

# Against Ethnic Cleansing In The Former Yugoslavia

How to take you back to the winter of '92

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It's very hard now, probably impossible, to capture in a few words the events of the autumn and winter, 1992-93. In a few months hundreds of thousands of people had loved ones killed. Not just that, the survivors were driven from their homes. Two million of them. Families became refugees, split up for months or years, the lucky ones making into 'fortress Europe', the rest into refugee camps one place or another. All this took place less than a day's car drive from Brussels.

Here is not the place to give a history of the break up of Yugoslavia. All I want to do is give a glimpse of people in ex-Yugoslavia who tried to fight, morally and militarily, against ethnic cleansing and ethnic oppression and a glimpse of the activities of people outside the region who tried to support them.

Through 1992 the world's media brought increasing news from towns and villages being ethnically cleansed. Vukovar, the anti-nationalist industrial town in Croatia, was shelled flat by Serbian nationalists. The Croatian nationalist leader Tudjman publicly denounced the aggression against 'his' people but privately smiled as a centre of opposition to his rule was destroyed. In Bosnia, Sarajevo was surrounded. The Muslim side of Mostar was reduced to rubble, attacked first by Serbian nationalists and then by their Croatian counterparts from the other side of the river. The centuries old bridge across the Neretva finally collapsed under artillery bombardment. Refugees who could escape poured out of Bosnia. Others sought refuge in towns held by Bosnian soldiers only to find that these soon became besieged, shelled, and left without heating, light, food, medicine and left without weapons.

From the start the United Nations imposed an arms embargo on the area, supposedly to try to halt the killing. It had no effect on the ethnic cleansers, who controlled most of the old Yugoslav army with some of the biggest stockpiles of military hardware in Europe. The embargo only hit their victims, mostly those of Muslim ancestry, who had only limited weapons-hunting rifles and then what they could slowly capture.

Across Europe and beyond, people with any sense of feeling for their fellow human beings watched the news in growing anguish. How could this be happening? Why could no one stop it? In the spring of 1993 came the news of concentration camps. So much for 'never again after 1945' talk on the lips of the world's great statesmen. The only response to all this misery was

from aid organisations who attempted to take food to the refugees, but even this soon became impossible as the nationalist forces strengthened their stranglehold over the remaining Bosnian communities holding out against their advance.

Apparently responding to public pressure, the UN finally made a move. It sent troops to assist the aid convoys to get through. All this was done alongside a description of the war by the UN, western governments and media as an 'ethnic' or 'civil' war. Apparently Bosnia's Muslim, Croat and Serb populations had all woken up one morning determined to kill each other. From the start the 'humanitarian' organisations, the UN and all other great organisations like the European Parliament talked about 'warring factions' and treated them as equally to blame. The world was reminded of 'primitive Balkan tribesmen' with their murderous characteristics that had been seen many times in the past. If people wanted to kill each other what could the world do but try to help the innocent civilians whose terrified faces could be seen on every news broadcast? The perspective of the Great Powers and UN became one of separating the 'warring factions' - in effect to divide Bosnia, the same plan as the ethnic-cleansers.

If this had been all I could see then like many others I would probably have turned off the TV and put aside the papers. For me, the future is a world without borders between people but now a bloody slaughter was taking place designed to drive people apart. Events seemed so monstrous that if there was nothing that could be done then it became hard to even watch the news on TV.

However, this was not the whole picture. Hidden from just about everyone's view were the people determined to resist this barbaric ethnic division. For some time I had been reading articles from a Serbian socialist, an oppositionist who, like many real socialists, had been living in exile, driven out by the autocratic Tito regime. Within socialist circles he had been fighting an almost lone battle in the late 1980's to show that the destruction of Yugoslavia was being organised not by some outside force like German capital or NATO, as many on the left thought, but primarily by the Serbian regime itself.

The Yugoslavia established in World War Two by the Partisans had been whittled away by the years of Tito's bureaucratic rule and was finally being destroyed by Milosevic. The real death of Yugoslavia came in 1989-90 when Milosevic began the total suppression of the Kosova Albanians. While the institutions of something called 'Yugoslavia' might still have existed any idea of a federation of the region's peoples was finished. Open, extreme discrimination and oppression were now the name of the game. Milosevic, previously a businessman and bureaucrat in the energy sector, had become leader of the Serbian Communist party on the back of an anti-Albanian hate campaign. The Serb oppositionist's articles showed that the Serbian leaders' so-called 'defence of Yugoslavia' against 'breakaway republics' was a fraud. Moves towards independence by Slovenia and Croatia were only a reaction against the growing arrogance, brutality and chauvinism of the Serbian regime as it tried to convert the eight self-governing regions of Federal Yugoslavia into their fiefdom - a 'Greater Serbia'.

