

Chomsky Ignores Lessons of Wars on Kosovo

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Marxist Humanism's review of Chomsky's book on the war in Kosovo, in which they criticise him for failing to make enough of Milosevic's crimes.

There once was a time when the radical critic, faced with rape camps and mass killings against an ethnic minority, could be counted on to attack the offending regime, expose the complicity of the Western powers, and extend solidarity to the victims of oppression. But no more—at least judging from Noam Chomsky's latest book on the war in Kosova.

Chomsky debunks the myth that the U.S. went to war over Kosova for “humanitarian” reasons. He is right that this wasn't the first time U.S. imperialism tried to justify a military intervention through ideological double talk. As he shows, the U.S. bombed Serbia to bolster the prestige of NATO, not to aid the victims of “ethnic cleansing.”

The problem, however, is that not one but TWO wars were fought in Kosova this year. One was the U.S. war against Serbia. The other was Serbia's war against the Kosovars. Reading Chomsky, you'd barely know the second ever occurred. Neither the nature of Milosevic's regime nor the struggle of the Kosovars receives any serious discussion.

A ‘NEW HUMANISM’?

Chomsky does the imperialists one better by not only debunking what they say, but attributing to them what they never claimed—namely, that the bombing of Serbia represents “the New Humanism of the New Millennium.” (The phrase was actually first used by the German intellectual Ulrich Beck.)

This is an incredible choice of words. Far from having anything to do with the actions of imperialist commanders, the quest for a “New Humanism” has been integral to the freedom struggles of our time, from the East European revolts against statist “Communism” to the African Revolutions to the Black freedom struggles in the U.S. By attributing to the rulers the opposite of what they are about—a “New Humanism”—Chomsky manages to purge from his purview the ACTUAL humanism which comes from mass struggles for freedom. This is most of all seen from his callous treatment of the Kosovars.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

He first of all denies that genocide was ever at issue, since “only” 2,500 Kosovars were supposedly killed by Serb troops prior to the start of NATO’s air war. Most of the killing of Kosovars by Serbs, he says, occurred after the bombing started. Serbia is therefore not to blame for the mass killings and expulsions; it’s really the fault of the U.S.

He does mention that before the U.S. bombing Milosevic made plans for a massive invasion of Kosova, code-named Operation Horseshoe, but he dismisses it. After all, he says, the U.S. probably has contingency plans to invade Canada but that hardly means it’s planning on taking imminent action. Chomsky doesn’t mention that Operation Horseshoe was named after the tactic used by Serb paramilitaries in Bosnia of surrounding a village in a U-shaped formation, killing and raping those caught in it while forcing the rest of the populace to flee. Nor does he mention that Milosevic sent 40,000 troops into Kosova BEFORE the U.S. invasion replete with veterans of the paramilitaries in Bosnia who knew very well what was expected of them with “Operation Horseshoe.”

The one time he mentions genocide is by citing Miranda Vicker’s comment about “genocidal tactics of Albanian separatists.” Since he has told us that the killing of “only” 2,500 Kosovars prior to the U.S. bombing did not constitute genocide, one is left wondering how the killing of a few dozen Serbs by Kosovars up to then constituted genocide-especially when most of those killed were Serb policemen.

For all his acumen in criticizing the media, Chomsky’s critical reasoning comes to a dead stop when it comes to considering the Kosovars. He accepts without criticism THE NEW YORK TIMES writer Chris Hedges’ statement that “between 1966 and 1989 an estimated 130,000 Serbs left [Kosova] because of frequent harassment and discrimination by the Kosovar Albanian majority.” The revocation of Kosova’s autonomous status by Milosevic in 1989 comes out sounding like a benign act of a man trying to protect the Serb minority. Chomsky either doesn’t know, or doesn’t bother to tell us, that Milosevic used such exaggerated tales about the suffering of Serbs to consolidate his hold on power in 1989 and then launch a genocidal war against Bosnia.

Incredibly, Bosnia hardly figures in the book at all. It’s as if the massacre of hundreds of thousands through a carefully orchestrated genocide were a historical trifle without relevance to what Milosevic was doing in Kosova.

ONE-SIDED ANTI-IMPERIALISM

The gist of Chomsky’s approach is seen when he draws an analogy to the U.S. in explaining why Serbia responded harshly to attacks by the Kosova Liberation Army

(KLA): “We need scarcely tarry on how the U.S. would respond to attacks by a guerrilla force with foreign bases and supplies, seeking, say, independence for Puerto Rico” (p.31). No one need be told what would be the response of the U.S. But what would be the response of those opposed to U.S. imperialism? Obviously, to support the fighters for Puerto Rican independence. But when it comes to Kosova, Chomsky uses the analogy to ATTACK the KLA’s fight for independence, on the grounds that it provoked the Serbs!

Though an anarchist, Chomsky suffers from such tunnel-vision anti-imperialism that he becomes a virtual apologist for Milosevic: “Serbia is one of those disorderly miscreants that impedes the institution of the U.S.-dominated global system” (p.13).

This statement leaves one speechless. He has apparently forgotten that Serbia was a virtual ALLY of the U.S. during 1995-98, following the signing of the Dayton accords-which REWARDED Milosevic by dividing Bosnia into distinct ethnic cantons.

Chomsky’s failure to support the fighters against genocide in Bosnia and Kosova, after writing eloquently for years in defense of the victims of “ethnic cleansing” in Guatemala, East Timor and elsewhere, shows that the power of U.S. militarism has become so total that even anti-statist radicals are being drawn into making apologies for any force, no matter how reactionary, so long as it can be considered a bulwark against U.S. dominance.

It isn’t that Chomsky actually SUPPORTS Serbia. He knows the regime has committed unspeakable crimes. But that just doesn’t matter that much to him. He instead wants to expose the hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy. The inevitable result of such a one-sided approach when a TOTAL view is needed is that the HUMAN dimension-those struggling against Serbian policies in Kosova-drops from sight.

Last spring some of Chomsky’s writings on the war were circulated by the Tanjug press-Milosevic’s state-run propaganda bureau. No doubt this book too will be used by those out to defend Serbia as the “lesser evil.” It’s a sad commentary that Chomsky allows himself to be used in this way.

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