

The left and Bosnia

By Chris Reynolds

TO READ Britain's left press on Bosnia, you would think that there must be three different countries with that name.

In one, reported by *Workers' Press*, "the Bosnian people" are battling for the "defence of Bosnia" and multi-ethnic democracy against "fascism". This parallels the Spanish Civil War of 1936-9, when General Franco led a fascist revolt against the bourgeois parliamentary regime.

In another Bosnia, the one seen by leading figures of the parliamentary left such as Tony Benn and Dennis Skinner, the Bosnian government is a catspaw for aggression by German or American imperialism against the old Yugoslavia and now against Serbia.

And in a third Bosnia, there is "a cynical battle between ruling groups with two aims in mind: to grab as much territory as possible and, in doing so, to stir ethnic hatred..." (the SWP's *Socialist Review*, July-August 1995).

The SWP's description is abstract enough to cover any national conflict within the established order — with qualifications. But the qualifications, the concrete details, are decisive for a Marxist response.

National conflicts are not just plots by ruling groups. National identities and nationalist feelings have deep roots and wide influence. Working-class politicians can limit the grip of nationalism, and win over masses of workers to an internationalist outlook, but only by fighting to gain for every nation full and equal rights.

In a predatory world, to denounce all nationalist concerns is in fact to go along with the nationalism of the strong. As Engels put it: "If members of a conquering nation called upon the nation they had conquered... to forget their specific nationality and position, to 'sink national differences' and so forth, that was not Internationalism, it was nothing else but preaching to them submission to the yoke". And Marx commented that "the announcement that all nationalities and even nations were 'antiquated prejudices'... the negation of nationalities" meant in fact the "absorption" of other nationalities by some "model nation".

There are times when Marxists should denounce both sides in national conflicts, as the SWP denounces all sides in ex-Yugoslavia. At no time, however, could Marxists do what the SWP does in dismissing national concerns and defining them out of existence.

Somehow, for the SWP, the nations of ex-Yugoslavia do not deserve the dignity of being described as nations. They are only "groups". The SWP panders to the conventional prejudice whereby the nationalism of poorer, remote nations appears as pure nonsense or "antiquated

prejudice". It puts forward no policy at all on the national questions. It advises the workers to forget about those questions and pursue direct economic class struggle instead.

Although all national struggles are battles between ruling groups for territory, nevertheless some nations fight mainly for the defence of their own territory and their own people against foreign conquest, and some mainly to conquer other peoples. And then we should side with the oppressed.

Socialist Review declares that "it is pointless to view the war in terms of 'good' and 'bad' sides". That is true of the war in Bosnia as of all other wars. The differentiation between oppressed and oppressing nations is not one between good and bad. It is not absolute, certainly not in conflicts between neighbouring nations. That overall, in

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recent years, Serbia has been the oppressor and Croatia the oppressed, does not make Croatia "good". It does not justify the Croatian government's oppressive actions, like its seizure of part of Bosnia and its "ethnic cleansing" of Serbs in the Krajina.

For workers' unity, as Lenin argued, it is necessary that "we fight against the privileges and violence of the oppressor nation, and do not in any way condone strivings for privileges on the part of the oppressed nation".

Since the late 1980s Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian government has suppressed the autonomy of Kosovo (which is 90% Albanian) and of Vojvodina (which has a large Hungarian minority). It has replaced the Montenegrin government with its supporters. It tried to use Yugoslavia's federal government structures to transform Yugoslavia into "Serboslavia". It pulled control of the federal armed forces into Serbian hands. It mobilised and armed Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia, long before there was any real threat of discrimination against them. It went to war in 1991 for control of Slovenia (which has no Serb minority) and of Croatia: it seized and held 30% of Croatia, mostly areas where Croats were a majority. With its Bosnian-Serb allies, it has seized 70% of Bosnia, where Serbs were only a one-third minority.

The main engine of war in ex-Yugoslavia has been Serb sub-imperialism, proto-imperialism, or quasi-imperialism. Neither Germany, nor America, nor Britain, nor France, nor NATO, nor the UN, nor all of them, mentally amalgamated as a mystical

super-power, is the decisive imperialism in ex-Yugoslavia. They have not controlled events. They backed plans to keep Yugoslavia together as a looser confederation. They have backed innumerable peace plans thwarted by Serbia. Their crime is not any intention to seize colonies or semi-colonies in ex-Yugoslavia, but their desire to let Serbia win the war as quickly and tidily as possible so that profitable trade and investment can restart.

