

Serbia gains time, while Croatia is betrayed by West

by Konstantin George

In the afternoon of Sept. 19, Britain's Peter Lord Carrington, chairman of the European Community's (EC) so-called international "peace conference" to settle the war in Yugoslavia, officially announced the failure of his mission. The announcement followed the breakdown of the "cease-fire" he had negotiated, which only formally went into effect at noon on Sept. 18. In reality, the Carrington mission was a failure from the beginning. By making no demands or conditions on Serbia at the outset, the peace conference had achieved only one result: For its brief duration, Serbian forces were given time to pursue their war of expansion to the point where Croatia has been partitioned into three parts.

During the Carrington peace mission, Serbian and Yugoslav Army forces had: 1) advanced to the Adriatic, cutting off more than half of Croatia's Dalmatian coastline from the rest of Croatia; 2) launched an offensive northwards along the Okucani-Pakrac corridor into Croatian Slavonia, roughly midway between Zagreb and the embattled cities of eastern Slavonia, cutting off Croatian forces there from the rest of Croatia; 3) all but completed the occupation of the strategic Banija region between Bosnia and the Croatian capital of Zagreb, capturing the key town of Kostajnica, and preparing for an attack on the vital rail, road, and oil pipeline junction in the city of Sisak.

The next EC failure

With the EC policy in shambles, the next policy failure is now taking shape: a plan for a so-called "military intervention" by the nine-member European defense organization, the West European Union (WEU), consisting of all EC members except Greece, Denmark, and Ireland.

The failure of the Carrington mission was immediately obvious. The cease-fire never existed. Fighting continued throughout Sept. 18 and into Sept. 19, including, for the first time since the war started, inside Zagreb, where the Yugoslav Air Force launched bombing raids and Yugoslav Army units, which had been surrounded by Croatia forces in Zagreb, shelled the city from their barracks. For the first time since the war started, the daily wailing of air raid sirens in a European metropolis, and civilians hurrying to cellars and shelters, has again become reality, not in some "far-off" place, but on the

European continent.

The reason for Europe's tragic inability to render effective assistance to Croatia and stop the Serbian offensive is not hard to find. Of western Europe's three main military powers, two of them, Great Britain and France, have tacitly backed Serbia all along, blocked any EC-wide move to recognize the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, and blocked any EC-wide policy of tough economic sanctions against Serbia. Beyond that, the Anglo-French policy has succeeded in preventing any effective economic or defensive military assistance for Croatia.

Deep-rooted British-Serbian ties

The British-Serbian axis runs deep. London's support for Serbia has little to do with its affinity for the present communist Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. London's policy is to exploit the war to secure its domination of post-Milosevic Serbia through a restoration of the monarchy, represented by the London-based heir to the Serbian throne, Crown Prince Alexander. Britain knows that Milosevic will be ousted whether or not Serbia wins militarily, because Serbia is bankrupt. Should Milosevic "win" his war, the postwar euphoria will not last long. The devastated economy and social misery, now overshadowed by the war, will produce a popular revolt that will drive him out, bringing into power the pro-monarchy opposition. Should the war backfire and Serbia suffer a humiliation, the same result occurs. The monarchical restoration will not be long in coming. On Oct. 5, Prince Alexander will leave London to take up permanent residence in Belgrade.

Germany has been, in principle, committed to stopping Serbian aggression, securing international recognition of Slovenia and Croatia, and providing the financial and logistical backbone to any European "peacekeeping force" sent to Croatia, whether in the framework of the 12-member EC or the nine-member WEU.

However, the German government has succumbed to date to massive foreign pressure from the Western "Big Three"—the United States, Britain, and France—to confine its support for Croatia to lobbying for a consensus for recognition within the EC and the WEU. The German policy re-

mained, through Sept. 19, that Croatia and Slovenia should be recognized. But Germany will *not act on its own* to unilaterally recognize them as independent states. In his Sept. 16 White House meeting with George Bush, Chancellor Helmut Kohl was told, as he himself stated, that any military intervention or sanctions against Serbia were, for Bush, "not a theme" for discussion. A statement issued Sept. 18 by British Defense Secretary Tom King was just as emphatic: Britain would not send a single soldier to take part in a European peacekeeping force in Yugoslavia. Direct German military participation in any intervention has been ruled out by the German government, which has cited the ban on NATO "out of area" deployments in the German Constitution.