Another revealing picture of events came from Bosnian refugees. At a meeting in London in June 1994, where some sixty people came together to discuss how to respond to the war, I listened to a woman from the Bosnian mining town of Tuzla explain how her town contained all ethnic groups fighting side by side in the trenches and organising the town's defences. For her the description of 'civil war' was a fraud put about by Milosevic and parroted by the UN. This lie helped put an 'equals' sign between all sides in the war. It hid the true picture of a long planned and organised assault on a unified Bosnia by the Serbian and Croatian leaders. She denounced the racist press coverage of 'Balkan tribesmen' and pointed out that all the past wars on Balkan

soil were in fact clashes between the shifting great empires-Turkish, Austrian, Russian, British, French etc. She recounted Tuzla's militant history as a part of the Balkan people's efforts to free themselves from control of the empires and their local servants. Tuzla's traditions of solidarity and militancy had shown themselves more recently too. Tuzla miners, themselves very poor, had collected money for the British miners on strike in 1984-5. Many people in the town had watched and hoped they would defeat Margaret Thatcher.

This focus on Tuzla was reinforced by my Serbian socialist contact who sent a letter from Serbia. The Tuzla miners, he wrote, were defending a simple principle of the right of everyone to live and work together. The ethnic cleansers were besieging the town, using starvation to defeat the resistance. Couldn't British miners and trade unionists return the solidarity of 1984-5? Couldn't they try to get food to the town?

Our little meeting united on trying to initiate this proposal. We would appeal to the trade unions and people at large in the UK and Europe to get food through to Tuzla. But knowing the existing union structures were mostly uncritically supporting their own governments' 'non-intervention' stance we decided that rather than simply appeal for them to take action we would start a convoy ourselves. The plight of the communities resisting ethnic cleansing could not be resolved by our handful of people-it needed a popular uprising-but we hoped that our example would help develop such a movement.

We started from zero. None of us had ever done anything like this. We needed money, food, lorries, drivers and so on. We had nothing. In a few cities we started putting up collecting stalls in the streets, we held public meetings, we lobbied trade union conferences. Money started to come in and we found the public keen to help. Some gave to us just as they would give to the 'humanitarian aid' collectors but many people were enthusiastic that our appeal was not simply to feed hungry people but to clearly support those resisting ethnic cleansing. We were showing a side of the war few people knew about.

We got better organised. Such was the mood in the country at large that we managed to get permission to collect food inside big supermarkets. On a good day a small group of volunteers could get a ton of food and maybe five hundred pounds by asking every shopper to buy an extra item.

We bought our first lorry and refugees painted our logo and telephone number on it. People saw the lorry on the streets and rang in volunteering to join the team.

Two lorries set off from the strike bound Timex factory in Scotland, stopping in towns along the way, raising money, spreading awareness, gaining more active supporters. Six weeks later ten lorries assembled at Dover ready to head off across western Europe. Five more lorries joined, from France, Hungary and Sweden. We were given official receptions at town halls and factories. A delegation from the convoy got a standing ovation from the European Parliament-but no practical support.

The convoy finally reached Zagreb in Croatia, only a couple of hundred kilometres from Tuzla. But from here the main route, down the Zagreb-Belgrade highway was blocked. By who? Well to start with by the nationalist ethnic cleansers who controlled all roads into Tuzla. But as we went from office to office in Zagreb we found something else. Zagreb housed the headquarters of the UN military forces charged with getting aid through. We were sent backwards and forwards, from military HQ to the UN High Commission for Refugees, to the Croatian government, everyone refusing to help. The real picture of UN activity began to emerge. No one wanted to help us because we were taking food to people resisting ethnic-cleansing. Food could sometimes be

got to refugees, people already driven from their homes, but not a finger was being lifted to help the besieged communities who were fighting to prevent the fall of their towns. No airlifts were organised, no convoys were being escorted in. Tuzla had a large airport. UN helicopters shuttled backwards and forwards but the only food landed was for UN personnel in the town. All the time the western governments and the UN were replying to popular feelings at home by telling their citizens-'leave it to us, we are getting help to the victims'. It was a fraud, just like their arms embargo which only hit the resistance. The 'humanitarian aid effort' was a cover-up for the real UN-NATO-UK-US plan to divide Bosnia-exactly as the ethnic cleansers proposed. Lord Owen from the UK would shuttle backwards and forwards with various maps, proposed 'peace settlements', and they all carved up Bosnia in different ways, sometimes with borders passing right through single towns. Of course to the outside world this made sense if it was true that all the communities hated each other. But they didn't. They were being driven apart by force. The delivery or non-delivery of food was being used as a weapon, both by the ethnic cleansers and by the great power governments. The so-called NGO's-non governmental organisations-revealed themselves for the most part to be governmental-NGOs, in that with their uncritical stance towards the UN and western governments they helped camouflage the filthy diplomatic/political/military intrigue going on behind the slaughter.

We took our lorries and blocked the UN military headquarters for several hours, holding up placards reading 'Why are you letting Tuzla starve? Open the aid routes'. Local Croats joined us, venting their own anger over the way the great 'international community' had stood by as Vukovar was destroyed.

