to imagine that Bosnian Muslims can do no wrong, and that the Serbs are unmitigated villains.

The groups currently involved in Workers Aid for Bosnia—USec, LRCI, WRP, et al.—previously supported the various secessionist movements in the disintegrating Yugoslav workers' state. They all adhere to the proposition that the question of national self-determination supersedes the question of property forms, i.e., which class shall rule in the social sphere. But they were not prepared for the consequences of their position. They apparently did not realize that the splitting of the Serbs and Croats into competing nation-states was counterposed *in real life* to the existence of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This peculiar blindness, and the reflex of much of the supposedly "progressive" milieu to support the Croatian nationalists, was accurately characterized by BBC and former *Guardian* correspondent, Misha Glenny:

"On the whole, Croatia's case was presented with considerable sympathy in the West European media. Those of us who were not uncritical of Tudjman's programme were subject to ever more poisonous attacks as the war spread. Most shocking of all were the people I had known for many years from left and liberal circles in the United Kingdom who had fallen under the spell of Croatian nationalism. These people demonstrated their consistent solidarity with a small-minded, right-wing autocrat as a consequence of losing the ability to argue rationally. In extreme situations, nationalism appears to neutralize that part of the mind which is able to fathom complex equations."

—*The Fall of Yugoslavia*, 1993

This is an insightful description of the hysteria and willful blindness that has characterized most of the left-liberal/social democratic milieu over events in the former Yugoslavia. It should have been obvious that a rupture between Serbia and Croatia would inevitably polarize the large Serbian and Croatian populations of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Those who advocated "self-determination" as a panacea for the ills of the former workers' states may be full of sympathy for the Muslims today. But they were not doing them any favors then. This was recognized by Izetbegovic *at the time*. As Glenny explains:

"The death sentence for Bosnia-Herzegovina was passed in the middle of December 1991 when Germany announced that it would recognize Slovenia and Croatia

unconditionally on 15 January 1992. So distressed was Alija Izetbegovic by this news that he travelled to Bonn in a vain effort to persuade Kohl and Genscher not to go ahead with the move. Izetbegovic understood full well that recognition would strip Bosnia of the constitutional protection it still enjoyed from the territorial claims of the two regional imperia, Serbia and Croatia."

### Dynamics of Bosnia's Communal War

The standard centrist-reformist view of the war in Bosnia is that it is purely a matter of external aggression by the Serbian government. And perversely, given the record of much of the left in supporting Croatian nationalism, sometimes the Croatian government is mentioned as a co-conspirator. According to the 5 February 1994 issue of *Socialist Outlook*:

"It is not true that the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia is a 'civil war' between three groups of nationalists, equally responsible. The war, and the rise of ethnic nationalism, was pioneered and led by the Serbian leadership in Belgrade....

"The people resisting aggression from Serb and Croat forces in multi-ethnic Bosnia deserve our solidarity and support."

While Serbian and Croatian irredentism is an important factor in the war in Bosnia, the view that the Bosnian conflict is "not a civil war," that the Bosnian government's opponents/allies are purely and simply puppets of outside forces, and that the war would not be taking place without the latter's interference, is a denial of reality. The Croats have switched from being semi-allies of Izetbegovic to outright opponents, and are now once again, after signing a U.S.-brokered pact in March 1994, allied with the Muslims. The Bosnian Serbs constitute a political and military force in their own right, as the recent falling out between Belgrade and the Bosnian Serb leadership over the latest imperialist peace plan illustrates.

The multi-ethnic character of the Bosnian republic was a product of political decisions taken by the Yugoslav workers' state. Dusko Doder, former East European bureau chief for the *Washington Post*, provided the following description of Tito's attempts to undercut the traditional nationalist hostilities and establish the "fraternity and unity" of the peoples of the Balkans:

"...Tito's scheme went beyond balance, and that forms the core of the Serb grievances today. Given Serbian domination in Alexander's Yugoslavia, Tito sought to weaken the Serbs by dividing them internally. In addition to the three constituent nations of Alexander's Yugoslavia—Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes—Tito turned prewar 'Southern Serbia' into the republic of Macedonia, made the tiny former Serb kingdom of Montenegro a nation in its own right, and created two federal units within Serbia itself—the 'autonomous regions' of Kosovo, with its sizable Albanian population, and Vojvodina, where many Hungarians, Romanians, Ruthenians, Slovaks, and other minorities lived.

