



Bosnia - which side are you on?

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The SWP has consistently refused to support the right of multi-ethnic Bosnia to defend itself against ethnic cleansing. This article, from 1993, debunks Socialist Worker's lame excuses.

September 1993 saw the imperialists attempt to put the finishing touches to an agreement which ensures the destruction of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the same month Socialist Review, the journal of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), led with an article attacking those on the left who called for an end to the arms blockade, and for the arming of the Bosnian Muslims in order that they could defend themselves and their state.

The SWP refuses to take sides in the war in former Yugoslavia. It has constantly argued that revolutionaries should give no support to the nationalist demagogues who have plunged the ex-Yugoslavia into civil war.

This 'plague on all your houses' position sounds very revolutionary, until we look at the concrete and complex reality of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Then it reveals itself to be not a revolutionary position but a pacifist one.

The war in the former Yugoslavia has gone through many turns and stages. The current phase, which began in October 1992, has been dominated by a concerted Serbian and Croatian offensive to carve up Bosnia between them.

Blockade

The results are indisputable. Over a million Bosnian Muslims have been driven from their homes as a result of a massive programme of ethnic cleansing by both Croat and Serb forces. The Muslims, who made up 44% of a population that included 32% Serbs and 17% Croats, have been driven into a tiny area of the country, less than 20% of the territory. Under the latest plan the Serbs control 52% of the territory.

The imperialists and the UN troops on the ground have overseen this bloody war. They have imposed an arms blockade which in reality has only had an impact on the Bosnian Muslims. The Serbs have their own arms industry, while the Croats have no problems receiving arms courtesy of their German backers.

Each defeat of the Bosnian Muslim forces has been followed by a new imperialist plan giving them an ever-dwindling piece of territory. The Vance-Owen plan offered them barely a third of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The latest proposal offers little more than a South African-style 'homeland' with the Izetbegovic government desperately trying to win a narrow outlet to the sea.

These are the circumstances in which Socialist Review denounces those who want, as it puts it, to 'reduce the civil wars in the ex-Yugoslavia to the suffering of the Muslims'. This, according to the article, is 'single issue politics of the worst kind'. Those who call for the arming of the Muslims, for ending the arms blockade, are involved in an 'act of conscience salving'.

This is the position that led the SWP to have nothing to do with the Workers' Aid to Bosnia Campaign. Fortunately the average British worker has a better sense of internationalist solidarity than this supposed 'vanguard' party. Despite the very small forces involved, large numbers of trade union organisations rallied to this campaign.

Does supporting the Bosnian government and its army in the current phase of the war mean we are uncritical supporters of its government? Absolutely not. Workers have no interest in supporting the nationalist policies of Izetbegovic, nor of

forcing Croats or Serbs into a Muslim-dominated state. We fight for a workers' republic in Bosnia with autonomy for minority groups and a Socialist Federation in the Balkans.

But by showing that revolutionaries and the workers' movement are willing to support a just struggle for national rights, and even survival, by fighting alongside and aiding this struggle, socialists can undermine the hold of the nationalists.

By refusing to support this struggle, the SWP's policy plays into the hands of the extreme nationalists and reactionaries. They can say to workers and small farmers: 'Look who the only people actively supporting us are: the Iranian government, the Afghan Islamic fundamentalists etc. They are your real allies?'

Does it mean we have to cover up for the actions of the Bosnian army that also have committed atrocities and 'ethnic cleansing' in the war, although on nothing like the scale of the Serbs or Croats? No, we condemn them when they occur. We call for the disbandment of the Musulmanskaya Brigada—the main, overtly Muslim nationalist unit in which many of the Arab fundamentalists serve—and the disciplining and reorganisation of any unit found to be involved in ethnic cleansing.

But Socialist Worker goes out of its way to equate the two sides with such headlines as 'Terror used on both sides' (SW 19.6.93), as though this justifies a position of neutrality in the war. Does Socialist Worker think that the NLF in Vietnam never committed atrocities? The FLN in Algeria? The ANC in South Africa? Marxists decide to support a struggle on the basis of whether it is a just one or not, not on the basis of the methods used in it.

