

Editorial: The lessons of Kosovo

The editors of *Soundings*, like many on the left in Britain, did not find it easy to make a straightforward response, either sympathetic or hostile, to the NATO intervention in the Balkans War. ¹ Some of us thought that there was a humanitarian case for armed intervention, comparable to that which had justified the Vietnamese intervention against Pol Pot's Cambodian regime, or Tanzania's against Idi Amin's Uganda, and which would and should have justified intervention to halt the Rwandan genocide had it taken place. It is the moral responsibility, as Michael Walzer has argued, of bystanders, whoever they are, to intervene to prevent atrocity where they can. Once the mass expulsions of the Kosovans, and the military intervention against Serbia, were both in full process, it seemed to us difficult to argue that the preferred outcome was a victory for Milosovic, which is what an anti-war position would at that time, though perhaps not at an earlier stage before the bombing started, have amounted to.

But how had this whole disaster come about? Was the undoubted humanitarian crisis which was used to justify NATO's intervention its actual cause, or its mere pretext? Had NATO first decided to 'teach Milosovic a lesson', following the humiliation of the UN during the Bosnian crisis, and to impose the dominance of NATO as the single global military force, as its objectives? Was it possible that the fate of the Kosovans at the hands of the Serbs was not merely a political bonus to NATO commanders, giving much-needed public justification for their war, but had been calculated as such, as the predicted and predictable response of Milosovic to the NATO bombing campaign?

It is difficult to answer these questions with certitude. It seems likely, however, that political misjudgement (Milosovic had given way quickly when air power had been eventually deployed in Bosnia) and expediency (constraining what kinds of military intervention were deemed politically acceptable) played as much part as informed strategic calculation in what took place. We can say now that NATO's armed intervention brought about the very catastrophe it was intended to prevent (terror and mass expulsions in Kosovo). One can say too that this consequence should have been anticipated, to some degree. But this is different from asserting that everything took place according to a script written beforehand in Washington and London. What is certain is that armed violence is always unpredictable in its effects, and usually develops a cumulatively destructive momentum of its own. The intervention in Kosovo has so far solved few problems in this region, and at great human cost. We recoiled in particular at the idea of a supposedly humanitarian war in which Western and in particular American casualties were weighed in value on a scale of one to a thousand or more of casualties among former Yugoslavs. It seemed to us that the responsibility of politicians is to protect and spare all human lives, not merely the lives of their own political subjects, and the contrary of this seemed to us to be approaching a kind of racism, which was all the more unacceptable wearing its 'humanitarian' face. This is not to ignore the fact that in this war, unlike in the war against Iraq, avoiding unnecessary casualties even among 'the enemy' was in reality given an unusual priority. But if risks have to be run, to prevent atrocity, it cannot be right that virtually none of these risks are to the subjects of the intervening powers.

And what about the manifest double standards employed by NATO in this as in virtually all of its military interventions? Why had injustices to Kurds or Palestinians been ignored for decades, and a blind eye turned to genocide in Rwanda, but here, on Western Europe's doorstep, synthetic moral outrage and a vast military machine were mobilised? Why was it only now that the problem of Kosovo was recognised, when its dangerous potential had been clear during the Bosnian crisis? We came to see that in the era of global communications and human international rights, moral claims had become a significant factor, but rarely the decisive one, in decision-making about political and military action. The Falklands War depended both on

the claims to self-determination of the British Falkland Islanders, *and* on Britain's continuing imperial ambitions; Kuwait was defended *both* because of its international entitlements as a sovereign state, *and* because of its strategic importance as an oil state; the Kosovans were defended *both* because of the injuries done to them, *and* because of Western determination to defeat Serbian (and less directly, Russian), ambitions, in the Balkans region. Justifications of moral legitimacy seem to have become one condition, but by no means a sufficient or determining one, of the West's recent military interventions.