"The largest obstacle to Tito's plan lay between Serbia and Croatia, where a mixed population lived. That region, Bosnia, was the crucial problem of Yugoslavia, both literally and metaphorically. Conscious that both Croatia and Serbia laid historical claim to Bosnia, Tito declared even during the war that its future would be 'neither Serbian

nor Croatian nor Muslim but rather Serbian and Croatian and Muslim.' As his Yugoslavia was to be a multinational socialist state, Bosnia would be its most genuine portion. The cradle of a revived Yugoslav idea, it would become a republic in its own right."

—*Foreign Policy*, Summer 1993

During the 1960s the Yugoslav Stalinists proclaimed Yugoslavia to be a commonwealth of equal nations and nationalities, each of which ruled itself. In 1964 the Bosnian Muslims were elevated to the status of a "nation," by the Titoists. The 1974 Yugoslav constitution proclaimed the sovereignty of the nations of Yugoslavia:

"For the Bosnian Muslims, the new constitution opened the prospects of a future embryonic nation-state. Their recognition as Yugoslavia's sixth nation 10 years earlier meant that the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina had a nation of its own, just like Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. The 1974 constitution became the departure point for the Bosnian Muslim national assertiveness that in the post-Tito period provoked an adverse reaction among the Bosnian Serbs. Their loss of ethnic domination coupled with political liberalization marked a decline in the Serbs' share of political and economic power in Bosnia-Herzegovina."

—*Ibid.*

To understand the roots of the bloody communalist conflict in Bosnia today, it is important to understand the significance of the mechanisms of tri-national parity that existed in Bosnia under the Yugoslav deformed workers' state:

"In every sphere of Bosnian life (with the critical exception of the JNA [Yugoslav People's Army]) the three communities were equally represented. The importance of this concept cannot be underestimated as its violation by the Moslems and Croats, as well as by the international community, is at the core of the Serbs' decision to fight. It implies that Bosnia's polity consists of 'three constituent nations' and that major constitutional changes may only be made if agreed to by all three sides. This reaches to the very heart of post-war Yugoslavia, a state which, uniquely, was constructed on a dual concept of sovereignty: the sovereignty of the republics and the sovereignty of the nations. Independence, it follows, cannot be granted to a republic unless the nations of the republic also seek that independence."

"The decision by the European Community to recognize Slovenia and Croatia pushed Bosnia into the abyss. Once this had happened, the Bosnian government had only three roads along which it could travel and each led to war. It could have stayed in the rump Yugoslavia and been ruled over by Milosevic and Serbia. It could have accepted the territorial division of Bosnia between Serbia and Croatia, as suggested by Tudjman and Milosevic. Or it could have applied for recognition as an independent state. The Croats and Moslems considered the first solution unacceptable; the Moslems and Yugoslavs, the second; and the Serbs, the third. This enforced choice could not have been presented at a worse time—Serbia and Croatia had been radicalized by the trauma of a war which neither side had yet won and neither side lost...."

—Glenny, *op cit.*

The bulk of the centrist/reformist left, in asserting that the Bosnian war is *simply* a matter of aggression by Belgrade (and sometimes Zagreb), absolve themselves of responsibility for supporting the destruction of the

Yugoslav workers' state and dismiss the significance to the Serbian population in Bosnia of the loss of their former constitutional guarantees. Bosnia's Serbs were well aware of the consequences of the dissolution of the system of mutual veto, and did not relish a future as an oppressed minority in a Muslim-dominated Bosnia. They decided instead to use their military clout (due to Serbian dominance in the Yugoslav Army) to carve out as big a piece of territory as possible with the aim of eventual incorporation into a Greater Serbia.