In this situation, French President François Mitterrand met Chancellor Kohl in Bonn on Sept. 18 to coordinate strategy for the next day's meeting of the nine WEU foreign ministers, which is considering sending a European peacekeeping force to Croatia. At a joint press conference where no questions were allowed, Mitterrand and Kohl agreed that such a mission should be undertaken, and Mitterrand announced that France would be willing to provide troops for it. However, the conditions that both leaders, who form the military core of the WEU, attached to what is falsely labeled a "military intervention," guarantee even under the best of circumstances that this force, envisioned as "lightly armed contingents patrolling a cease-fire" line, will merely prevent Serbia from further advances into Croatia. For Croatia, this "intervention," as presently conceived, would ensure its survival as a territorially truncated rump state.

The conditions for military intervention, dictated behind the scenes by Britain and others in the WEU, and specified by Kohl and Mitterrand, are that no troops may be sent without the "consent of the warring parties," meaning agreement by Croatia, Serbia, and the Army leadership. Croatia has accepted. On the eve of the WEU meeting, Serbia, in a statement by Foreign Minister Jovanovic, rejected any "foreign military presence."

Two outcomes are possible. Serbia may indefinitely reject a WEU force, or, after it has completely occupied the Croatian regions of Slavonia and Dalmatia that its Army has cut off from Croatia, it may then "allow" a WEU force to patrol the only remaining cease-fire line running north-south from the Hungarian border to the Dalmatian coast across the center of Croatia. In either case, the ludicrous conditions established by the EC and the WEU give the Milosevic regime of Serbia another blank check to do as it pleases.

The Serbian mobilization

The absurdity of the EC cease-fire approach does not lie in the fact of its immediate collapse as such. Even had it been nominally respected by the Serbian side, the interlude would have been of short duration. The most significant Serbian military deployments are those which lie *outside* the nominal domain of current front-line fighting. These are the extensive

preparations under way for the next series of offensives. During Sept. 15-17, the Serbian-run Yugoslav Army enacted a far-reaching callup to immediate active duty of Serbian reserve units. These included Serbian reserve units from Serbia; eight reserve units from the Serbian region of Vojvodina, directly opposite the front in Croatian Slavonia where the beleaguered cities of Osijek, Vukovar, and Vinkovci lie; Serbian units in Bosnia; and, for the first time, Montenegrin reserve units from an area opposite the southernmost Dubrovnik region of Croatian Dalmatia. In the latter two cases, these units will provide the necessary troop strength to invade and occupy the southern two-thirds of the Croatian coastal region of Dalmatia, which has been cut off from the rest of Croatia.

On Sept. 17, some 36 hours before the cease-fire took effect, the Yugoslav Navy began a total blockade of all seven Croatian ports. Two of them, Rijeka and Pula, lie to the north of the Serbian occupied part of Dalmatia; the other five—Zadar, Sibenik, Split, Ploce, and Dubrovnik—lie within the rapidly shrinking "pocket" still held by the Croatian National Guard in southern Dalmatia. Exposing Serbia's post-cessate-fire military designs, the naval blockade of Croatia has continued, with Serbia "agreeing," on paper, only to stop shooting.

Furthermore, in the last hours before the cease-fire formally took effect, Yugoslav Army units advanced from the Serbian-held Dalmatian hinterlands and reached the coast, and with it the vital coastal road, in four separate places. Thus, Dalmatia, already separated from the rest of Croatia, has itself been cut in four parts. During the entire day of Sept. 18, both before and after the cease-fire, fighting raged in the port of Split.

These moves are only a prelude to what will soon happen if the British-brokered "consensus" continues to rig the rules of the game in Serbia's favor. In the afternoon of Sept. 19, while the WEU foreign ministers were convening, a column of 70 Yugoslav Army tanks, plus scores of armored personnel carriers and trucks filled with additional infantry, were seen leaving their Belgrade barracks, moving in the direction of Slavonia. All indications were that a final offensive would soon be under way to storm Vukovar, Osijek, and Vinkovci, the centers of Croatian resistance in eastern Slavonia, and thus annex the entire region as the next *fait accompli* in establishing "Greater Serbia."

The only hope in this desperate situation is that the shackles of "European" consensus politics be broken. Someone, possibly Germany, has to start this process by recognizing the independence of Slovenia and Croatia and rendering all assistance possible to these states.

The alternative is to accept the enormous consequences of failing to act resolutely. The fall or truncation of Croatia would only be the beginning of an expanding chain of Balkan wars of ever-increasing scope, creating—whether one or several years down the road—for the first time in over 50 years a pre-war situation for all of Europe.