

Are the Bosnian Muslims a nation?

Sat, 30/04/1994 - 10:59

The proposed settlement over the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina is a big blow against the longstanding multi-ethnic character of the old republic in former Yugoslavia. For centuries economic and political developments have combined to prevent the Bosnian Muslims, in particular, from attaining a national consciousness. Michael Gatter explores the reasons for this, and asks what difference the experience of war has made.

Many people, despairing of the ethnic war in ex-Yugoslavia, have ceased to root the conflict in the real history of relations between the different communities. Yet it is the interweaving of class and religious ties that underpins the consciousness of all those involved in the current war. In particular the history of the Bosnian Muslims reflects in the sharpest way the national and social complexities of relations between the Balkan peoples.

The Bosnian Muslims emerged out of a local heretic movement, the Krstjani, which split away from the Roman Church at the start of the thirteenth century. This 'Bosnian Church' constituted, like other heretic sects in this period (the Bogomils, the Cathars), a rebellion against the domination of the parasitic Papacy. The latter responded with such savage military repression that Pope Pius II was able to boast in 1460 that, 'about twelve thousand have been baptized, forty or a bit more fled'¹

But this triumph was short lived. The Ottoman Turks were steadily conquering the Balkans. Several contemporary reports indicate that the Krstjani greeted them as liberators.² Identification with the tyrannical Roman Church was so weak that the population underwent a mass conversion to Islam and 'at the end of the sixteenth century 80% of the Bosnian population were Muslims.'³ This conversion enabled the traditional Bosnian aristocracy to hold onto their social power. In time the Muslims developed a class of big landowners 'the Begs'.⁴

For the next three hundred years this may have been an advantage for the new Muslims in comparison with the other conquered Slavic peoples of the Balkans. In time it was to prove a major obstacle to the development of a modern bourgeois class and therefore to the formation of a nation.

Things worked in the reverse direction as far as the Serbs were concerned. Serbia was a powerful monarchy throughout the middle ages. Conquest and occupation by the Ottomans in the fourteenth century threw Serbia back to a patriarchal peasant collectivism in landed property 'the zadruga' which was similar to the Russian 'mir'.

The destruction of Serbia's ruling classes was the general pattern of Ottoman conquest in the Balkans. These regular rounds of exterminations and expulsions contributed to the misery and historic backwardness of the Balkans and explain the eventual chronic weakness of capitalist development. An extremely atomised peasantry made a more economically productive utilisation of the land almost impossible. It led in turn to rural over-population and a very weak development of industry by the nineteenth century.⁵ According to one economic historian, GDP per head declined between 1860-1910,

during the very period of the most dramatic and widespread capitalist growth in western Europe.⁶

Serbia stagnated for centuries along with the rest of the region. Yet because there was no strong ruling class integrated into the upper political and social echelons of the Ottoman Empire in Serbia, it gave birth, albeit slowly and belatedly, to a predominantly merchant bourgeois class. This led to a national movement against Ottoman rule. With the aid of Tsarist Russia this achieved autonomy in 1830 and later (1867) complete independence.

The fate of the Muslim population in Bosnia was quite different. Their aristocracy held on to their social position by converting to Islam and by integrating themselves into the military and administrative elite of the Ottoman state. Consequently, during its long decline—dominated by the Asiatic mode of production—the Muslim Begs were hostile to any modernisation. When the Sultans cautiously tried to reform the empire in the nineteenth century the Bosnian Begs launched separatist uprisings, which were put down only with difficulty.

After an initial resistance to the 1878 Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina the Begs came to terms with the Habsburgs. The Austro-Hungarian bourgeoisie and the Begs shared common interests. Both wanted to suppress the unrest of the Serbian peasants and tenant farmers and to restrain Serbian expansion which, after 1903, was the main threat to the Habsburgs in the Balkans.

One important result of this whole history was that the Muslims did not join in the nation-building process in the Balkans during the nineteenth century. Because of the different development of their propertied classes the Serbs and the Croats were both able to build nations:

‘According to the 1910 census, Muslims made up 91.15% of all landlords whose lands were tilled by customary tenants... But according to the same census, 73.92% of all (serfs) were Orthodox, and 21.49% were Catholic.’⁷

The absence of the developed and differentiated classes, which make up bourgeois society held back the development of a Muslim nation. While such social differentiation was equally absent for Croats and Serbs in Bosnia they came under the influence of the more developed bourgeois classes in Croatia and Serbia.

By contrast the only ‘motherland’ for the Muslims was the Ottoman Empire which was in terminal decline and from which they were cut off after 1878. Moreover, the Muslims in Bosnia were scattered, without a compact territory of their own. This certainly hindered them becoming a nation.