But we were still just a small campaign. Yes we had raised more money, food, lorries, volunteers, etc., and spoken at more meetings than we had first thought possible, but the movement we had behind us was still too small to make any impact on the UN. Almost no political parties or European trade unions or civil rights movements said anything or did anything to support the opponents of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Some of them followed the line of 'we must support the UN's peace effort', others looked more radical by saying we are for 'unity' so 'we support the maintenance of Yugoslavia'. Both lines of argument lent strength to Milosevic.

The main road to Tuzla remained blocked by the hidden alliance of armed ethnic cleansers and UN military. There were disagreements amongst the convoy team about what to do. They were people from many different countries and different backgrounds only just starting to work together. Three lorries set off to try to find a way to Tuzla through the mountains. The other people returned to their own countries. By letting people know about the UN's role and demanding that the UN open all aid routes, they pushed forward a campaign for the main road to Tuzla and central Bosnia to be opened. Several weeks later the three lorries reached Tuzla-the first outsiders for over a year, apart from UN personnel 'observing' the war.

The lorries' arrival, though bringing only the tiniest amount of food, was a great boost to the miners and townsfolk. They thought the world had abandoned them. Now friends had made it through. But there were many problems. The desperate miners' hopes were raised. They thought the lorries were the advance guard of the whole European trade union movement. Twenty thousand miners and their families needed food. We had to explain that we were in our own battle against the prevailing outlook of all our institutions and especially against our so-called 'labour' leaders.

In March 1994 an uneasy truce was brokered between the Croat nationalists and the forces of multi-ethnic Bosnia. The onslaught from the Serbian nationalist forces continued unabated

but the truce opened up a route into Tuzla-not along main roads, they all remained blocked-but via a crazy route over mountains, forest dirt tracks, farm land and bits of road not under enemy control.

From the UK it would take a couple of days to reach Zagreb with all the holdups for customs checks at borders. From Zagreb the pre-war route to Tuzla was a five hour drive, but now it was taking sometimes a couple of days, if we were lucky, but usually four, five and even eight days as we slowly crawled along the mountain tracks and passed through the endless checkpoints of different armies, queuing in lines of lorries, sometimes stretching for several kilometres, and arguing and quarrelling with various nationalist/local gangster/political figures along the way. The Croatian nationalists wanted a share of our load to pass through 'their' enclave. We refused to give them so much as a tin of beans. Some 'aid' organisations handed over a third of their loads to get through. For us our food was for the community fighting against ethnic cleansing and no one else. Sometimes these local gangsters arrested our drivers or held us up for days hoping we would hand over aid, but all we did was kick up the biggest fuss we could, in the media, through politicians and so on and we always got through-eventually.

When we planned our first convoy we had not thought where the initiative would go after that. All the time our approach was to find ways to turn the general concern of people into an organised movement of solidarity, not just taking food-by itself that could not defeat the ethnic cleansers-but into a political movement that would organise solidarity in every possible way. A movement that would oppose the western governments' support for the division of Bosnia and its multi-ethnic communities, and that would fight alongside them to defeat such a barbaric plan. Everywhere we got good responses from people, but they all looked to us to organise things-and we couldn't. Our tiny handful of people could barely keep the convoys going. Debts running into tens of thousands of pounds loomed over us continually. Breakdowns in our fleet of clapped out lorries threatened disaster. We had no office, no paid organisers, no funding but what we collected on the streets. It needed millions of people to organise themselves, or make their existing organisations take action. But none of this happened. People supported us, cheered us along, helped us, but this support never rippled outwards, never lit up a wider 'bush fire' because our little efforts were dwarfed by the 'damping down' influences of all the existing social organisations supporting the UN's 'peace initiative'.

Most of our volunteers were unemployed, young people by and large, people who hated the idea of ethnic cleansing. They didn't have jobs, they didn't have influential positions, they were not in trade unions but one way they could express their feelings was through organising the convoys, so they kept them going. As soon as one got back we started collecting for the next one. All through 1994 and into 1995 the convoys went back and forth; dust and heat in summer, snow, frozen brakes, dirt tracks turning to vast mud quagmires in winter. All together, from the campaign in the UK and sister organisations in Spain and France, we took over a hundred lorries.

From the moment we first arrived in Bosnia we began to make friends and find eager collaborators amongst the trade unions, especially the miners and teachers, which were really the only surviving mass organisations apart from the army. Industry had come to a halt as roads were blocked and men and women had gone to the front lines. But the teachers kept the schools going unpaid, defending multi-ethnic education. And a vision of a society completely in contradiction with the plans of the ethnic cleansers-and the miners kept working to supply Tuzla's electricity generating station with fuel.

We also met up with the student union at the university. We visited health workers at the hospitals and staff at the orphanages and other institutions.