Those "Marxists" who have taken sides in the squalid communalist bloodletting in the Balkans can only do so by ignoring or denying the complexities of the national question in the former Yugoslavia. The progressive steps of the Tito regime in this sphere were ultimately doomed because of the Stalinist regime's Yugo-centred narrowness and its political expropriation of the proletariat. They nevertheless provide a glimpse of how the national question would be addressed by a revolutionary workers' state. The pseudo-Trotskyist left allowed their Stalinophobic hatred of the Yugoslav deformed workers' state to blind them to its progressive achievements in the national sphere. Having applauded the destruction of Stalinism, they now scream bloody murder about the reactionary consequences of the break-up of Yugoslavia. And, having cheered the breakup of Yugoslavia, they now pursue the New Left logic of support to "progressive" peoples against "reactionary" ones.

They are guilty of the same opportunist error regarding the Middle East and Ireland. But, in these two cases, by tailing the "nationalism of the oppressed," the centrist/reformist left posture as the most intransigent opponents of imperialism. In Bosnia they are capitulating to the pressure exerted by the bourgeois media.

### 'Ethnic Cleansing': Serbs, Croats & Muslims

In the absence of any popular righteous causes in the world today, the petty bourgeois intelligentsia have latched onto the plight of poor little Bosnia as a *cause celebre*. The imperialist media (at least in the English-speaking world) have tended, by and large, to present the conflict in Bosnia as a case of defenseless Muslim citizens (and sometimes Croats) being attacked by heavily armed gangs of vicious, bloodthirsty Serbs. The UN resolutions and occasional displays of NATO airpower have been directed at the Serbs.

The Serbian forces are certainly guilty of horrendous crimes. But there have also been a substantial number of Serbian victims of "ethnic cleansing," both in Bosnia and Croatia. An article in the 24 June 1994 issue of Radio Free Europe's *Research Report* cites estimates from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees of 530,000 (predominantly Croat) refugees in Croatia and 540,000 refugees (mostly Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia) in Serbia and Montenegro.

One of the more interesting studies of the Western media's depiction of the Bosnian war was Peter Brock's "Dateline Yugoslavia: The Partisan Press" (*Foreign Policy*, Winter 1993). Brock's article addressed the one-sided treatment of the conflict in the imperialist media:

"By late 1992, the majority of the media had become so

mesmerized by their focus on Serb aggression and atrocities that many became incapable of studying or following up numerous episodes of horror and hostility against Serbs in Croatia and later in Bosnia-Herzegovina.”

Perhaps the most sensational stories of Serb criminality were the reports of widespread and systematic rape of Muslim women by Serbian fighters. Brock reports:

“The January 4, 1993, *Newsweek*, for one, quoted unsubstantiated Bosnian government claims of up to 50,000 rapes of Muslims by Serb soldiers.

“An inquiry by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights soon presented a more moderate estimate, however. Its investigators visited Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia from January 12 to 23, 1993. In its report of February 10, the commission, while refraining from giving an official estimate, mentioned a figure of 2,400 victims. The estimate was based on 119 documented cases. The report concluded that Muslims, Croats, and Serbs, had been raped, with Muslims making up the largest number of victims.”

Brock also cites a series of examples in the popular media to illustrate the bias and manipulation of the facts:

“\*The 1992 BBC filming of an ailing, elderly ‘Bosnian Muslim prisoner-of-war in a Serb concentration camp’ resulted in his later identification by relatives as retired Yugoslav Army officer Branko Velec, a Bosnian Serb held in a Muslim detention camp.

“\*Among wounded ‘Muslim toddlers and infants’ aboard a Sarajevo bus hit by sniper fire in August 1992 were a number of Serb children—a fact revealed much later. One of the children who died in the incident was identified at the funeral as Muslim by television reporters. But the unmistakable Serbian Orthodox funeral ritual told a different story.