This different line of development became explosive because the confessional line coincided with a class divide—a crucial factor in understanding the deep roots of nationalism in the Balkans.⁸

Failing to build a nation of their own the Muslims became the target of rising Serbian and Croatian nationalism from the end of the nineteenth century. Once again for reasons specific to their historic development Serbian and Croatian nationalism proved incapable of achieving a progressive solution to the national question in the Balkans.

Because of its belated arrival on the stage of history Serbian nationalism always showed a pronounced tendency to subordinate itself to one or other of the two dynastic powers vying for control of the Balkans power, Habsburg Austria or Romanov Russia. In the mid-nineteenth century it looked to the Tsar to achieve its liberation from the Ottomans. Then it turned to the Austro-Hungarian Empire; after 1903 it became Russia again and during the first world war Russia’s allies France and Britain.

As a result Serbian nationalism sought to ‘solve’ its contradictions not in a struggle with imperialism but

rather at the expense of the weaker nationalities and ethnic communities of the region; the Albanians, Croats, Muslims and Macedonians.

The record of Croatian nationalism is in no way superior. While Serbian nationalism at least originated in wars of liberation against Ottoman rule, Croatian nationalism never transcended the role of handmaiden to the Habsburgs. In 1848 Croatian units provided shock troops to crush the bourgeois democratic revolution in Vienna.

Afterwards Croatian nationalism staked everything on the protection of the Emperor in Vienna, refusing to join in the growing liberation movements of the oppressed nationalities throughout the Empire. The reactionary role of Croatian nationalism was to culminate in the 'Independent' Ustasha State (NDH) of 1941-1945.

Both Serbian and Croatian nationalism attempted, from the end of the last century to integrate, or more precisely, to assimilate the Muslims. They argued that the Muslims were 'Islamicised' Croats or Serbs who must come back into the fold of their 'true' motherland. Indeed Bosnia-Herzegovina had been the core of the short-lived medieval state which Croatian nationalists chose as the origin of the nation. Thus the founder of Croatian nationalism went so far as to suggest that the Muslims were 'the better Croats'.

The reaction of the Muslim classes to this pressure was not uniform. On the one hand, the Begs were sympathetic to the Croats. But at the same time they had no interest in giving up their politico-religious leading role in the Muslim community under the Habsburgs.

They felt they would lose out in any process of integration into bigger and more developed bourgeois class societies, like those of the Croats or the Serbs. Moreover, the big landowners succeeded in keeping the mass of the Muslim population behind it. Hence, 'Catholic felt as Croats, Orthodox as Serbs. In contrast the Muslims saw themselves as part of the 'supranational' people of the Ottoman empire.'⁹ Or as another historian states, 'The overwhelming majority of ordinary Muslims shunned any process of 'nationalisation''¹⁰

However, the small, but growing, modern intelligentsia fell increasingly under the influence of the nation building process which ran through the Balkans, most of them considering themselves as Croats.¹¹

This Croatophilia was due to several factors. First, Serbian nationalism's liberation struggle against the Ottomans always contained a strong dose of Islamophobia. In contrast, the Croatian propertied classes shared with their Muslim counterparts political conservatism and loyalty to the Habsburgs. This Croatophilia was strengthened once again during the 1920s and 1930s because both Croats and Bosnians suffered national oppression within the Yugoslav kingdom, which was essentially an expanded Serbia.

Nearly every Bosnian Muslim parliamentary deputy held Croatian nationality and the bourgeois Muslim party, JMO¹², even collaborated with the Ustasha state. Today's most radical right wing Croatian nationalist leader, Dobroslav Paraga, advocates a 'historic Croatia' which includes the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina and from the outset of the present war he recruited Muslims for his HOS-militias, with some success.

Yet these pro-Croat sympathies could never be transformed into integration into the Croat nation. In the Balkans, and especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, religion was a very important element in the nation building process. This was due to the Ottoman millet-system, which gave the non-Islamic churches a central administrative function over their respective ethnic groups.¹³

On the other hand, loyalty to Islam was the key to a career in the military and bureaucratic apparatus. So

religion became a decisive component of ethnic and later national identity.

Croatian nationalism only ever accepted the Muslims as subordinate partners?never as equals. So when the Muslims fought for religious-educational autonomy between 1899-1908 the Croats resisted strongly. Ultimately, there emerged a powerful current inside Croatian nationalism which characterised the Muslims as ?national enemies?, rather than ?better Croats?. This sentiment was, and is, especially strong in the peasant dominated Western Herzegovina.