It is something positive, perhaps, that the claims of 'human rights' may now count at least for something more than they used to in international relations. The pending extradition of General Pinochet is another straw in the wind here. But we would be gullible if we mistook our governments' rhetorical posturing on these questions for the full explanation of why they acted as they did. The crisis in East Timor, unfolding as this article is written, is revealing these levels of hypocrisy in a terrible way. Just as one might have imagined that Kosovo represented at least some process of learning from the disasters of Bosnia and Rwanda, we observe that after all nothing may have changed. It seems that decades of complicity with the authoritarian rulers of Indonesia are not going to be set aside because of a democratic vote in a small country, least of all to preserve the reputation of the United Nations. In the light of these events, the UN appears to have been brushed aside in Kosovo not merely because of the practical necessities of urgent action, as was then claimed, but also because the United States and British governments see its power as a rival to their own, and positively desire its impotence.

What is really needed in this situation is to get beneath the surface of events - to which, like everyone else, we had our sometimes confused day-by-day responses - to try to find an understanding of what was fundamentally at issue in the Balkans Crisis. Here there continues to be a massive failure of Western imagination and understanding, in regard to the problems created by the collapse of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe. The major culpability of the West in this region does not lie in the specifics of the Kosovan, or of the preceding Bosnian crisis, but in its short-sighted and exploitative response to the collapse of this rival political system in its entirety. In this respect, the problems of the former Yugoslavia are a microcosm of the much larger disaster which has befallen in the former Soviet Union, partly as a result of the misguided and ideologically driven nature of Western interventions.

The underlying problem in Yugoslavia was plainly what was to happen after the collapse of Communism. What possible pathways were available to bring this former nation, or its component nations, from the partial version of 'modernisation' which they had accomplished, with considerable success, under Communist governments since 1945, into a post-Communist era? It should have been possible to foresee the dangers that would be posed, both in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, by latent nationalisms. These were especially acute in the Balkans, the permanent border-country of the successive competing empires of the Hapsburgs, the Ottomans, the Russians, and the Nazis, with other powers like Britain and France always eager to put in their spoke. In this region, there were no stable equations between ethnic and religious cultures and political jurisdictions. The 'normal' course of modernisation, described by Ernest Gellner, in which a unified national culture developed in many territories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as a container for industrialisation, had been pre-empted by the complex imperial history of this region. The main task was always going to be to find a system of political containment for the nationalist forces which were otherwise certain to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Communist system. It was an achievement of Communism that ethnic divisions were contained for so long, in the former Yugoslavia and USSR, just as the Communist Party of South Africa deserves credit for its contribution to the non-racial universalism of the African National Congress.

It is not as if this problem should have been so difficult for the Western European or United States governments to understand. European integration in the post-war period had been undertaken, with assistance from the Americans and their Marshall Plan, in response to a parallel problem. This was how to contain potential nationalist antagonisms after the defeat of Nazi Germany at the end of the Second World

War; and the Franco-German alliance and the European Union was the wise solution to this. It is worth remembering, however, that this solution had been discovered fifty years too late, following the disastrous failure of a pro-nationalist model of development after Germany's earlier defeat in 1918. Nationalism after 1918 took both an idealised and sanctified form as the doctrine of national self-determination, influential in the Versailles Treaty; it took its catastrophic turn under the Nazis. It then led to global disaster.

And lo and behold, it is exactly this '1918, nations-first model' that the West chose to espouse for its defeated eastern rival after 1989. Having in 1945 decided in its own heartland to learn the lessons of 1918, it has opted in the former Eastern Europe to repeat its pro-nationalist errors of the inter-war period. In the former Soviet Union, Yeltsin's dissolution of the Soviet Union in favour of its component nationalities was welcomed as a fatal blow against the still suspiciously reform-Communist Gorbachev. The result of this, and of the imposition of free market ideology on a system and political culture quite unsuited to it, has been disastrous, culminating in economic chaos and in the rule over Russia by thieves.

In the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia's and then Croatia's exit from the Federation were encouraged and welcomed by their respective Western protectors, Austria and Germany. Whilst ostensibly the war in Kosovo was fought to secure multi-ethnic coexistence, and the restoration of the former autonomy of the province within the remains of federal Yugoslavia, it seems likely that its effect will be to reinforce ethnic particularism. The Kosovan Liberation Army, a factor in provoking Serbian oppression in the first instance, may well prove to be the ultimate inheritors of power in Kosovo as a result of the war. The logic of the nationalist politics encouraged, intentionally or otherwise, by the West is such that the KLA are now engaged in meting out to the remaining Serbs the same treatment as that to which the Kosovan Albanians were subjected by Serbian paramilitaries. It is not clear what will now obstruct the emergence of a Kosovan Albanian State, viable or otherwise, even though the West did not and still does not support this. There now seems more to be said for the idea of a partition of Kosovo, guaranteed by Russia as well as the West, than there did at the outset or even during the war.