“\*In its January 4, 1993, issue, *Newsweek* published a photo of several bodies with an accompanying story that began: ‘Is there any way to stop Serbian atrocities in Bosnia?’ The photo was actually of Serb victims....”

In a subsequent issue of *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1994) an anonymous “senior U.N. official” commented that:

“Most international personnel in the former Yugoslavia have been well aware of the general pattern that Peter Brock describes in his article; it has been a conversational cliché. It was especially characteristic of the 15-month period from late spring 1992 to late summer 1993.”

The LRCI, USec and assorted other leftists who have jumped to take sides in the bloody communalist struggles in Bosnia, demonstrate both an indifference to Marxist theory and social facts, and an acute sensitivity to the current moods of the radical political milieu in which they seek influence. The inclinations of the individuals who compose these milieus are shaped to a very considerable extent by the presentation of events in the bourgeois media. So it is no surprise to see most of the pseudo-revolutionary organizations finding one reason or another to side with the Muslims.

Pseudo-Trotskyists often attempt to dress up the latest trends in petty bourgeois opinion on Marxist phraseology. The British Workers International League (WIL), for example, in a piece entitled “Bosnia—Why We Defend the Muslims” in the June 1993 issue of *Workers News*, asserted that, “The national question is always a reflection, even if a distorted one, of the class struggle.” The national struggle certainly affects the class struggle, and frequently the question of national oppression and

class oppression are connected (for example in the use of Palestinian labor by the Zionist rulers of Israel). But it is mistake to imagine that the national question is *always* a “reflection...of the class struggle.” Leninists oppose national oppression (like other forms of extra-class oppression) without confusing the national question and the social one.

In the vicious communalist civil war in Bosnia, the WIL can only hint at a “class struggle” angle through an oblique sociological reference to the “mostly urban” Muslims versus the “predominantly peasant” Serbs. If national struggles are in fact “reflected” class struggles, why does the WIL assert that “In conflicts between Serbia and Croatia we are defeatists on both sides”?

## LRCI Flip-Flops on Bosnia

Workers Power has a curious record on the wars in the former Yugoslavia. When Serbia and Croatia went to war over the mainly Serbian inhabited territories of Slavonia and Krajina in Croatia, the LRCI denounced the conflict as “a reactionary, nationalist war on both sides” and noted that:

“Revolutionary communists from the early years of this century have seen the answer to the extreme national complexity and intermixing of the peoples of south-east Europe in the creation of a Federation of the Balkan Peoples.”

—*Trotskyist International*, September 1991

When the conflict between Serbia and Croatia touched off war in Bosnia between the Bosnian Serbs (supported by Milosevic’s army) on one side, and an uneasy Muslim-Croat alliance on the other, the LRCI was once again defeatist on both sides:

“we cannot interpret the actions of any of the national-chauvinist parties of Bosnia-Herzegovina or their backers in Croatia and Serbia as expressing the legitimate democratic right for separate statehood, i.e. a demand for freedom from oppression rather than for privileges and the ‘right to oppress’ others. Their actions reveal this.

“The three communities do not inhabit clear contiguous areas which could be separated to join their respective states or form an independent ‘Muslim’ state.

“...Therefore, Marxists should not support secession and should not recognise ‘self-determination’ where this is aimed at, or inevitably leads to the violation of, the national rights of others.”

—LRCI statement, 25 April 1992, *Trotskyist Bulletin*, May 1992

The statement went on to call for “multinational defence militias” and concluded that, “Only under the power of the workers and peasants of Bosnia-Herzegovina could the fears of national oppression be dispelled and economic life restored.”