Finally, the Muslims also feared that to openly embrace either the Croats or the Serbs would inevitably draw them into the Serbo-Croatian firing line, with dire consequences for them. They felt, rightly, that they could only survive in a multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Although the Bosnian Muslims did not become a nation during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century this is not to say that they were just an amorphous mass. They understood themselves to be a specific cultural entity, different from the other nationalities. Their development from an ethnicity, mainly defined by their religion, towards nationhood was blocked in two ways by their specific social conditions.

Muslim society did not develop strong modern bourgeois and petit bourgeois classes or an intelligentsia that could lead such a development. Nor did the Muslims occupy a contiguous and ethnically homogeneous territory. But neither could Muslims be integrated into the Croat or Serb nations.

Due to the continuing political hegemony of the reactionary Begs the Muslims remained outside the South Slav (Yugoslav) unity movement of the early 1900s which was rooted mainly in the Serbian and Croatian communities. Indeed reactionary Muslim leaders used the ferocious Austrian anti-Serb propaganda, at the beginning of the first world war, to organise riots and pogroms against Bosnian Serbs. The Yugoslav movement might have been a step towards solving the national antagonisms in the Balkans.

But Slav unity alone could not complete this process. Indeed pan-(south) Slavism held chauvinist dangers vis-a-vis the non-Slav peoples of the Balkans. For this reason the revolutionary social-democratic parties, particularly in Serbia and Bulgaria, developed the slogan of a ?democratic Federation of the Balkans?, which was later developed by the Communist International as the ?Socialist Federation of the Balkans?.

But the Muslim leaders? abstention from the Yugoslav movement was justified in the eyes of the Muslim masses by its actual outcome, the Yugoslav kingdom, a nationally oppressive and viciously anti-working class bonapartist regime. This outcome proved a central Trotskyist thesis; namely, that the bourgeoisie is unable to resolve either progressively or permanently the national question in the imperialist epoch.

From the beginning, the Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes¹⁴ was characterised by Serbian dominance over the other nationalities. Serbian nationalism succeeded in conflating the class hatred of Serbian tenants against the Muslim Begs with anti-Muslim chauvinism. This was especially strong in 1918 when the whole country was engulfed in peasant riots.

There were, however, important multinational class struggles, such as the heroic Bosnian miners? strike of December 1920 led by the Communist Party. In ?one of the best known and biggest class struggles in Yugoslavia?¹⁵ 4,800 miners?mainly Croats but joined by Slovenes, Muslims and Serbs?fought for social demands against the government. Government forces, together with Serbian nationalist militias, brutally smashed the strike wave.¹⁶ This defeat for multinational working class action resulted in strengthening anti-Serb feelings.

The immaturity of the young CP and the resurgent Serb nationalism were important factors in cementing

an all-Muslim cross-class unity. The bourgeois JMO succeeded in getting 98% of all Muslim votes in the 1920 elections for the Constituent Assembly.¹⁷

The JMO was dominated by the reactionary interests of the big semi-feudal land owners. In the decisive vote on the constitution in 1921 the JMO voted in favour of the reactionary and nationally oppressive constitution. In return they got a promise from the Serbian dominated Belgrade government not to implement agrarian reform in Bosnia which would have threatened the social wealth of the Begs.

The reactionary Begs continued to sell-out the struggle for Muslim rights. After the coup d'état by King Alexander and the establishment of a monarchist military dictatorship the JMO failed to mobilise any resistance and, together with other bourgeois opposition parties, conducted a tug of war with the monarchy.

For a period the JMO even entered the government and served the Serbian monarchy in the interest of 'stability'. In 1939, Serbian and Croatian nationalists agreed upon the 'sporazum'.¹⁸ This was an agreement between the central (Serbian) government and Macek, the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, to give Croatia more autonomy and to divide Bosnia-Herzegovina between 'Croatian Banovina' and 'Serbian territories'. The JMO leader, Dzafar Kulenovic, supported this despite its reactionary consequences for the Muslims. Worse the JMO supported the fascist Ustasha regime of Ante Pavelic in 1941.

As Marxists we reject Serbian nationalist claims, often shared by Stalinophile leftists, that the Croats and Muslims are reactionary peoples in contrast to the Serbs, who fought against the Ottomans and then German fascism.

Firstly, it should be noted that after 1941 there existed a strong monarchist and chauvinist Cetnik Movement, whose main activity, particularly in Bosnia, was ethnic cleansing of Croats and Muslims¹⁹ and fighting against the Partisans. They collaborated from the beginning with the Italian fascist army. Later they did the same with the Nazi occupation forces and in some areas even with the Ustashi!²⁰

Additionally, it is understandable that an oppressed people does not usually rally to the defence of their national oppressors. They are very likely to develop naïve and false hopes in any 'liberator' that attacks their oppressors. Today, the Muslims have developed similar illusions in United States and European Union imperialism.

