

supporters around the world, see the fires for what they are: deliberately set, the work of arsonists, aimed to kill, terribly dangerous. Of course, every fire has a complicated social, political, and economic background. It would be nice to understand it all. But once the burning begins something less than full understanding is necessary: a will to put out the fire—to find firefighters, close by if possible,

and give them the support they need. From a moral/political perspective, I don't think it matters much if this particular fire isn't dangerous to me and mine. I can't just sit and watch. Or rather, the price of sitting and watching is a kind of moral corruption that leftists (and others too) must always resist. ●

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## Bogdan Denitch

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# A Botched Just War

I HAVE SUFFERED much anguish over NATO's war in Yugoslavia. Unlike almost every U.S. military intervention of the past half century, this is a just war—but badly and irresponsibly led. It was cowardly of the White House to decide on high-altitude bombing in order to spare itself the painful decision to use ground troops. How reassuring to Milosevic that no military expert believes the war can be won by air power alone.

The stand I have taken—favoring intervention and the use of ground troops (but opposing bombing cities)—horrifies my relatives, longtime associates, and close friends in Belgrade. Most of them, even those who are staunch critics of the Milosevic regime, absolutely oppose the NATO war. (Distressingly, almost none of the opposition groups in Serbia have tempered their condemnations of NATO with real words of regret for the regime's ethnic cleansing and war crimes in Kosovo.) Years of friendship have melted in the face of this disagreement, and I feel great personal loss.

### Just and Unjust Interventions

My position was not easy to adopt. From my days in the left wing of the U.S. Young People's Socialist League, which I joined in 1948, I opposed almost every war and military intervention by the United States and its allies. In the mid-1960s I broke off relations with my longtime political mentor Max Shachtman, over his

support for the attempted U.S.-backed invasion of Cuba and his critical backing of the war in Vietnam. I opposed the landing of marines in Lebanon, the invasion of Panama, and the idiotic military adventure in Grenada. I have criticized both the bloated U.S. defense budget and the rigid assumptions on which it is based.

And yet here I find myself not only defending a NATO intervention, but defending a war against my country of origin, where many of my closest friends, comrades, and relatives live. This choice did not come easily but it did come logically. There was even a Marxist tradition to draw on: the support of Marx and Engels for the North in the U.S. Civil War, as well as their support for the unilateral action of the British Empire to stop the slave trade. For that matter, they backed the Allies against Russia in the Crimean War. In none of those cases were the intervenors' hands clean or motives pure.

There is also plain common sense. As early as 1991 I advocated multilateral military intervention to prevent the breakup of Yugoslavia from turning into full-scale wars of secession. A very modest intervention could have prevented a great evil. Clearly the Bosnia intervention of 1995 came very late indeed, but it did provide a flawed peace that was better than the murderous ethnic war that had been going on. Similarly, it seemed to me that the 1992-1993 intervention in Somalia was wor-

thy and failed in its aims only because the United States was unwilling to place its professional soldiers at risk. In still another case, a modest international intervention in Rwanda could have prevented a genocide. To its eternal shame, the United States worked overtime at the UN to block intervention in Rwanda. This policy is in good part explained by the fact that the people in question were African and not European.

Some will ask: shouldn't NATO have given the negotiating process more time to work before launching its strikes? Remember Milosevic's track record. His regime is primarily responsible for three previous wars of aggression in the region, as well as massive ethnic cleansing and mass murder of civilians and thousands of prisoners of war in Bosnia. It is also clear that this is a regime that would continue its repression in Kosovo while negotiating. It would only back down if faced with credible force and it would only keep its agreements if international troops were present to enforce them. Even before the NATO attack began, some twenty-five thousand Albanians had been ethnically cleansed—that is, moved with great brutality out of their homes. The massacre of unarmed civilians in the village of Racak took place *before* the bombing.

The fury of "pure" American leftists with my impermissible deviation was predictable but not serious. They needed to know nothing about Kosovo or the Milosevic regime. It was enough that the United States and NATO were involved, and everything became crystal clear. I sometimes envy that certainty and innocence, but alas, I choose to engage in politics and not morality plays.