Serb imperialism dates back to the Balkan Wars of 1912-3, when Serbia conquered Kosovo and part of Macedonia. It continued in the heavily Serb-dominated Yugoslavia of 1918-41. It arises not from anything 'bad' in Serbian national character, but from historical circumstances. The Yugoslav peoples' position in the border area between two empires — Hapsburg (Austrian) and Ottoman (Turkish) — stopped them being amalgamated into a single larger nation, like the French, the Germans, the Italians, or the English. The Serbs were the biggest of the small nations; because they came under the weaker and more backward empire (the Ottoman), they gained their own state much earlier (1830, under Russian protection), but were economically more backward than the Slovenes and the Croats, and so could win hegemony only through force.

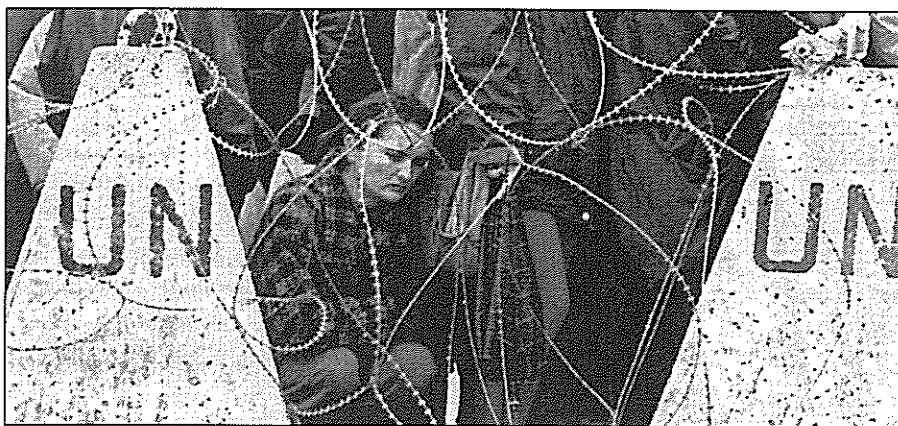
The Serb onslaught in Bosnia, organised by the Serbian government, threatens to wreck the multi-ethnic cities of Sarajevo and Tuzla and destroy the Bosnian Muslims as a nation by reducing them to a scattering of refugees and minority communities. The SWP retorts that "the Muslims of Bosnia were not an oppressed group *before* the war started" [emphasis added]. The retort makes sense only if "oppressed" and "oppressor" are seen as fixed absolutes — "good" and "bad" sides, to use the SWP's own terminology — and it recycles an argument that they use on Israel-Palestine, whereby the fact that the Israeli Jews are not now an oppressed nation implies that they can have no right to self-determination, and, implicitly, that they would not become oppressed even if the Arab states rallied enough military force and coordination (and big-power acquiescence) to overrun Israel.

The SWP argues further:

- That the Bosnian government has done deals with the big powers and allied with the Croatian government, which has oppressed Croatia's Serb minority.

- That the Bosnian government is dominated by a Muslim party (the SDA), which has a Muslim-chauvinist wing; that social conditions are the same on both sides of the war in Bosnia.

But the Bosnian government's territory is landlocked. Militarily it needs alliances. Socialists would work for an alliance between Muslim, Croat and Serb workers.



What is the role of the UN?

But the Bosnian government's bourgeois alliances do not cancel out the Bosnian Muslims' national rights; nor do chauvinism and bourgeois social policy.

Besides, when desperate Muslim refugees from Srebrenica attacked local Serbs in Tuzla, and killed some of them, the local authorities arrested the attackers. In Karadzic's and Mladic's Bosnian Serb Republic, the authorities organise the attacks on Muslims. In Tuzla and Sarajevo the Serbian Orthodox churches still stand; under Karadzic, mosques have been systematically razed.

The difference is not due to the Bosnian Muslims being 'good' while the Serbs are 'bad'. The Muslims were more concentrated among the working and professional classes of the cities, where secularism, integration, and intermarriage were more developed than in the Bosnian countryside. The difference is not an absolute, as is shown by Bosnian president Izetbegovic's recent moves to make it law that his successor must be a Muslim. And the logic of war is for the difference to diminish: war can drive people to revolutionary internationalism or to chauvinism, but it burns away bland liberalism.