It is remarkable that Western politicians should have been sponsoring self-determination east of their own borders, at a time when they had decided that supra-national forms of integration or containment were the necessary pathway to full modernity within their own boundaries. They had become adept, in Catalonia, Scotland, even perhaps Northern Ireland, in making use of larger structures of containment and identification as ways of releasing intra-national pressures, and allowing a necessary measure of autonomy and self-expression to nationalist currents inside their own states. Yet in the former Eastern Europe, such remaining structures as there were have been utterly cast aside. The selective inclusion of some favoured states in the charmed circle of the European Union and NATO (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland) has only worsened the plight of those left out. It seems that a continuing preoccupation with the ideological struggle against residues of Communism is what explains this folly, just as fears of the Bolshevik revolution played a large part in unhinging the West's political sense in the inter-war period.

Milosovic has thus only attempted to write his own part in a larger play already scripted for him by the covertly pro-nationalist Western response to the crisis of Yugoslavia. States use the resources available to them. The principal military resource available to Milosovic was the former Yugoslav army, and his principal political resource has been ethnic absolutism. Nationalism based on military power was hardly an option without a precedent - it had been, after all, the essence of Prussia's unification of Germany in the previous century. The Yugoslav tragedy is that the failed 'partial modernisation' of Communism was followed by utter anachronism, by a Serbian strategy of military nationalism embarked on at the very moment when the nation-state elsewhere is in terminal decline as the facilitator or container of modern social development. The West has been confused and myopic in its response to this situation, on the one hand condoning the erosion of the remaining structures of containment (the Yugoslav Federation), on the other vainly trying to secure continued 'multi-ethnic co-operation' (in Bosnia or Kosovo).

The West has chosen, in its public response to Milosovic's adventures, to deal largely in the moralistic terms of personal demonisation. It is a notable fact of Western politics today that the binary structures of ideological antagonism which maintained its internal unity and purpose throughout the Cold War have been transmuted into such personalised hatreds of individualised enemies, wherever and whenever it encounters the limits of its power. But this denunciatory rhetoric obscures far more than it reveals. The scale of death and injury inflicted by the economic catastrophe of the former Soviet Union, following the West's triumph over it; or by NATO's continuing economic sanctions on Iraq; or by the continuing failure of Western promises to bring investment and prosperity to the new South Africa, or to the Palestinians, provide little basis for western moral self-righteousness. Unfortunately, the mass sufferings of poverty are less visible, and less attributable to their causes, than the personalised misdeeds of individuals. The global media currency which gives a 'value' to humanitarian crises where individual victims can be photographed and interviewed, also prefers to hold individual leaders rather than less visible social processes responsible for ills and harms.

There have been the glimmerings of enlightenment in the proposals of some European politicians (initially, Joschka Fischer, the German Green Foreign Minister) for the economic reconstruction of the Balkans and its eventual admission to the European Union. This at least recognises the need for a post-national structure, on a scale which can nurture economic and social development, which can impose rules of reasonable democratic practice, and which can provide guarantees for minorities which preclude the necessity for strategies of desperate self-defence and self-assertion. The European Union is, unlike NATO, an institution based on formulated principles of democratic practice, and respect for human rights (and of course the market economy); and its extension and development into this region are thus to be cautiously welcomed. There is no decent future for independent states derived from the former Yugoslavia without their inclusion in some broader containing federation. The pity is that this recognition by the European Union has come only now, after two terrible wars and after hundreds of thousands of people have been expelled from their homes. But this is the only hopeful development that has emerged from this crisis. It is vital that something substantial should now come out of it.

M R

1. This editorial was written following a discussion of these issues at a *Soundings* contributors meeting in July, in which different views were explored. Subscribers interested in attending these quarterly discussions are invited to write to the *Soundings* office for details.

2 We will of course be relieved if by the time this issue appears, this assessment comes to seem too harsh.