We sat and talked with committees and individuals. For the most part we met with men and women who told us that before the war they never cared who was Croat or Muslim or Serb. They hated the nationalist politicians of all ethnic groups who wanted separate societies. The miners told us about the days in 1992, before the war started. The parliament in Sarajevo had become dominated by the three Bosnian nationalist parties supposedly representing the three ethnic groups. The squabbling between them paralysed parliament. The 'Yugoslav' army, increasingly composed only of Serbian and Montenegrin troops and under officers now subordinated to Serbian fascist para-military groups, had attacked Croatia and seized a third of its territory. Across Bosnia there were barracks of these 'Yugoslav' troops, and their tanks lined Bosnia's borders to 'protect' Yugoslavia.

In the summer of 1992 huge demonstrations were held outside the Bosnian parliament in Sarajevo. The crowds, led by large numbers of Tuzla miners, shouted their opposition to all the nationalist parties. Some shouted out that if parliament could not settle anything they would disband it and take control. Then sniper shots rang out. The demonstrators dived for cover. Miners edged their way up to the hotel from which the shots came. They seized the gunmen-Serbian nationalists-and handed them over to the police. Days later the gunmen were released and barricades organised by Milosevic supporters began to appear in Sarajevo, put up to prevent people voting in a referendum about whether Bosnia should break from the Milosevic controlled 'Yugoslav' federation. The people who were able to vote overwhelmingly chose an independent, multi-ethnic Bosnia with equal rights for all citizens. But events had gone beyond votes. Milosevic replied with war.

All across Eastern Europe people had brought down the old tyrannical regimes. The question was what to replace them with? People only had the opportunity to begin thinking collectively about this with the first days of freedom. In Yugoslavia any such discussion was drowned in a deafening artillery bombardment. Across the country gangs went from village to village driving out the ethnic 'undesirables' and all those who refused to support their actions. When we drove to Tuzla we would pass through mile upon mile of villages, deserted and empty, where every house had been burnt out. Milosevic's troops with their control over all heavy weaponry, commanded the mountain tops and began a bombardment of every town that held out.

Tuzla fared better than most. Its people with their militant history fighting fascism during World War Two, and with a spirit of ethnic unity, were better prepared than some. Miners battalions dug trenches and fortifications well outside the city and throughout the war the Tuzla region remained the biggest 'free territory'-free to all people.

We learnt all this and much more in formal meetings with people like the mayor and city council, the local army commanders, in visits to mines, factories and schools or in people's homes where we stayed and shared people's lives during our brief visits. Electricity for a couple of hours a day on alternate days. Water for half an hour before sunrise. With no fuel the streets were reclaimed by pedestrians and horses and of course the huge fleet of brand new, white, 4x4 Landcruisers of the UN and NGO 'humanitarian business circus', that can now be seen in every man made political conflict around the world. These people stayed in Tuzla's hotels or they rented houses. We all found beds with local citizens, ordinary folk, soldiers, students, nurses or in the student halls. During our stays we would talk and learn about the history of Yugoslavia, about people's hopes and their personal tragedies-too many tragedies.

Right from the first visit we felt this spirit of resistance to nationalism, barbarism and ethnic division and realised we had to help this spirit make its voice heard in the outside world, which knew only about 'Yugoslav ethnic hatred'. So we began to arrange for delegations to get out from Tuzla and come to the UK or France or Spain to meet with people so that others could hear what we had heard. These delegations of miners, teachers and students came and told their stories. They asked for help. Bill Speirs, the President of the Scottish Trade Union Congress was persuaded to visit Tuzla. The Telecommunications workers' unions in the UK and France joined one convoy with lorries of supplies for their fellow communication workers in Bosnia.

On the convoy going out, during meal breaks and overnight stops, the French and British telecommunications men chatted with other people who had been before. They could not agree with our idea that the UN should drop its arms embargo and let the victims of ethnic cleansing defend themselves. The telecommunications men said, surely more guns will only lead to more killing.

When we reached Tuzla the telecommunications men went off with their fellow workers from Bosnia, visited their homes and work places and handed over the food they had brought. Two days later we all met back to give a press conference for the Bosnian media. One of the British telecommunications men spoke on behalf of his UK and French co-workers. He thanked his new Bosnian friends for their hospitality and went on to say that in the time they had been there they had been able to find out how things stood. As a result they were now returning to their trade unions in France and Britain to campaign for the lifting of the arms embargo. Direct person to person contact had helped them see what no amount of lectures, resolutions or pamphlets could have done. It proved the worth of us trying to do everything we could to break down the barrier that existed between the embattled multi-ethnic communities and the world outside-a barrier put there both by the ethnic cleansers, but also by all the world's great 'democratic statesmen' who were going along with the plan to carve up this unity.