All very good. But a few months later, after the Croats abandoned the Muslims, the LRCI changed its tune and declared that, “the character of the Muslim’s struggle changed into a war of justified resistance against ethnic annihilation” (“LRCI Resolution—War in the Balkans”, *Workers Power*, December 1992). If by “defense” of the Muslims WP meant the right of a community faced with pogroms to defend itself, no one could object. Revolutionaries defend *any* community (Muslim, Croat, or

Serb) against pogromists. But Workers Power meant much more than this:

“Our aim in the defence of the Bosnian Muslims remains the establishment of a multi-ethnic Bosnian state. Previously, this was best pursued by a tactic of generalised defeatism and a fight for joint multi-ethnic resistance against pogromists of all stripes. Now it requires the ability of the Muslims to remain an integral part of what is left of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Previously, we supported the defence of all ethnic groups against pogroms and forcible removal from their homes and villages. Now we fight for *the establishment of military control of all and any areas within Bosnia-Herzegovina by Muslim forces*—our aim remaining to establish multi-ethnic workers’ and peasants’ councils.”

—*Ibid.*, emphasis added

The LRCI’s call for the victory of the Bosnian Muslims over the Croat and Serb forces means supporting a *war of conquest* by Izetbegovic’s Muslim army. In typical centrist fashion, WP sought to hedge its position with the following disclaimer:

“Common military action with the Muslim forces must not extend to political support for the official Muslim leaders and their reactionary and pro-capitalist aims. We do not share nor support the territorial ambitions of many of their leaders to force the Serbian and Croat nationalities into a unified capitalist state of Bosnia-Herzegovina threatening them in turn with national oppression....

“Such a ‘solution’—which would require in the first instance massive imperialist military support—would only lead to further national tensions, not to building a bridge between the nationalities.”

—*Ibid.*

Thus the LRCI combines a call for “the establishment of military control of all and any areas within Bosnia-Herzegovina by Muslim forces” with a claim to oppose the latter’s “territorial ambitions.” For good measure they tack on a call for a “multi-ethnic workers republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina.” The rationale for the line change was presented by Workers Power leader Dave Stockton in an article in the May 1993 issue of the LRCI’s *Trotskyist International*:

“At the start of the war in Bosnia the LRCI supported neither the Croat-Bosnian government nor for the Serb’s [sic]. We recognised the right of every community, Muslim, Serb or Croat...to defend themselves against ethnic cleansing.”

This right is one that every genuine Leninist continues to uphold. But not the LRCI, as Stockton explains:

“Events in the autumn of 1992 altered the situation with regard to the Bosnian Muslims. The collapse of the Muslim-Croat alliance and the secret deal between Serbia and Croatia to carve up Bosnia made it clear that the character of the war had changed. For the Muslims...it became...a war against genocide.”

When the Croats abandoned their former Muslim allies it changed the military balance of forces, but not the fundamentally communalist character of the conflict. Stockton is unable to explain why Marxists should suddenly support Muslim forces taking “military control of all and any areas within Bosnia-Herzegovina,” i.e., conquering the Croatian and Serbian areas. He admits that the Muslim regime is “a willing accomplice of imperialism” and acknowledges that its forces are guilty

of “atrocities” and “ethnic cleansing,” but suggests that such things are not so important anyway because:

“For Leninists approaching the national question, the task is to say who is systematically oppressed, who is fighting a justified war of national defence, who is fighting a war for national privileges and aggrandisement?”

The simple formula of defending the oppressed is perfectly adequate in situations where the oppressed people constitutes a more or less homogeneous population within a clearly demarcated territory, and is oppressed by an outside force, e.g., the Québécois in Canada or the people of East Timor and Indonesia. Things are more difficult where the populations are mixed or interpenetrated, with two or more different nationalities living on the same piece of land. By applying Stockton’s simple formula in such complicated situations, one ends up supporting the “right” of the currently oppressed nation to drive out or conquer other nationalities and reverse the terms of oppression. This is so palpable today in the Balkans that WP is forced to qualify its position with a whole series of caveats and “buts.”