### **The Disoriented Yugoslav Opposition**

In Serbia, meanwhile, the democratic opposition has been seriously disoriented by the war. With a very few exceptions, citizens' organizations long known for their courageous if ineffective opposition to the regime have united as critics of NATO. They denounced the attack as a gross violation of international law and the rights of sovereign nations. Very few of them bothered to mention Milosevic's war against the Kosovo Albanians or its earlier aggression in Croatia and Bosnia. They seemed

oblivious, more than a month after the NATO attacks, of the genocidal nature of the Yugoslav army's campaign in Kosovo.

And genocide is not too strong a word. The Convention on Genocide defines it as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.

This clearly covers what the Milosevic regime is doing. The Albanian exodus from Kosovo was organized with great brutality and was obviously planned long in advance.

Why has the democratic opposition in Serbia been so half-hearted in its condemnations of ethnic cleansing? Bear in mind that it includes elements that are even *more* nationalist than the Milosevic camp. These elements oppose the regime for having "lost" the Krajina to the Croats and the war in Bosnia. And then there are those who attack the regime as "leftist" despite the fact that it is in a coalition with what is arguably the largest fascist party in Europe, Vojislav Seselj's Radicals. Very few indeed opposed the regime over its intransigent insistence that Kosovo is an "eternal" part of Serbia. Most have made a moral equivalence between the misdeeds of the Serbian police and army in Kosovo and the misdeeds of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

The KLA's democratic credentials are, to put it mildly, dubious. But the more responsible wing of the Kosovar Albanians' movement—the decade-long nonviolent struggle under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova—received almost no support either from the West or from Serbian democrats. (The sole exception was the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina, whose two deputies were thrown out of Parliament for their heresies.) Anger at NATO has for the moment united almost all of the public behind Milosevic. The April murder of a leading opposition journalist, Slavko Curuvlija, by what was probably a police death squad, helped silence those who might do otherwise. One cannot demand ir-

rational heroism in the face of a ruthless regime. Nor is it difficult to understand that bombing makes people feel like victims.

What is hard to accept, however, is a persistent tone in the messages coming over by e-mail from Belgrade: shock and surprise that this should be happening to *them*. It is as if the Milosevic regime were somewhere else, as if they, the anguished correspondents, had absolutely no responsibility for what that regime has inflicted on the whole region. It's true that many of those protesting NATO opposed Milosevic's wars in Bosnia and Croatia, and his repression at home (with scandalously little help from the democratic West). They feel betrayed by what is in effect a vote of no confidence in their ability to effect change in Belgrade.

On the other hand, it is also the case that the Serbs have repeatedly re-elected this regime, and its even worse coalition partners, in balloting that was at least semi-free. The masses attending rock concerts to protest NATO's bombing have, for the most part, done nothing about repression in Kosovo.

There remains a small core of people who resist the enormous pressure for solidarity with the tribe. Sonja Biserko of the Helsinki Committee publicly declares (from her present asylum in Sweden) that Serbia deserves to lose this war, and that it will have to be decontaminated of fascism and nationalism, much as Germany underwent denazification after the Second World War. The eminent human rights lawyer Srdjan Popovic, also in self-imposed exile, calls for ground troops and the defeat of the regime. So does the filmmaker Dusan Makavejev, despite his criticism of the bombing as a strategy. Natasa Kandic of the Humanitarian Law Center has sent regular bulletins about arrests in Kosovo. The remarkable Nenad Canak, leader of the Vojvodina Social Democrats, writes on e-mail that the destruction of Novi Sad's bridges began in 1991, when the Novi Sad Army corps invaded Croatia. The time has come to reap what was sown then.

There are others who can't be named for safety's sake and there are even a handful of nongovernmental organizations—mostly those who received the *least* aid from the countless foundations that were supposed to help build

Yugoslav democracy—whose statements against the bombing also mention, if only tepidly, Belgrade's war in Kosovo. These include the heroic Women in Black and some of the democratic socialists and trade unionists.