In Europe, public hatred of ethnic cleansing was widespread but unfocussed and held only by individuals as individuals. There was no social movement, no coming together to protest, to organise, to act as an external wing of the resistance movement. However, even without this much needed support the balance of forces inside Bosnia began to change. In the first few months of war a highly prepared force, whipped up by a frenzy of anti-Muslim propaganda, had swept through Bosnia, in most places meeting little organised resistance. A few enclaves like Tuzla and Sarajevo held out, but elsewhere the towns and villages were 'cleansed'. The front lines then settled down and for the next two years remained pretty static. The longer this went on the worse things got for the ethnic cleansers. Their victims began to acquire arms, mostly through capture. The ethnic cleansers' morale deteriorated. Against unarmed civilians they had swaggered but against people armed and fighting for their lives the bravado evaporated. When the front lines advanced there was looting. People got rich taking everything of value from the homes of the fleeing refugees-money, washing machines, fridges, electric cables, door frames-everything. But when front lines got bogged down there was no more loot.

In Tuzla in early 1995 we found spirits were high. The Tuzla defenders were starting to push back the front lines. Behind the scenes the US moved in to take the diplomatic initiative. Tudjman and Milosevic were told to accept the fact that they could not wipe out the 'Muslim' resistance and carve up Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia as they planned. As the war continued the odds increased of the resistance breaking out and turning the tide. This was a threat not just to the nationalist forces, but also to the West's desire for a docile, manageable atmosphere for the

global free movement of capital. A triumphant resistance could well create the space to attempt the social changes the majority of people wanted. A subservient welcome for MacDonaldis and the World was by no means certain in a land which had just been liberated.

Meetings were held in private rooms, but before any of the ex-Yugoslav politicians could put their names to a deal there remained a small problem. No matter how the maps were drawn there were people in the 'wrong' places. The nationalist politicians could not be seen to be selling out 'their' people so these 'impediments' had to be moved before a deal could be signed publicly.

The result was the massacre at Srebrenica. The UN had declared it a safe haven. For three years 30,000 hungry, terrified Muslims had sheltered in the besieged town with the UN flag waving over them. In July 1995 the Serbian nationalists advanced into the town without resistance. The UN simply handed it over without a shot. The Dutch UN and Serbian commanders drank a glass of champagne together before the Dutch drove off, leaving the Muslims at the mercy of the ethnic cleansers. Women and children were bussed to the front line of the Tuzla free territory and pushed into no man's land. Eight thousand men between sixteen and sixty were murdered. One woman who escaped to Tuzla climbed into a tree and surrounded by other traumatised refugees, hung herself. Her photo appeared across the world and again the public were shocked. The West's complicity behind her tragedy, however, was masked from view.

Srebrenica was followed by a Serbian army withdrawal from occupied Croatia and the expulsion of the indigenous Serbian population by Croatian troops. On all sides miserable refugees trudged to a future with no home and no hope-Muslim, Serb and Croat alike, all used as propaganda and military fodder by 'their' politicians and then dumped, betrayed.

In November 1995 Bosnian Muslim, Serbian and Croatian political leaders were flown to the Dayton air base in the USA and a deal was done to divide Bosnia. UN/NATO troops poured in and became the new masters over an exhausted, war weary population. Today, six years later, 30,000 western administrators control Bosnia. It remains divided even if the front lines have vanished. There is no fighting, but nothing is settled.

Our work continued. Bosnian friends asked us to help them try to reach out from their 'ethnic ghettos'. We helped the Tuzla teachers meet up with leaders of education unions from Croatia, Serbia, Vojvodina, Serbia and Kosova at a meeting in Hungary. These contacts were the beginning of a long road. This first meeting between Kosovar Albanian and Serbian teachers' representatives did not lead to Serbian teachers speaking up against the Serbian brutality in Kosova, but the meeting certainly did lift the spirits of the Bosnians. They developed their union work across Bosnia, into the Serbian held sector as well as in the new 'Muslim' State. They were determined to oppose the people who wanted ethnically divided curricula in all schools. Only Tuzla still sent all its children to common schools.

In 1998 we helped the Bosnian miners' union organise an international workers conference to discuss government proposals to privatise the mines. The conference, attended by people from 13 countries, bringing all their own bitter experiences of privatisation, helped the Bosnian miners to decide to fight the government plans. From their visits to miners in the UK, though, they knew they could not do it alone and they appealed for international support. Once again the forces supporting resistance to the 'new order' were too weak and the Bosnian government slowly advanced its privatisation programme. As in the rest of ex-Yugoslavia more and more parts of the previously 'socially owned' property slipped into the hands of politicians, war profiteers and foreign capital. When Bosnian miners spoke of their opposition to the reintroduction of



capitalism-'a system that would eat us alive'-it became possible to see a shadow of the forces that had necessitated Belgrade's violence against the Yugoslav people.

Throughout the war we had known of the dark cloud hanging over Kosova but never had the resources to open up contacts there. After the Dayton agreement we began to wind down the convoys and were now able to make contacts there.

During the NATO bombing in 1999 many people leapt up to denounce 'imperialist aggression' without saying a word about the 'imperialist aggression' that had been going on since 1990 when Milosevic's troops had occupied Kosova, disbanded its parliament and begun a wholesale persecution of the 2 million Albanians living there.