Of course, these are crippling illusions and Marxists denounce the leaders of the community for spreading them. Nevertheless, we must understand the reasons for these if we are to break them. In any case, history is the biggest teacher and those Croats and Muslims who had illusions in the Ustasha/Nazi state quickly lost them.²¹

The second world war was a watershed for inter-ethnic relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. While some bourgeois Muslim forces collaborated with the fascist NDH and a Muslim 13th SS-Division was even created, the vast majority of the Bosnian Muslims suffered terribly at the fascists hands. The chauvinist pogroms carried out by the Cetnik bands and by the new Ustasha state demonstrated to them the necessity of a sharp struggle against nationalism. According to several studies the Muslims faced genocide.

There are estimates that up to 100,000 Muslims, approximately 8% of the population, were killed.²² Whilst many Muslims joined the Partisans in Herzegovina soon after the Partisan liberation war started, the general participation of Muslims in the Partisan movement dates only from 1943. But this common experience of a struggle comprising Serbs, Muslims and Croats against chauvinism and occupation, was very important in forging a multinational Bosnian identity.

In Stalinist Yugoslavia the national question was posed anew under changed conditions. The Titoite bureaucracy understood well that there could be no real stability in Yugoslavia without the elimination of national conflict, particularly between the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The Serbs were (and are) too weak to enforce a system of stable national oppression in the whole of Yugoslavia. In 1948 they comprised 41.5% of the Yugoslav population. In 1971 this was down to 39.7%.²³

The bureaucracy exercised its political dictatorship partly on the basis of balancing between, and arbitrating between, the various nationalities. The denial of free political expression to any forces outside the League of Yugoslav communists suppressed open nationalist agitation. Nevertheless this took on a disguised expression within the party and the cultural intelligentsia. Repeated re-adjustments had to be made in the political balance of power, culminating in the 1974 constitution.

The only important exception to this inclusive system was the Kosovo Albanians, who were simply oppressed. This was because the right of national self-determination for the Albanians would probably have resulted in the creation a separate republic or even a union with Albania. This would have provoked Serbian nationalism into a frenzy.

Its founding historical myth centres on the heroic defeat of the Serbs at the hands of the Ottomans in Kosovo in 1389, an act of redemptive crucifixion, which led eventually to national resurrection. The 'field of Kosovo' is regarded as the Calvary of the Serb nation. Unfortunately this region is not, and has not been for centuries, inhabited by Serbs.

Its extreme poverty and backwardness have failed to make it attractive to them. Any moves to grant the Albanians their rights to self-determination would have thus endangered internal stability. In addition they would have changed the balance of forces in the Balkans in favour of Tito's Albanian rival Stalinist, Enver Hoxa.

This strategy of building a balance of power between the nations was the main reason why the Stalinist bureaucracy declared the Bosnian Muslims a nation in 1963. A secondary reason was that it aided Tito's sponsorship of the non-aligned movement, in which several Islamic states played an important role.²⁴

The practical fruit of this new status was an increasing share of party, state and economic positions for Muslims (the important exception was the military). There are also indications that religious affiliation declined in Bosnia. According to one poll in 1985 only 17% were religious believers, compared with 19% in Macedonia, 26% in Slovenia, 33% in Croatia and 44% in Kosovo.²⁵

The industrialisation process in the Yugoslav degenerate workers' state also led to the development of a significant Muslim working class. As a consequence Muslims became the most urbanised ethnic group in Bosnia.

While there was no systematic national oppression of Muslims under Tito several forms of discrimination existed. All the positive economic indices cannot hide the fact that Bosnia-Herzegovina was, before the present war, still an underdeveloped part of Yugoslavia.

According to official statistics Bosnia's per capita income grew by 201% between 1947-1962; yet the average for Yugoslavia was 235% while Slovenia's grew by 282%.²⁶ In the late 1980s the relative per capita social product in Bosnia was 80, while the average for Yugoslavia was 100 and in Slovenia 179.²⁷

In 1945 several leading Stalinists, including Milovan Djilas, actually opposed the formation of the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. An organisation called 'Young Muslims' was founded at the end of the war to defend the Muslims against attacks and banned as 'terrorist group'.²⁸ In 1983 the Stalinists put Alia

Itzetbegovic and 13 others on trial, accusing them of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. While they undoubtedly professed bourgeois religious ideas, it was an absurd slander to accuse them of fundamentalism. Many Muslims correctly grasped that this reactionary trial was an attack on them as an ethnic group.