WP initially responded to the outbreak of war in the Balkans with an attempt to formulate an anti-communal program. But, true to its history of centrist vacillation, WP abandoned this position as soon as it became unpopular. If, as they claim, the LRCI’s decision to support the Muslims was motivated by the shift in military fortunes that occurred when the Croats broke their bloc, *why did the position not change again in March 1994 when the Muslim-Croat bloc was reconstituted?* The answer is, of course, that the LRCI’s line change was based on opportunist organizational calculations, not considerations of principle. Once it became clear that forces to its right (i.e., USec, WRP) were building a sizable pro-Muslim “solidarity” movement, WP trimmed its own position so as not to be isolated from that movement.

## A Trotskyist Program for the Balkans

The Marxist attitude to the national question in situations of interpenetrated peoples was first formulated by the revolutionary Spartacist tendency in the 1970s. We uphold that tradition today. As we stated in our 1986 document “For Trotskyism!”:

“Both the Irish Protestants and the Hebrew-speaking population of Israel are class-differentiated peoples. Each has a bourgeoisie, a petty bourgeoisie and a working class...Leninists do not simply endorse the nationalism of the oppressed (or the petty-bourgeois political formations which espouse it). To do so simultaneously forecloses the possibility of exploiting the real class contradictions in the ranks of the oppressor people and cements the hold of the nationalists over the oppressed. The proletarians of the ascendant people can never be won to a nationalist perspective of simply inverting the current unequal relationship. A significant section of them *can* be won to an anti-sectarian class-against-class perspective because it is in their objective interests.”

—1917, No. 3, Spring 1987

A Trotskyist program for the Balkans must begin from this basic understanding. While actively fighting every form of national or communal oppression, class-conscious workers must reject any form of nationalism and defend the rights of all peoples to exist. All commu-

nities, whether Serb, Croat or Muslim have the right to defend themselves, and a communist organization in the region would have the responsibility to aid them in whatever way practicable. An authentic communist organization would seek to intervene against the communalists through the formation of a multi-ethnic workers' militia. Such a militia must contain representatives of all three communities. The workers' movements of every nation have a material interest in stopping communal slaughter, because the spread of poisonous nationalism and chauvinism will inevitably be used as a battering ram by the aspiring bourgeoisies. The example of integrated multi-ethnic workers' militias could have an important influence on advanced workers in other Balkan nations—from Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece—all of whom have a vital interest in halting a regional conflagration growing out of the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

We support the right of *all* peoples displaced by the savage "ethnic cleansing" campaigns to return to their places of origin. Yet this elementary democratic demand can only be implemented by a genuine anti-nationalist working-class movement with representation from all the former combatant nationalities themselves, which is linked to workers' organizations from Balkan nations outside the former Yugoslavia.

A resurgent workers' movement in the Balkans would seek to establish soviets of workers' and farmers' representatives, from the Adriatic to the Black Sea, from the Carpathians to the Aegean. Only representative organs of the working class and poorer farmers would have the authority and political strength to resolve the

tangled and conflicting ethnic claims equitably and democratically, and thus put an end to the communal wars in Bosnia and elsewhere in the region. Only such organs of power, fused into a Socialist Federation of the Balkans, could provide an effective alternative to the murderous nationalism of the nascent bourgeois state apparatuses that have already wreaked havoc on the region.

Despite the Tito regime's serious efforts to suppress traditional ethnic hostilities (efforts which, for several decades, met with considerable success), the narrow nationalism of the program of "socialism-in-one-country" (defined by the frontiers established by the treaty of Versailles) doomed the attempt. This national narrowness was compounded by Stalin's betrayal of the Greek revolution at the end of World War II, as part of the deal reached with the imperialists at Yalta and Teheran.

A socialist Balkan federation must be genuinely multi-national. It must include Rumanians, Bulgarians, Albanians and Greeks. The slogan of a "multi-ethnic workers' republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina" is both narrow and utopian. Large sections of the population of Bosnia do not at this point want to be part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As Marxists, we neither advocate the destruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina nor its preservation by force. The question of exactly what constitutional arrangements can best resolve the conflicting national/communal appetites of this former Yugoslav republic can only be settled by negotiations among elected representatives from the different populations under the aegis of proletarian state power in the region, of a broad, all-inclusive Balkan federation. ■