Two of us reached Kosova in 1996 and over the next three years made more visits. While all kinds of 'left' organisations have recently written their various explanations of how western capital encouraged the Albanians to break away from Yugoslavia, people who went to Kosova found the opposite. On our first visit we were guests of the Kosova miners' union at the famous Trepca mineral mines. From them we learnt how in 1989-90 the miners, alongside the teachers' trade union, had led the protests against Milosevic. The miners had staged underground hunger strikes and marches to Prishtina. One of their slogans had been 'Defend Yugoslavia'. This was aimed against Milosevic's moves to change the Yugoslav constitution, removing Kosova's equal status with the other Republics. It was only after their efforts to defend the Yugoslav constitution failed and Serbia seized control of Kosova that the miners and others turned towards the call for independence. They were left with no other road to follow.

When Milosevic used force to end Kosova's autonomy mass protests broke out and Belgrade retaliated by arrests, shootings and the sacking of all state employees in Kosova-miners, teachers, health workers etc.-180,000 people.

When we arrived in 1996 the Albanians had already spent six years under a state of total and arbitrary police/military rule accompanied by unemployment, hunger and fear. Over the next three years all our delegations reported a deteriorating situation. At Dayton the western leaders had elevated Milosevic into a 'great peacemaker'. While the UN trumpeted the Dayton agreement as bringing 'peace' to Bosnia they kept quiet about the clauses supporting Milosevic's control over Kosova. This policy remains intact today. Despite the bombing, despite the switch to backing a new horse in the Serbian Presidential elections-the western policy makers remain opposed to Kosova breaking from Serbian control-and oppression. Their reasons were the same for refusing to lift a finger to help the resistance in Bosnia-the fear of a self-organised popular uprising, out of the control of any reliable regime.

On our first visit to Kosova we met various people, told them about what we had done in Bosnia and listened to their opinions. Despite their poverty they felt our best help would be in getting their delegations to the UK and elsewhere to let the world know what was going on. However, by 1998 the activities of the Serbian paramilitaries in Kosova-burning villages, surrounding the towns-led to an appeal to us to try to get food through to the mining town of Mitrovica. Before it had been possible for us to reach there by car. Serbian friends in Belgrade had helped us get Yugoslav visas to visit them and we had then just driven over the mountains to Kosova. But this backdoor method was not possible for lorries. They needed proper papers to enter Serbia. For several months we tried to get visas from the Yugoslav embassy in London but without success. Then due to a temporary shift in international diplomacy we suddenly got visas. We transported food collected by Bosnian miners down to Kosova. Already the town resembled many of the be-

sieged Bosnian towns during the war. Villages alongside the main roads were being ethnically cleansed and burnt down. The community in Mitrovica feared the worst.

All this time the US government and British government, now New Labour with an 'ethical foreign policy', were shamefacedly lying to the Albanians. They told them to stick by their peaceful protests and that eventually they would be free. At the same time they were telling Belgrade that they would not countenance Kosova independence.

Then the volcano exploded. Milosevic had ridden to power on an uncontrollable force of ethnic hatred. His only way to escape the growing discontent from poverty in Serbia itself was by continually racking up flag waving nationalist fervour. Paramilitary groups increased their attacks on the 'hated' Albanians. In turn the Albanians' patience with their ten year long passive resistance finally wore out. It had got them nothing but empty promises from the West. Now they turned to armed resistance against their tormentors. But the limited arms they could lay their hands on were even more meagre than their fellow victims in Bosnia.

The western politicians were caught in a dilemma. They wanted a stable Balkans and had backed Serbian control over Kosova in the hope that this would keep the lid on Albanian discontent. Any such discontent could ignite fellow Albanians scattered by previous western diplomatic intrigues in 1919 across Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece and Albania itself. However, Milosevic's form of control was now threatening to create the very explosion the West hoped he would contain. On the other hand the West feared taking any action that would support the Albanian movement. Politicians in the West and in the UN were further worried that public criticism at home was again mounting. Hadn't all these politicians promised 'no more Bosnias', and yet it was happening again?

As refugees poured out of Kosova and into Prishtina from other towns NATO decided to act not in support of the Albanians or out of concern with their tragedy but simply to find a way to put the lid back on things. No troops were to be sent in. That would automatically act as armed assistance to the Kosovar Albanians. Bombing raids started-a tactic that could do nothing to stop the mass ethnic cleansing but was instead designed to force Belgrade to become more pliable.

NATO troops finally went in after a deal was done with Milosevic, but they went into a country which had been depopulated. As in Bosnia, NATO became the new masters. The Albanian refugees returned to find a new occupation force. Understandably, at first this was welcomed unquestioningly. The European left could easily denounce the 'imperialist invaders' but fail to recognise that as far as the Albanians were concerned the new occupiers were treating them better than their previous colonisers?