How then should we characterise the 'Muslim' national question under the Stalinist bureaucracy? Essentially, the Muslim ethnic community remained a 'half way house'; it neither developed fully into an independent nationality nor was it absorbed into another one. The agrarian reform of 1945 liquidated the Begs as a class of semi-feudal landowners, while the overthrow of capitalism in 1946/47 prevented the formation of a Muslim urban bourgeoisie.

The creation of a degenerate workers' state after the expropriation of the semi-feudal landed aristocracy, meant the bourgeois dynamo of nation-building was never started up. Meanwhile, the working class had no class interest in the formation of a nation.

When a society is flung into deep crises that threaten its very existence it is possible to go forward or backward. To go forward society must look to the working class and a political leadership which represents its fundamental interests—a revolutionary communist party. To go backward requires simply that society falls under the leadership of bourgeois forces. All currents in between are forced to vacillate between these two poles. If they are not able to find their way to the path of proletarian revolution they are doomed to serve reaction.

This is exactly what has happened in Bosnia. The death agony of Stalinism hurled the whole country into convulsions. The pattern of established economic ties was forcibly torn up. The Stalinist bureaucracy, losing all faith in its own system, embarked on the restoration of capitalism. But since it was discredited in its 'socialist' guise it could only hope to lead this process by donning the 'traditional' and outlandish costumes of nationalism. Rival bureaucrats outdid one another in demagogic excesses in the hope of getting the people to forget the bureaucracy's own recent past.

Nationalism was the only radicalism with deep historical roots which could outdistance the growing working class radicalism in the years 1986-88. However the strike waves which could have been the harbingers of political revolution lacked any clear class political leadership. Thus a wing of the Serbian bureaucracy under Slobodan Milosevic, fanned chauvinist flames.

He claimed that all the Serbian workers' economic problems were due, not to the bureaucracy's mismanagement and disruption of the planned economy, but to the so-called privileges of the other nationalities. Moreover, the Slovenian and Croatian bureaucrats wanted to get rid of the more backward parts of Yugoslavia. Nationalism and capitalist restoration would help this.

It is obvious from all that has been said before that there existed a basis, a popular 'historical memory', which the bureaucrats were able to exploit to achieve their goals. But such ideologies are open to being contested, refuted and replaced. The ex-Yugoslav peoples were not doomed, as though by some genetic imprint, to hate each other because of these resurrected memories, part real, part myth. A revolutionary internationalist party can shatter these mythologised 'memories' with new experiences, above all, with the experience of multinational class war against the fomentors of national carnage. But this party does not exist today and this is the key to understanding the depth of the current tragedy.

When the various bureaucracies launched their campaign of national hatred the Bosnian working class resisted particularly strongly. After war broke out between Serbia and Croatia in 1991 tens of thousands of Muslim, Croatian and Serbian workers marched in Sarajevo against nationalism and war.

The climax of this desperate struggle to avert catastrophe was the mass demonstration of April 1992, in Sarajevo. Hundreds of thousands of workers from all around Bosnia occupied the inner city for three days. They stormed parliament, demanding the resignation of Itzetbegovic and the immediate cessation of the war moves.

They saw clearly that the responsibility for the war lay, in large measure, with their reactionary government. Tragically, this movement was betrayed by the leaders of the liberal and reformist parties who were seeking a compromise and to this end disarmed the masses. The crowd was unprotected in the face of sniper attacks by the Serbian militias.²⁹

The deliberate diversion of the class struggle into national conflict strengthened bourgeois forces in all three communities in Bosnia: the SDS (Serbian Democratic Party), the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Community) and the Muslim SDA (Party of Democratic Action). The SDA was founded in May 1990 by Itzetbegovic.

The party became a bourgeois, pro-capitalist party which claimed to represent the Muslim community.³⁰ Undoubtedly, the SDA succeeded in this project (as did the HDZ and the SDS among the Croats and Serbs). Of the 240 seats in the two chambers of parliament the SDA held 86, the SDS 72 and the HDZ 44 seats. In all there were 99 Muslim seats, 85 Serb, 49 Croat and seven declaring themselves as ?Yugoslavs?.³¹

Whilst the SDA does have an Islamic fundamentalist wing, which is becoming stronger, it would be wrong to characterise the SDA in its entirety as a fundamentalist party. The Bosnian Muslims lacked the essential basis for the creation of an Islamic state. According to one 1991 poll, the Muslims counted for 43.7% of the Bosnian population, Serbs 31.4% and Croats 17.4% (5.5% are ?Yugoslavs?).³²

The structural faultlines made the project of either a confessional or a national state utopian; namely, territorial dispersal and under-representation in the military apparatus and the greater degree of secularisation amongst them than in the Croat or Serb communities. The SDA strategy was therefore to preserve a multinational Bosnia, but to establish a Muslim hegemony and seek from west European imperialism guarantees for the independence of Bosnia.