The SWP has correctly argued against imperialist and UN intervention, rightly arguing that any such intervention can only be for the benefit of the imperialists. They have argued that any bombing of the Serbs will drive the Serbian masses further into the arms of the nationalists, just as the economic blockade has. Yet at the same time the SWP opposes the lifting of one key element of the economic blockade: the arms embargo. It is this embargo that has prevented the Bosnian Muslims from defending themselves. It is an embargo imposed by the imperialists—a form of imperialist intervention just as surely as an embargo of food or fuel.

The SWP strategy for breaking the masses from the nationalist leaders in Serbia and Croatia is as deeply flawed as its strategy in Bosnia. All hopes for change are pinned on a spontaneous 'popular revolt' against nationalist 'warlord leaders' resulting from the growing war weariness.

Of course it is greatly to be hoped that such a movement develops. But to ensure its success, to prevent it leading to a reactionary outcome or even fascism, a party of Serbian workers who are free from national chauvinism has to be built. In concrete terms this means supporting the right of Bosnia to defend itself against a predatory war of conquest and genocide being pursued by the Serbian rulers.

The perspective of a spontaneous revolt conveniently absolves the SWP from taking sides in various phases of the war. So keen are they to bolster their position that they have consistently exaggerated and painted up in progressive colours all oppositional movements.

First they looked to the pacifists, who organise amongst the students and intellectuals. Most of these groups are now small and isolated. Many of them wanted UN intervention to ensure peace—precisely what the SWP argues against.

In August Socialist Worker declared that the real hope for peace lay in the outbreak of a strike wave in Serbia, including a one day general strike. These were strikes for better pay to compensate for hyper-inflation and back pay owed. Of course such strikes resulting from the economic crisis caused by the war and blockade are vitally important. But they do not necessarily take an anti-war or anti-nationalist direction. Workers in Serbia can only be broken from the nationalists if they are won to an internationalist position. For this they need a party which campaigns not only for the defeat of Milosevic and his army but clearly stands for the rights of the Bosnian Muslims and victory in their struggle.

In fact the mass 'oppositions' to Serbian leader Milosovic are just as nationalist or further to the right. The 'democratic' opposition of Draskovic stands for a Greater Serbia but opposes the present war, while the Serbian Radical Party is both powerful and openly fascist. Workers' discontent could just as easily be funnelled in these directions as any progressive one.

Tactics

The latest 'most hopeful sign yet' discovered by Socialist Worker (25.9.93) was the revolt by Bosnian-Serb soldiers in Banja Luka. Crack troops and tanks seized the town and demanded measures be taken against war profiteers mainly ensconced in the local government.

Socialist Worker seems to find it particularly hopeful that these were 'the largest and toughest outfit in the Bosnian Serb army'. Indeed they are. They are also responsible for many incidents of ethnic cleansing against Bosnian Muslims. These are precisely the units that are most opposed to any concessions on territory they have seized and 'cleansed'.

That is not to say that all these troops can be written off. But their current revolt would have to be entirely transformed if it were to become a vehicle for a progressive solution to the war.

The situation in the former Yugoslavia has brought into focus all the weaknesses in the SWPs politics. In the face of a bloody civil war it is politically disarmed. It can only rail against the nationalists, while having no tactics that relate to workers in Bosnia who are fighting a just war of defence but are under nationalist influence.

It opposes UN intervention, but opposes the lifting of the arms embargo—a key imperialist policy that has disarmed one side in the conflict. It desperately hopes that somehow the economic struggle will reassert itself and solve all problems. Rather than worry its head about developing strategy and tactics that can take the workers forward, it relies as ever on the spontaneous explosion to sweep away the nationalism that infects the workers.

SWP members have the chance at their forthcoming conference to change this rotten position. They should take it.

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