But *Workers' Press* — the people who see a Bosnia where there is only "multi-ethnic democracy" against "fascism" — make the difference into an absolute. They accept the same terms as the SWP, good sides and bad sides, only they make the Bosnian Muslims the 'good', democratic nation, and the Serbs the 'bad', fascist nation.

Thus *Workers' Press* lacks any real political independence from the Bosnian government, outside of ceremonial declarations. It argues in terms which rationalise anti-Serb chauvinism: "the Bosnian people" means Muslims, while the majority of the Bosnian Serbs are "fascists".

Workers' Press of 19 August, two weeks after the Croatian conquest and "ethnic cleansing" of the Krajina, comments on that atrocity by... quoting the Croatian ambassador's hypocritical words of assurance. "Serbs who fled the Krajina area of Croatia in the path of Croatian forces are welcome to return to their homes". The latest estimate is that only 130,000 of the 600,000 Serbs living in Croatia pre-war remain.

The Serbian military pushed for the exo-

odus from Krajina, and by their atrocities they promoted reflex anti-Serb reactions in Croatia. But we cannot follow *Workers' Press* in trusting the Croatian government when it tells us that Serbian military plots alone make the Croatian Serbs, who survived as a community through the Ustashe terror during World War 2, flee now to economically-ruined, militarised Serbia, where they are likely to get dumped as colonists in Kosovo. The Croatian government's policy also plays a criminal part: encouraging the instinctive reflex fear of Croat revenge among Krajina Serbs (under cover of bland statements that "Serbs can stay or leave, as they wish"); purging Serbs from public jobs in 1990-1; purging Serbian words from Croatian Serbo-Croat; discontinuing official use of Cyrillic script; and so on.

The coverage by *Workers' Press* of events here in Britain connected to ex-Yugoslavia should be enough to make us distrust its picture of events in Bosnia which are more distant and more difficult to check on. *Workers' Press* produced a special issue on the Bosnia solidarity march in London on 22 July and the rally after it chaired by one of their leading people, Dot Gibson. They reported a speaker from the Muslim Solidarity Committee — accepted by *Workers' Press* as co-sponsors of the event — calling for a multi-cultural Bosnia, but not the leaflet put out at the rally by that Muslim Solidarity Committee, which denounced Amnesty International for criticising the Islamic government in Sudan and its reign of terror against the Christian and mixed populations in Sudan. They were silent about the fact that a message of support to the rally from left-wing groups in Serbia provoked howls of protest from a minority of the Bosniac refugees present.

To support the oppressed is necessary: to blank out all complications and reservations from our picture of reality is wrong. Opposition to Serb imperialism in ex-Yugoslavia must be coupled with opposition to anti-Serb chauvinism. Given the extensive intermingling of peoples in the region, reconciliation and rights for minorities are just as important as national self-determination for workers' unity and for a viable peace not poisoned for decades to come by border disputes.

Addressing Red Army soldiers before they

went in battle against British troops intervening against the Russian workers' revolution, Trotsky called on them to remember that there was another England — the England not of the bosses, bankers, and generals, but of the workers. There is another Serbia, too. In this century Serbia has been the base not only for Serb imperialism, but also for the strongest contingents of the socialist and communist movement in the region.

That Serbia is, at present, cowed and battered. It will rise again. Milosevic's wars have brought Serbia nothing but ruin, and from all reports many Serbs know it. Milosevic will fall, and workers in Bosnia and Croatia must be ready to ally with Serbian socialists and democrats to create a new, genuinely democratic, federation, offering full rights to all nations and minorities. ■

For A Thousand Years!

We have fed you all for a thousand
years,
And you hail us still unfed,
Tho' there's never a dollar of all your
wealth
But marks the workers' dead.
We have yielded our best to give you
rest,
And you lie on crimson wool;
For if blood be the price on all your
wealth,
Good God, we have paid in full!

There's never a mine blown skyward
now
But we're buried alive for you;
There's never a wreck drifts shore
ward now
But we are its ghastly crew.
Go reckon our dead by the forges
red,
And the factories where we spin;
If blood be the price of your cursed
wealth
Good God, we have paid it in!

We have fed you all a thousand
years,
For that was our doom, you know,
From the days when you chained us
in your fields,
To the strike of a week ago.
You have eaten our lives and our
babies and wives,
And we're told its your legal share;
But if blood be the price of your
lawful wealth,
Good God, we have bought it fair!

Anonymous

*Dating from the early part of the
century, this powerful working class
verse may have come from the
Industrial Workers of the World.*