This project implied neither ethnic cleansing, nor systematic persecution of the other minorities. It was formally democratic since the Muslims constituted a plurality on their own and a majority, with the Croats, for Bosnian independence. Nevertheless, the inherent dynamic of this policy seemed a serious threat to the Serbs, who it converted into a national minority, severed by the new state borders from their fellow Serbs to the east and the north.

To carry out this strategy the SDA leadership was obliged to form an alliance with the Croatian HDZ. They also sought to avoid provoking the Yugoslav army (JNA) and to this end totally failed to prepare themselves militarily for the coming war. They placed all their hopes on recognition and support from European imperialism which urged them along this suicidal course. This was the aim the referendum in February 1992, which was boycotted by the Serbian minority.

The Muslims had no intention of splitting the republic because they would thereby atomise themselves. Certainly, there were differences between the outlook of the rural and the urban population. While multinational feelings were very strong in the cities they were weaker in the more backward countryside. But the huge demonstrations in April 1992 clearly revealed the strength of multinationalism.

While the SDA leadership may have had a strategic plan for Muslim hegemony it did not dare to campaign

for it openly precisely because this would have been violently unpopular with the Muslim population. The latter felt, correctly, they could only survive in a multi-ethnic Bosnia. Therefore SDA propaganda focused on slogans such as, "For an equal representation of the Muslims in a multinational Bosnia?"³³

As we have said from the outset of the conflict, Bosnia-Herzegovina can only survive as a multinational entity, not as a cantonised State or a Confederation of three republics. The Bosnian peoples were so intermixed that such a "solution" could only be brought about by mass expulsions of population which could only be achieved by terror.

The war has achieved in great measure exactly this arch-reactionary objective. The European Union, having encouraged a Bosnian declaration of independence, did not rush to Bosnia's assistance when the Yugoslav army and the Serb militias launched their attacks. Indeed the imperialists imposed an arms embargo which kept the Bosnian state forces virtually disarmed as the Serbs deployed tanks and heavy artillery to pound the Muslim communities.

Itzetbegovic received a brutal lesson in what comes from trusting imperialism. After the break up of the Muslim-Croat alliance and the agreement of the perfidious EU to partition Bosnia-Herzegovina in the second half of 1992, the war turned into a genocidal one against the Muslims. In November 1992 we outlined the possibility of the formation of a Bosnian Muslim nation precisely as a result of the terrible experience of war and ethnic cleansing by Serb and Croat forces. This could lead to the establishment of an identifiable majority in a compact area.³⁴ A sense of national identity for the Muslims would be forged out of the shared experience of persecution and resistance.

How far has this process gone? Although there has been massive ethnic cleansing against the Muslims there are still tens of thousands of Muslims living in areas under the control of the Serbs or Croats.³⁵

Nevertheless, in a small part of Bosnia, probably 10%, the Muslims undoubtedly make up the overwhelming majority. Because of this national experience, hatred for the Serbs and Croats has intensified. In the Bosnian popular newspapers such as *Lilja*, or *Nova Bosna* growing Muslim "nationalism" is evident.

Unsurprisingly the Muslim nationalists have drawn the conclusion that living together with Serbs and Croats is impossible. The absence of a consistent internationalist party helps them to drum this idea into the brains of many Muslims. The right wing in the SDA and the genuine fundamentalist forces, which dominate the unelected Muslim Assembly, have an open project of fighting for a bigger piece of Bosnia so as to create a Muslim state there.

But it would be wrong to identify a continuing process with the final result, or to accept that this process is irreversible. There are important countervailing tendencies. While in the central Bosnian region, around Zenica, Muslim "nationalism" and fundamentalism is quite strong, multi-ethnicity still dominates in central urban areas such as Sarajevo and Tuzla.³⁶

Furthermore, the army is still multinational, especially the Second Corps around Tuzla, which still has a multinational officer corps. But even in Sarajevo there are still HVO units in the army³⁷ as well as Serbs. Approximately 10% of the government army is non-Muslim.

