

# Tony Benn: "the main enemy is NATO"

WHATEVER the deficiencies of the former Yugoslavia, it was held together without bloodshed.

Then Yugoslavia tried to reform its economy. The IMF came in and demanded cuts. They squeezed the economy.

The federal government pushed the responsibility for making the cuts down onto the republics. They decided that it would be best not to be part of the Belgrade set-up.

The Germans came in and recognised Croatia. That is how it seems to have begun. A new, strong, unified Germany wants to assert its role inside Europe.

Then, of course, the war began. The policy was to establish a dominant Croatia.

The ultimate carve up of Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia is probably what stands behind the American peace plan.

President Clinton wanted to show how strong he was. But— after Vietnam— he did not want to commit any American ground troops. So he brought in the ultimate US weapon, the air strike.

The British government has given endless assurances that they had no intention of becoming participants in the war. Now we see not just an air strike but a war against the Bosnian Serbs, launched by the most powerful military machine in the world, NATO.

I must confess to you that I am not even sure about the "Sarajevo massacre".

There is a simple rule in politics - you ask who benefits from what happens. And those that benefited from the Sarajevo massacre were the Bosnian government, who got NATO help for their war against the Serbs.

It appears that the NATO airstrikes destroyed a hospital. But they said that this was not deliberate, it was an "accident of war"!

What about the Sarajevo market massacre? Perhaps that was also an "accident of war".

Now America has taken the side of NATO and the Germans have gone along with it. The Germans can not participate very easily because people remember that they were there before. But the Germans are supporting the Americans, and they are a part of it too.

Now the UN is an agent of war. It has handed over power to NATO. NATO has replaced the UN and is used to enforce Western interests on any country that is intransigent.

The propaganda in the media is unprecedented. The BBC has been a disgrace. The

silence of political leaders of all parties has been a disgrace. The impression is that everyone in Britain supported the Cruise missile attacks.

The UN should withdraw the authority it has given NATO. The arms embargo should be strictly enforced: the Americans have been arming the Croats to act as their agents against the Serbs.

Negotiations should continue without military threats.

It is a civil war — it is not as if Bosnia had existed for years and then was attacked by Serbia. It is a civil war. And in a civil war you can only provide a table.

*Tony Benn MP was speaking at the "Committee for Peace in the Balkans" rally on 18th September.*

## An open letter to Tony Benn

# "The main problem is Serb imperialism"

Dear Tony Benn,

THE PROBLEMS with the rally of the "Committee for Peace in the Balkans" on 18 September began with the title: "Stop the NATO bombing".

It's like "Oppose the Maastricht Treaty". "Oppose Maastricht" covers very different attitudes to Europe, and "Stop the NATO bombing" covers very different attitudes to Serbia.

You, we, and Norman Tebbit can all agree to "oppose Maastricht" — but with very different positive alternatives to the Euro-capitalist plan we all oppose.

On 18 September you were applauded by the most foul Serb nationalists— people who ripped up copies of *Workers' Liberty* outside the meeting and howled at us inside it, people who believe the Albanians of Kosovo are "illegal immigrants" who should "get back to their own country". They cheered loudly when you told them that the Sarajevo market-place massacre on 28 August could well have been staged by the Bosnian government to provide an excuse for NATO intervention— as if anyone needs one more bloody atrocity as an excuse for anything in the ex-Yugoslavia.

Why did the Serb chauvinists cheer you, Tony Benn? Because you challenged none of their prejudices. Because you want the strict enforcement of a one-sided arms embargo which keeps the Bosnian Muslims weak. Because you criticise the Western imperialists when they turn against Serbia, without fingering the major aggressor in the region: Milosevic's Serb

imperialism.

During the 1980s the old Yugoslav ruling class split along national lines. The bureaucratic and military machines, based in Belgrade, were transformed into instruments for Milosevic's Serbian chauvinist policy. He moved first against the Albanians of Kosovo (perhaps you remember the slogan "Kill the Albanian leadership"? ) and the Hungarians of Vojvodina. Then he launched wars against Slovenia and Croatia, and in 1992 he spread the war to Bosnia. Do not be mistaken: war was Milosevic's policy and it was carried out against the majority of all the peoples in Bosnia. They did not ask for war. They retreated into "ethnic" camps only when the guns started firing. The Bosnian Serbs are fighting, but as part of a campaign whose main directing centre is in Belgrade.