During the bombing it was easy for all kinds of people to shout slogans and argue for or against the bombings. But all their slogans were half truths. The 'anti-imperialists' wanted to only fight one side of imperialism-NATO and not Milosevic. Supporters of the bombing ignored that it was NATO itself that was half responsible for the tragedy and assumed that this was some kind of benign intervention. They said nothing about the killing and destruction in Serbia. For us, with close friends in Belgrade and in Kosova, working in daily contact with Albanian refugees who had lost all contact with families driven into the mountains or into neighbouring countries, we could find no slogans adequate to deal with the problem. All we could do was describe the whole picture we saw. The Kosovars faced death. They needed help from people who had no hidden agenda. They needed allies amongst the Serbian people. But where were any such movements of internationalism and solidarity? They didn't exist. Not surprisingly the Kosovars looked to NATO to save them from the immediate threat. All we could do was point to this gap between

the help the Kosovars needed and what actually existed-and try to close that gap. We took food to refugees in Albania and remade contact with miners from Mitrovica with whom all contact had been lost when the town was ethnically cleansed. Then through the education union we made contact with resistance groups in the mountains inside Kosova who desperately needed food. We made plans to take food to the Albanian Kosova border, from where they would walk it across the mountains. Before this could be done the 'peace' deal was done. So instead we took a large convoy of food directly to Mitrovica.

There we found excitement, happiness, sadness and fears for the future, all intermingled. The Albanians celebrated the removal of the hated Serbian police and paramilitaries. Young people danced and sang in the streets every evening. In their lifetimes the streets after dark had always been unsafe territory. Amidst the happiness many people mourned lost relatives and contemplated life with destroyed homes and villages.

The situation for the miners was even more serious. For ten years they had been locked out from their mines-which legally they jointly owned-by Serbian guns. From the mountains and exile they had rushed back to save the mines from flooding as the Serbs withdrew, only to find they were once more locked out-this time by UN guns. French troops occupied the mines and refused to let the Albanians in.

As the miners started to organise protest marches against the NATO theft of their property we began work outside the region to publicise their plight.

Today Kosova, like Bosnia, is under NATO/UN control. Western politicians place their hopes on political changes in Belgrade, making it possible for them to stitch together some deal whereby Kosova remains under Belgrade control but which allows a partial withdrawal of UN troops. The future of the mines remains undecided. The Serbian state claims them. Western businessmen claim parts of them. The Albanian miners claim them, the Albanian politicians claim them. But the UN will decide. One thing is for sure-the people of Kosova will not end up in control. For a start they lack the money necessary to reopen production. So, as in Bosnia, everything that used to belong to the 'people' will end up in private hands. For many this makes little difference. In previous times the 'peoples' property was actually controlled and used by the bureaucrats for their own benefit. But for the miners in Kosova and Bosnia the privatisation process will bring closures and unemployment.

Whatever the frustrations with the UN presence, the Kosovars would continue to accept it as long as the threat to their existence from Belgrade remained. While the West began their intrigues to replace Milosevic with a more acceptable figure-a Milosevic mark 2-we tried to help the development of contacts between the Kosova Albanians and Serbs who would speak up for the Albanian's right of self determination. We organised a visit to the UK and France for a representative of the Kosovar miners and a journalist from Belgrade, one of the few outspoken critics of Serb nationalism. Together they spoke at meetings, calling for support for the Kosovar miners' efforts to regain control of their mines.

Given the current situation, what did we achieve, what did our friends in ex-Yugoslavia achieve? Jeffrey Sachs, a Harvard economist advising the Polish government after the collapse of the Soviet empire wrote as follows:

'The complications of privatization begin with the fact that the ownership of the state enterprises in ... Eastern Europe is already politically contested. In many cases workers wonder what all the fuss is about, because, of course, they already own the firms... Privatization should begin by establishing that central government owns enterprises and has exclusive power to engage in

privatization the government should reject workers claims to full ownership....' Sachs goes on to recommend 'shock therapy' in order to minimise resistance to this plan, act fast and catch the workers off their guard before they make alternative plans.

Looking back it is now possible to see that this proposal was carried through across Eastern Europe. The only slight change from the vision of the western advisors was the extent to which the old Communist Party bosses formed alliances with various criminal gangs and took control of property themselves rather than, as the western advisors hoped, simply helping to transfer assets to the control of international banks.

In Yugoslavia Milosevic and the other former 'socialists' turned capitalists hoped to pursue the same policy, but unlike elsewhere they were not able to catch the masses totally off their guard. As the Party bureaucrats tried to begin to implement economic policies suited to the new capitalist environment they ran into opposition-not a clear opposition calling for 'down with capitalism' or 'stop privatisation' or anything like that. All such ideas had been far too discredited by the bureaucratic tyranny that had been carried through in the name of 'socialism'. No, most Yugoslavs had no hard opposition to the idea of capitalism or privatisation. All they wanted was a better life. But far from that happening, things were getting worse. All across the Yugoslav federation people were protesting against unemployment, against non-payment of wages, against corrupt politicians. The political elite found that their dream of converting the 'peoples' property' into their personal property could not be achieved simply through political decree. The protests had to be broken up. But how? Milosevic hit on the key with his support for the ultra-right's campaign against Albanians. From there on his party and state machine, state controlled media, etc. worked overtime to whip up hatred against non-Serbs. People were turned against each other. Popular frustration, anger and discontent was channelled by the political elite away from themselves and against other ethnic groups.