There is still a multinational elected parliament and state presidium. There are multinational parties like the Liberals or the Reformist Party and also Croatian and Serbian parties like the Croatian Citizen Party, the Croatian Peasant Party and the recently founded "Serbian Assemblies".³⁸

A strong mood still prevails in the Muslim and mixed population areas against partition and for a multi-

ethnic solution. Even the 17th Brigade, which is composed of Muslim refugees from the Banja Luka region, strongly favours a multi-ethnic Bosnia. Some months ago Itzetbegovic admitted at an SDA conference that the Muslims still have no national identity or national consciousness. This multi-ethnic mood forces the SDA leaders to continue to deploy multinational rhetoric. Itzetbegovic regularly speaks about the heroic multi-ethnic Partisan tradition in the second world war and repeatedly underlines his commitment to a multinational Bosnia-Herzegovina.³⁹ The official Radio and TV condemns pogromist action by Muslim fundamentalist forces in Central Bosnia. This is unimaginable in Serbia or in Croatia

To this picture we have to add that a majority of the Croats do not live in Western Herzegovina and many Croats (and possibly the majority in Croatia itself) are still opposed to partition. Finally, there is evidence of continued multinational sentiments in the territories occupied by Serbs.

In the uprising of Serbian soldiers in Banja Luka and Prijedor in September 1993, it was reported that they accused Karadjic of being a Cetnik and of favouring the destruction of the multinational communities; they hailed the multi-ethnic Partisan tradition.⁴⁰

In early March 1994 an agreement was signed between the Bosnian-Muslim government, the Bosnian Croat nationalist leaders and the Croatian government. It sketched out a plan to form a Bosnian Muslim-Croatian federation and a confederation between this and Croatia. Strong pressure is being exerted on the Serbs to join this peace process. This agreement will have to withstand the pressures of continuing military action in central Bosnia.

It is unlikely that this 'settlement', even if it is achieved, will hold for long. It will be founded on a massive injustice against the Muslims the largest community in Bosnia. If the SDA backs it to the hilt then it is likely that the Islamic fundamentalists will grow in strength amongst the displaced peasant masses and resume armed struggle as soon as it is possible. No peace settlement can be founded upon such a basis of felt wrongs.

Will a Muslim nation emerge in these conditions? This still depends on establishing a contiguous, compact territory as well as a strong and lasting national consciousness. A federation between the Muslims and the Bosnian Croats could certainly lead to the formation of such an area, even if it contained a small minority of Croats.

If capitalist restoration succeeded in Bosnia⁴¹ this would involve the emergence of a Muslim bourgeoisie, the leader of any future nation building project. The development of a national consciousness, on the other hand, is linked to the outcome of the war. A prolonged struggle against the Serbs would strengthen the alliance with the Croats and therefore slow down the formation of a specifically Muslim national identity.⁴² The more restricted the war, the less will be the collaboration with the Croats. This would probably strengthen a distinct national consciousness.

National consciousness among the Bosnian Muslims has significantly increased over the last year and a half. A large part of the Muslim leadership orients towards the building of a Muslim state in a compact area in central Bosnia. But they still face major obstacles. Firstly, the evident unviability of the present area they control. Secondly, the strong remnants of a multinational tradition among many Muslims, Serbs, Croats and 'Yugoslavs' run counter to the leadership's project. And these forces have a significant presence in parts of the army.

The main problem here is that these forces only have a utopian, bourgeois multinational perspective. In practice they are incapable of leading a resolute opposition to the plans of the leading SDA figures.

On the contrary, they subordinate themselves to them. Hence, the biggest danger now is that if the war drags on without hope of a decisive victory against the Serbian and Croatian nationalists the progressive forces within the Bosnian masses will become resigned to an ethnic solution.

The Muslim leaders would step forward as 'realists' and win approval for the building of a nation state. In sum, the nation building process of the Bosnian-Muslims has made significant advances in the last period but it is neither complete nor irreversible.

The goal of socialists must remain as before? a multinational workers' republic in Bosnia. There is still no objective reason to advance the slogan of an independent Muslim workers' state. Only when a majority of the Muslims clearly embrace the perspective of building of a Bosnian-Muslim nation state should socialists change their point of view.

The present tragedy in Bosnia demonstrates that capitalism and Stalinism are condemned, by their very nature, to promote national chauvinism which in circumstances of the crisis of both can result only in genocidal war.

The real solution lies in the building of revolutionary communist parties throughout the Balkans, resurrecting the legacy of both the revolutionary Social Democratic and Communist movements at the beginning of this century.

The principles that guided their actions also illuminate the path ahead:

'The Conference of the Balkan Communist Federation declares in consequence that nothing but the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat with its organisations of the councils of Workers', Soldiers' and Red Army deputies, will liberate the Balkan nations from all oppression and will afford the possibility of self-determination, uniting them all into one Balkan Socialist Soviet Republic.'⁴³

NOTES

1 Cited in Srečko M. Dzaja, 'Bosnien-Herzegowina', in M Weithmann (Hrsg.), *Der ruhelose Balkan*, Munich 1993, p154-5.

2 The Serbs on the other hand fought a heroic but in the end unsuccessful battle against the Ottomans at Amselfeld in 1389.