Mladic is a general in the Yugoslav army. He is in the pay of Belgrade. You cover up for Milosevic if you talk about Bosnia's problem being "civil war".

"The main enemy is at home", a supporter of Socialist Action said, using a good old slogan to obscure the issue. But the main problem in ex-Yugoslavia is Serb imperialism. Yes, the Western powers are hypocrites. No one should trust them, no one should believe they are going to bring a democratic peace to the area. Yes, we should oppose the bombing, and yes the Labour Party should vote against the government's policy in the Balkans— Labour should act like a real opposition. In parliament we would vote for British troop withdrawal.

**Bosnian Serb retreat**

We would go further. We have no illusions in the UN. We do not trust any of the individual governments, and so we do not trust them when they get together and call themselves the United Nations. But to reckon that NATO's bombardment of Mladic's siege guns calls for protest meetings, and Milosevic's atrocities do not, is to condone Serbian imperialism.

You talk of the one-sided view of the British media and their uncritical support for NATO. Fine. But what about your own one-sidedness. You see the NATO bombs which fall on Bosnian Serb hospitals. But what about the other side of the West's policy? What about the disarming of Bosnian Muslim enclaves? What about the Western arms embargo which has left the Bosnian army facing a vastly better-armed Serb military?

The explanation of both sides of the big powers' policy is that they want the war to end as quickly as possible. They want the region stable for trade and investment. Their policy is not to "bomb the Serbs into the stone age" but to force the Serbs into negotiations. To say that this is full-scale war is to lose all sense of proportion.

Alice Mahon said at the rally— quite reasonably, on a certain level — that there is no difference between a Muslim, a Serb or a Croat who has been "ethnically cleansed" or raped or killed. Nevertheless, let's not lose sight of the wood by staring too closely at the trees: the war has not affected each nationality equally. The Muslims have been at risk of having their nation overrun and ripped to pieces.

We demand the lifting of the arms embargo not because we believe that the Muslims are a "better" people than the

Serbs, but because we accept that they have rights, including the right of self defence.

You told us that the war began with Germany recognising Croatia. That was on 15 January 1992. By January 1992 Serbia had conquered and "ethnically cleansed" one-third of Croatia. How could the recognition of Croatia be the cause of events which happened much earlier? Three years earlier, in 1988-9, Serbia had forcibly suppressed the autonomy of Kosovo, as the Serbian state progressively drew the control of federal Yugoslavia's army into its hands. Seven months earlier, in June 1991, Serbia had gone to war against Slovenia (briefly) and against Croatia.

*"The Bosnian  
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And the Croats are a nation: we would have voted against independence if we had had votes in Croatia, and opposed the Croatian regime, but by what right should outside governments refuse to recognise an independence freely voted for by 90% of the population?

Your account of German policy makes no sense. If Germany's aim were to provoke the break-up of Yugoslavia and have "a dominant Croatia" under its thumb, why provoke a war which led to one-third

of Croatia being overrun? In fact, Germany, like all the big capitalist powers, supported the last ditch efforts to save Yugoslav unity.

You view the conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia through the spectacles of old Cold War bloc politics— on one side, the imperialist West, and on the other, "socialist" Yugoslavia, or at least the Serb-dominated rump which claims to continue it. But the spectacles were always distorting. The old Soviet Union was just as imperialist as the West— in Hungary, in Czechoslovakia, in Poland, in Afghanistan, in the Baltic States. Yugoslavia was never socialist, or post-capitalist. At best it kept the national conflicts stifled under the lid of a liberal-Stalinist autocratic state: it did not cure them. Milosevic's state machine, which has waged genocidal war in Bosnia, is essentially the old Stalinist state machine of Yugoslavia, only slightly reshaped: how could such a force be "socialist"?

And in any case, the spectacles belong to an epoch now ended. There is no "socialist bloc". There is no "anti-imperialist camp". The nationalists and Pan-Slavists in Russia back Serbia: but you can no longer believe that those Russian nationalists are less vicious than German or British nationalists or imperialists.

See events as they really are: a small nation, the Bosniac's, almost completely unarmed at the start, set upon by a heavily militarised neighbouring state. Support the principles of national self-determination and consistent democracy! Support Bosnia!

**Yours for socialism, Dan  
Katz and Chris Reynolds**