In some areas this was not so hard to do, but in other places the partisan struggle against fascism in World War Two had left a legacy of integrated, intermarried and tolerant communities-like Tuzla. This legacy could only be undone with the utmost violence. The world's great democratic statesmen, the institutions of 'democracy' like the EU and the UN, faced with a choice between this violence and the possibility that a spark of opposition to the smooth introduction of capital to eastern Europe could kindle wider protests, all came down on the side of the violence. While they talked of a united Europe they let Bosnia be torn apart.

Did the violence succeed or not? Writing at this point it is not possible to say. Yes, the people of Yugoslavia were beaten and battered sufficiently by Milosevic and the other former 'communists' for privatisation to be carried through in Serbia and elsewhere, and for a great deal of the assets of the people to be destroyed or transferred to private control. This process is going on right now. But the resistance to ethnic division and ethnic oppression was not completely destroyed. Across the region people still carry a vision opposite to the ethnic cleansers and are working for the kind of society they want. These forces are small but they take their place today alongside the many other voices opposed to the existing state of the world. As this global, multi-faceted movement for a different kind of human society grows these ex-Yugoslavs, with their long hard fight against the division of people, will strengthen it with their experiences.

If our actions helped even in the smallest amount to keep alive that spirit of resistance in Bosnia, Serbia or Kosova then our work was worthwhile. In 1998 we had a book launch in Tuzla of our book, 'Taking Sides against ethnic cleansing', a scrapbook of all our collective efforts. From the audience that came to the launch we had many people who got up to say in their own way

'Thank you for the food you brought, but thank you even more for coming when the world turned its back on us.'

Practical international solidarity is a must in a world in which capital, commodities and the search for profit are free to roam the world while people are forced to remain in one place. Over the last year we have been contacted by an anti-fascist group in Moscow who had been demonstrating against the war in Chechnya. After reading about our convoys they expanded their protest campaign to include collecting food and clothes for the Chechens-calling upon Russians to repudiate the violence of their political leaders by helping the victims. From southern Africa we received calls from young people developing a movement against the wars in Congo and Angola. They too wanted to go beyond resolutions and protest demonstrations and were trying to find the ways to link up with people across the region in an effort to unite against the continuing plunder of the continent's resources.

- April, 2001

#### NOTES

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This article is included as a chapter in the book *Restructuring and Resistance in Western Europe, Diverse Voices of Struggle*, edited by Kolya Abramsky, published by Resres Books in 2001. Check with your favorite radical bookstore or write to

Resres Books c/o Kolya Abramsky 13 Vanbrugh Road London, W4 1JB, UK. [resres-rev@yahoo.com](mailto:resres-rev@yahoo.com)

*Restructuring and Resistance* charts some of the rapid changes in social, political and economic relations which have been occurring in western European society, and the new conflicts which are emerging at the heart of these changes. The particular focus is the last twenty years of the European Unification process. The book brings out the voices of many different people directly involved in diverse grassroots struggles and processes of social change from across (mainly) western Europe. Seventy-seven chapters from 15 countries chart the breakdown that has marked western Europe in the years since the Second World War and the emergence of new challenges to the current social order which this breakdown is giving rise to. Analyses of restructuring processes and accounts of resistance are intertwined with each other, showing that they are inseparable from each other.

From the Introduction to *Restructuring and Resistance*

"... unless something very spectacular happens in the next years, many people in Western Europe will soon be faced with social conditions similar to those faced currently by the poor in the South, as is already the case in the USA. The Northern governments will surely continue using a wide range of tools to make sure that the massive macroeconomic gap between North and South continues growing (from trade agreements (See chapter 11, *The EU and the Rest of the World*) to the direct use of military force, disguised as 'humanitarian interventions' or as 'war on drugs' (See chapter 62, *Global Military Strategies for the Millennium*), but this will not translate into a good life for the majority of the population, it will only expand the influx of economic refugees. Social tensions will increase dramatically as wealth concentrates in fewer and fewer hands and regions, making growing sectors of the population unable to meet basic needs and forcing them to live in appalling environmental conditions. The illusion of the benevolent state and a socially and environmentally sensitive capitalism that can provide welfare, abundance and harmony for all, already heavily questioned, will in all probability soon be gone. Its decay is already providing

a perfect context for the growth of fascism, xenophobia and exacerbated nationalism, already visibly strengthened all over the continent...”

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Bob Myers  
Against Ethnic Cleansing In The Former Yugoslavia  
How to take you back to the winter of '92

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