3 Alojz Ivanisevic, 'Das Pulverfasz Bosnien? Zum historischen Hintergrund der gegenwaertigen Tragodie?', *Sudosteuropamitteilungen* 3/1993 Munich, p217.

4 In Serbia, however, the propertied classes fled or were wiped out.

5 According to the official statistics there existed in 1899 barely 1,735 factory workers in Serbia. See Mirka Bogdanovic, *The Serbian Labour Movement in the period 1903-1914*, Amsterdam, 1988, p48

6 Sandor Gyimesi, 'Motive und Probleme der Industrialisierung in den Staaten Suedosteuropas bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg?', *Suedosteuropa-Studie 42: Industrialisierung und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Suedosteuropa*, Munich, 1989, p13.

7 Ivo Banac, *The national question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*, New York, 1992, p367. According to the same author Muslim smallholders represented half of Bosnia's free peasants.

8 This class/confessional antagonism was already manifest in the 1875 uprising by mainly Serbian peasants. It was brutally suppressed by the Ottoman forces and 156,000 people fled abroad. See L.S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans 1815-1914*, Chicago 1963, p64

9 S M Dzaja, op cit, p159

10 I Banac op cit, p366

11 ibid

- 12 Yugoslav Muslim Organisation
- 13 E Hoesch, Geschichte der Balkanlaender, Munich 1988, p97-104
- 14 This remained the official name of the state until 1929. Then it was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.
- 15 Rodoljub Colakovic, Kazivanje o jednom pokoljenju, Zagreb 1964, p137
- 16 Enver Redzic, 'Der Streik der bosnischen Bergarbeiter im Dezember 1920 und das Verbot der Kommunistischen Partei Jugoslawiens?', Oesterreichische Osthefte 3/1988, p220-226
- 17 By and large the JMO was able to maintain its hegemony in the elections.
- 18 This literally means 'balance'.
- 19 According to a close collaborator of the Cetnik leader, Mihailovic, the Cetniks killed forty thousand Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandzak by the end of 1943. See J. Milazzo, The Cetnik Movement & the Yugoslav resistance, Baltimore, 1975, p103
- 20 ibid, p78-79
- 21 The German Ambassador in Zagreb, Glaise-Horstenau, wrote in February 1942 to the German Army General Command: 'The whole people with very few exceptions are united in their complete rejection of the Ustasha movement as the ruling party. Hatred of them is extremely strong.' Sundhausen, op cit, p121
- 22 L Bryant, The Betrayal of Bosnia, London, 1993, p16
- 23 F Singleton, Twentieth-Century Yugoslavia, London, 1976, p221
- 24 A Ivanisevic op cit, p219
- 25 H Poulton, The Balkans: Minorities and States in conflict, London, 1991, p43
- 26 F Singleton, op cit p254
- 27 Branka Magas, The Destruction of Yugoslavia, London, 1993, p191
- 28 H Poulton, op cit, p41
- 29 For a report by a participant see Lee Bryant, YugoFax, May 1992
- 30 Therefore they built Party branches in Sandzak and Macedonia. In reality these local SDA units are more or less independent today.
- 31 H Poulton, op cit, p44
- 32 'The National Composition of Yugoslavia Population, 1991', Yugoslav Survey Vol.XXXIII No1, 1992, Belgrade, p4
- 33 Also the Bosnian Croatian HDZ was for a longer time divided with a wing around Stepan Klujic who was in favour of a multi-national Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- 34 'Stop the annihilation of the Bosnian Muslims!', Trotskyist Bulletin 3, 1993, p16
- 35 There are still 40, 000 Muslims living around Banja Luka, for example, terrorised by Serbian chauvinists.
- 36 The Economist 4.9.93. One must also differentiate between the peasant refugees and the more multinational urban/working class Muslims
- 37 BBC Summary of World Broadcasting, 18.12.93
- 38 According to Nova Bosna, 1.3.94, a Bosnian Muslim newspaper
- 39 For example, Izetbegovics speech to army officers on 14.12.93, in BBC Summary of World Broadcasting, 18.12.93
- 40 Arbeiter/InnenStandpunkt (paper of the Austrian section of the LRCI), 56, November 1993
- 41 For the moment Bosnia-Herzegovina is still, like Serbia and Croatia, a degenerate workers' state.
- 42 Although a federation with the Croats could lead to national oppression against the Muslims by the Zagreb government and by this route strengthen Muslim national consciousness.
- 43 'Resolution of the Balkan Communist Conference?', Sofia, January 1920, in: L S Stavrianos, Balkan Federation; a history of the 'movement toward Balkan Unity in modern times, Connecticut 1964, p304