

NATO's War on Yugoslavia: "Don't mention the war"

Serbian government supports the 1999 NATO bombings

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Global Research, April 03, 2009

New Statesman 3 April 2009

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Imagine if, ten years ago, your country had been bombed in contravention of international law for 78 days and nights, leading to the death or injury of more than 1,500 people, and that the reasons for the attack had subsequently been exposed as fraudulent. You would reasonably expect your government to mark the anniversary with a series of official events, and to issue a strong denunciation of those who launched the aggression. But in Serbia, the pro-western ruling elite seems more concerned about keeping the US embassy onside than with commemorating the Nato bombing of ten years ago in an appropriate fashion.

The biggest event to mark the anniversary was an international conference, organised by the Belgrade Forum for a World of Equals, a non-governmental organisation. Delegates from around the world attended, including the former US attorney general Ramsey Clark and the Labour ex-MP Alice Mahon. Yet Deputy Prime Minister Ivica Dacic was the only participant from the Serbian government. His speech was one of the meeting's most low-key. On 24 March, a major anti-Nato rally was held in Belgrade's main square, Trg Republike. There were speakers from the US, Germany and Russia – but no input from the Serbian government. The most it came up with was a commemorative sitting of the cabinet, at which Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic declared that the attack of ten years ago was "illegal, contrary to international law, without a decision by the United Nations Security Council". Those looking for a more passionate denunciation of Nato actions from governing circles have been disappointed.

The reality is that Serbia's ruling elite are seeking to take the country closer to the Nato fold. Serbia is to open its first diplomatic and military mission at Nato headquarters in Brussels this summer, and military manoeuvres involving soldiers from several Nato states will take place in Serbia this autumn.

Such moves fly in the face of public opinion. "There is an overwhelming majority of those among the Serbs who believe Serbia's entering a Nato pact would have been a bigger disgrace than if Jacqueline Kennedy had married Lee Harvey Oswald," Matija Beckovic, one of Serbia's leading poets, told an anti-Nato gathering late last month.

Meanwhile, pro-American politicians in Serbia continue to blame the conflict of the late 1990s on the country itself and on Slobodan Milosevic, then leader of the rump Yugoslavia. But a growing weight of evidence indicates that the 1999 war had little to do with Milosevic, and everything to do with the US's economic and military hegemonic ambitions in the Balkans.

Lord Gilbert, the UK's defence minister in 1999, has admitted that "the terms put to

Milosevic at Rambouillet [the international conference preceding the war] were absolutely intolerable . . . it was quite deliberate". In an affidavit to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Colonel John Crosland, the UK's military attaché in Belgrade from 1996-99, stated that the US had decided on regime change in Serbia and had decided to use the terrorist Kosovo Liberation Army to achieve that end. Last month, a documentary on Serbian state television showed that the deaths of 40 people in Racak in January 1999 resulted from a legitimate anti-KLA police action and were only declared a "massacre" by the US Kosovo Verification mission to justify Nato actions.

"The war was not Serbia's fault, nor the fault of Slobodan Milosevic," Aleksandar Vucic, deputy leader of the Serbian Progressive Party, told me. "It was the fault of those who did the bombing." Such views may not go down well in western corridors of power, but they undoubtedly chime with what most ordinary Serbs think.

With the Serbian economy in free fall and pro-western factions likely to pay the price in elections expected before the end of this year, it is probable that future anniversaries of the Nato bombing will receive more enthusiastic support from governing circles.

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