### Democrats In Croatia and Bosnia

Democratic activists in Croatia and Bosnia have reacted differently. For the most part, they support the NATO campaign—albeit with reservations, and the bitter complaint that this should have been done much earlier, when tens of thousands of lives could have been saved, and millions spared ethnic cleansing. These activists' communications with longtime friends and associates in Serbia are now strained to the breaking point, which does not augur well for future cooperation.

One of the most moving statements comes from Boris Dezulovic, an editor of *Feral Tribune*, one of the harshest critics of Tudjman's nationalist Croat regime. On April 22 he posted the following statement (abridged here) on the Internet Web site zamir.net, an antiwar network funded by the Open Society Institute:

#### Just Imagine

Imagine that NATO surrounds Belgrade and that no one can enter or leave the city.

Imagine that from a skyscraper on the outskirts of the city snipers are shooting at women and children.

Imagine that there are eight thousand dead children and young people under eighteen.

Imagine that NATO commandos take all wounded from the military hospital and kill them nearby.

Imagine that NATO soldiers take *all* males out of Belgrade and kill them.

Imagine that NATO soldiers break into your houses and rape your daughters and wives. . . .

There are many of us here who do not send off NATO's planes with flowers and alcohol (*rakija*), and who did not wish this on you. I however know at of least two people in Dedinje [where the Milosevices live] who not only wished this on you but prepared it. I wish you all the luck in the world, but you should in the meantime, at least briefly, imagine and think about these things.

Good luck, and greetings from Split.

(Translation by B.D.)

Then there is a text posted on the Internet newsgroup *uswarreport* on April 18, attributed to Slavenka Drakulic, also a fierce critic of the Croat regime\*:

And now, these same citizens of Serbia who are not Albanians, for Albanians have been excluded not only from civil but also from human status a long time ago—the same people that were not concerned by Sarajevo or Srebrenica, nor Dubrovnik or Vukovar, not even Drenica and Racak—they dare to parade around with a target on their chest. For years they have been rejecting the understanding that they are at war. The war did not concern them, the war was happening somewhere else. But suddenly, they have become victims and that is why they are wearing targets.... At the same time a few hundred kilometers further, some other citizens of the same state of Serbia are standing in mud for days, in the rain.... They have no place to go back to, no house, no concert, no lunch, no native land. Nothing. They do not need a paper target, they do not need symbols. They know that they are targets, every man, woman, child.... But they are Albanians. They are something different... Two parallel tragedies are in progress. The first is the suffer-

ing of the Albanian people, their exodus which has already been called genocide by some people. There is no use to remind us now (but it should not be forgotten) that their fate has been shared by Croats and Bosnians and also the Serbs from the Krajina. The second tragedy is the autism of the Serbian people who are not aware of the consequences of their politics.

These are terrible things to write and say to people who were once your comrades and friends—and in my case even relatives—and who are being bombed. But they need to be said. And this tragedy will only be compounded if, after all the anguish and bombing, the West signs a shameful compromise peace that leaves Serbia and Montenegro in ruins, Albania and Macedonia destabilized, the Kosovo Albanians rotting in camps from which only a trickle are permitted to return to Kosovo, and, worst of all, Slobodan Milosevic still in power as the “indispensable man” created by years of disgraceful Washington policies. There are other possible outcomes, but today I cannot imagine a good scenario. ●

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\*For more information on this e-mail journal and other information services and media programs of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, visit the IWPR Web site at [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net).

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- (2) Please don't write to ask whether we're interested in such and such an article—it makes for useless correspondence. Look at our last few issues to see if your idea fits in. Or take a chance and send us your article. We will not consider manuscripts submitted simultaneously to several publications.
- (3) Type your ms *double-spaced*, with *wide* margins. Check all your figures, dates, names, etc.—they're the author's responsibility. Please use inclusive language so that we don't have to make adjustments during editing. If you are submitting to *Dissent* electronically, our e-mail address is [dissent@igc.org](mailto:dissent@igc.org).
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