

The Origins of the War in the Balkans

Media Disinformation on Slobodan Milosevic

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Part II in a five part series on the former Yugoslavia

Slobodan Milosevic isn't only charged with war crimes. The Globe's Doug Saunders says that Milosevic is "considered responsible for 250,000 deaths and the descent of the former Yugoslavia into terrible ethnic warfare." Though Saunders does not say who "considers" Milosevic responsible, he is certainly not the only commentator to repeat the claim.

The media's failure to examine facts on the ground (or at least, their failure to tell their readers about them) extends beyond Milosevic himself to the entire history of Yugoslavia's civil war.

Between 1960 and 1980, Yugoslavia—a federation consisting of multiple ethnic groups, including Albanians, Hungarians, Slovenes, Egyptians, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats—was, by objective measures, a prosperous country. Economic growth was vigorous, all citizens had a guaranteed right to income, a month of paid vacation, and life expectancy was seventy-two years. The federation's many national and linguistic groups coexisted peacefully through a complex complex system of government spanning multiple languages and semiautonomous regions.

As Michael Parenti writes in *To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia*—which documents the history of US and European intervention—Yugoslavian leaders committed a "disastrous error" in the 1970s: they borrowed money from the West. When western economies entered a recession, free trade principles gave way to economic self-preservation, and Yugoslavian exports were blocked, to devastating effect.

Earlier borrowing brought with it the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which demanded that the economy be "restructured". This process, Parenti writes, included "wage freezes, the abolition of state subsidized prices, increased unemployment, elimination of most worker-managed enterprises, and massive cuts in social spending." According to the World Bank's figures, restructuring produced six hundred thousand layoffs in 1989-90 alone.

Taking control of monetary policy by 1991, the IMF effectively broke Yugoslavia into pieces by preventing transfer payments to the republics (such as Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia) from the federal government and assigning debt to each of the member republics.

Serbia, Parenti notes, was the most hostile to IMF "reforms", with 650,000 workers (joined, in many cases, by workers of other ethnicities in Serbia and other republics) engaging in "massive walkouts and protests".

For Parenti and others, all available evidence points to a long term, deliberate campaign on the part of the US, Britain, and Germany (among others) to destabilize and divide the last socialist holdout in eastern Europe. Before the economic collapse, almost all observers agree that people from many ethnic backgrounds coexisted peacefully. The economic destruction of Yugoslavia, Parenti argues, caused different nationalities to “compete more furiously than ever for a share” of rapidly declining economic wealth. “Once the bloodletting starts, the cycle of vengeance and retribution takes on a momentum of its own.”

In 1990, the US threatened to cut off aid if Yugoslavia did not hold elections, but insisted that elections be held only in the republics, not at the federal level. In 1991, the European Community organized a conference on Yugoslavia, which called for its division into “sovereign and independent republics,” at which point Yugoslavian representatives were barred from attending any more of the conference meetings.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which has most recently called attention to itself by financing political groups that fomented military coups against elected governments in Haiti and Venezuela, was also involved in the Yugoslavian civil war and the ensuing conflict. Allan Weinstein, one of the NED’s founders, was candid about the mission of the NED, which is funded directly by the US federal government. “A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA,” Weinstein said in 1991.

According to research conducted by William Blum, a scholar of US interventions abroad, the NED described the mandate of its 1997-98 programs as aiming to “identify barriers to private sector development at the local and federal levels in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and to push for legislative change...[and] to develop strategies for private sector growth.”

Starting in 1988, the NED provided millions of dollars to “independent media”, “opposition political parties”, and “pro-democracy nongovernmental organizations”, “student groups”, “labour unions” and “think tanks” throughout the former Yugoslavia. According to testimony in Senate hearings, in the two years leading up to the Kosovo crisis, the US government provided \$16.5 million for democracy promotion in Serbia alone, mostly through the NED. Proportional to population, and not accounting for lower pay scales, the equivalent amount of funding for Canadian media and political groupings would be roughly \$46 million.

A Milosevic-headed Serbian government did eventually pass legislation that decreed that media could face steep fines for circulating false information, forcing US-sponsored newspapers and radio stations to move to Montenegro. The US, however, has even less tolerance for outside funding of its democracy. Senator John Kerry, for example, found himself the subject of a firestorm of media criticism when his 2004 presidential campaign accepted a \$2,000 cheque from a private citizen of South Korea (not a government group). Kerry sent the cheque back and vowed to do more thorough “background checks” on campaign donors.

The Canada Elections Act prohibits any groups that receives money from a foreign source from using it for “election advertising purposes”. Canada also maintains extensive regulations preventing foreign ownership of the media.

Are critics like Parenti and Blum right? How does their evidence stack up to that provided by Canadian media? This is difficult to say, because almost all news media in Canada and the

US have ignored the role of the West in the demise of Yugoslavia and the United States' subsequent well-financed political interventions.

“In the eyes of the global media,” writes University of Ottawa economist Michel Chossudovsky, “Western powers bear no responsibility for the impoverishment and destruction of a nation of 24 million people.” Instead, the prevailing view continues to be that the US, Canada, and other NATO powers acted benevolently to end the conflict.

Meanwhile, the breakup continues. NED-funded political parties, currently governing in Serbia-Montenegro's autonomous province of Montenegro (and, since 2000, Serbia itself) are currently in preparing for a referendum on secession from the state of Serbia-Montenegro.

Further reading:

- » William Blum: [Trojan Horse: The National Endowment for Democracy](#)
- » Michel Chossudovsky: [Dismantling Former Yugoslavia, Recolonising Bosnia](#)
- » Cathrin Schütz: [The Militarism of German Foreign Policy and the Dismantling of a State](#)
- » Jared Israel et alia: [The Nuts & Bolts of a Scam... How the U.S. has Created a Corrupt Opposition in Serbia](#)
- » Post-Soviet Media Law and Policy: [Media Law in Serbia-Montenegro](#)
- » James Ciment and Immanuel Ness: [NED and the Empire's New Clothes](#)
- » George Szamuely: [The National Evisceration of Democracy](#)
- » US Senate Foreign Relations Committee: [Prospects for Democracy in Yugoslavia](#)
- » Neil Clark: [The spoils of another war](#)
- » Al Giordano: [Do Foreign Governments Have a “Human Right” to Buy Venezuela Elections?](#)
- » Elections Canada: [Questions and Answers About Third Party Election Advertising](#)
- » Yves Engler: [Market Famines and the IMF](#)

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