

NATO and imperial domination

Sunday 13 February 2022, by [RYAN Geoff](#) (Date first published: 10 February 2022).

In a detailed analysis Geoff Ryan looks back at the formation of NATO and calls for it to be dismantled. Why? Well the evidence points to it only ever being a force to impose imperialist domination around the world.

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Anti Capitalist Resistance is totally opposed to any invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces. But does this mean, as some on the left have suggested, that we, therefore, support NATO? Far from it. We support neither Putin nor Biden, Moscow nor Washington. We are opposed to any attempts to find a solution to the conflict that excludes the people of Ukraine. So we oppose discussions between Russian and Western leaders about the future of Ukraine from which Ukrainians are excluded. Above all, we are for the dismantling of NATO which has never been a force for anything other than imperialist domination of the world.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was formed in April 1949 - seven years **before** the formation of the Warsaw Pact. Clearly, therefore, it was not formed as a defensive organisation to respond to any actual Soviet military threat. It was, however, a response to a perceived political threat to the capitalist order. Its origins can be found in the theory of 'containment' expressed in the 'Long Telegram' sent in 1946 by George Kennan, an official in the United States' Moscow embassy. It also owes much to Winston Churchill's speech, also in 1946, at Fulton Missouri, in which he spoke of an 'iron curtain' descending across Europe.

In fact, the nature of NATO can be seen by the countries involved in its formation. As I shall show below six (i.e. half) of the founder members of NATO were, or had been until very recently, involved in suppressing anti-colonial movements in 'their' colonies. The following summaries are by no means complete, they come no way near capturing the full horrors and barbarity of the colonial powers. Some of the states, particularly Britain and France, had many other colonies that I have not touched on but all of which were subject to colonial brutality. What the brief summaries do show is that the founder members of NATO had no claims to be defending democracy and freedom.

Belgium

Belgium had a brutal history in its African colonies, the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Burundi (now Rwanda and Burundi). While the best-known horrors of Belgian rule in the Congo lay in the treatment of the country as the personal property of King Leopold II at the end of the 19th century the Congo remained under an iron fist after control of the colony passed to the Belgian state in 1908. The Belgian Congo was essentially an apartheid state in which the whites had all the power, all the wealth and the Congolese had next to nothing. All decisions major decisions concerning the Congo were made in Brussels.

Ruanda-Urundi had been part of German East Africa until it was awarded to Belgium following the first world war. The Belgians significantly changed the system of government and social relations. They systematically promoted the Tutsi population at the expense of the Hutus and in 1933 issued identity cards in which they forced people to identify permanently as Hutu, Tutsi or 'pygmies'. Previously people had been able to move between Tutsi and Hutu which were closer to caste identities than nationalities. The fixed categories were entirely the product of Belgian rule.

Not only was the Belgian state carrying out the systematic oppression of the peoples of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi when it became a founder of NATO in 1949 it continued to do so even after independence. In the case of the Congo ethnic and personal rivalries were encouraged by Belgium (as well as other European states and the USA) culminating in the murder in 1960 of left-wing Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba by sections of the Congolese army with the full support of the Central Intelligence Agency. The military dictatorship of Joseph Mobutu (Mobutu Sese Seko) was the result of the political and military interference in the Congo by NATO member states.

In Rwanda, the colonial administration had changed its pro-Tutsi policy during the 1950s and in 1959 the then-dominant Hutus carried out a massacre of Tutsis, with further massacres in 1963 (one year after independence) and the much better-known genocide of 1994.

In Summary

Extremely brutal colonial rule encouraged ethnic divisions and conflicts which remain to this day, murdered a popular independence leader to maintain its influence in the Congo

France

The French government agreed to the independence of Syria and Lebanon at the end of the second world war though France continued to intervene in the affairs of these nominally independent states, in particular using the confessionalist structure of the Lebanese government to all French imperialism to maintain its position in the Arab world.

In the case of Algeria and French Indochina however, France was not prepared to countenance independence. In Vietnam, British troops took control of the country from the defeated Japanese army. One of their first acts was to expel the Viet Minh, the major liberation movement that had fought the Japanese occupation. A second act was to rearm the captured Japanese soldiers to keep control of a population upset by the expulsion of the Viet Minh. Eventually, after a series of military engagements with the Viet Minh, the British handed over control to returning French forces who proceeded to rule the country in the previous brutal colonial manner leading eventually to the defeat of the French troops at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. (As we shall see, this will not be the only time British troops played a role in preventing liberation movements from taking control and restoring the old

colonial rulers).

In May 1945 a march demanding Algerian independence took place in Setif. This quickly turned into a massacre: the protesters killed more than 100 European settlers, the French army killed between 1,000 and 45,000 protesters. (This is not the only time when the deaths of Muslims at the hands of the French state cannot be calculated accurately. There is a similar discrepancy in estimates for the number of supporters of Algerian independence killed in Paris on the night of October 17 1962),

The French were clearly not listening. In September 1947 a new constitution for Algeria is established. In theory, it makes all inhabitants of Algeria equal citizens of France but this is not what most Algerians want. They want independence. And in practice, the new National Assembly for Algeria is heavily skewed in favour of the white settlers giving them 60 seats (for 1.5 million settlers) and 60 seats for 9 million Algerian Muslims.

The first military response by Algerian Muslims was in 1949 with an attack on the central post office in Oran.

After France joined NATO it continued its war in Vietnam until the capitulation at Dien Bien Phu and massively stepped up its war in Algeria, particularly after defeat in Vietnam.

In Summary

Was engaged in a major war in Indochina when it joined NATO and was about to engage in an even more brutal war in Algeria.

Netherlands

We normally think of the Netherlands as a fairly laid back sort of place with cannabis cafes in Amsterdam. But from 1945 to 1949 Dutch troops fought a bloody war to prevent the independence of Indonesia. Two days after the Japanese emperor's surrender, on 17 August 1945, the proclamation of Indonesian independence was announced in the Indonesian capital Jakarta. Although it took some time for the proclamation to reach the scattered islands that makeup Indonesia once it did then it was enthusiastically endorsed by large sections of the population. The provisional government, fearing the return of the Dutch, set up or strengthened existing armed resistance groups.

The Dutch accused the republican government of being collaborators with Japanese fascism. An interesting allegation as we shall see when we look at one of the states the Netherlands government collaborated with while establishing NATO. However, they lacked the military strength to intervene until 1946. Once again British troops stepped in to disarm the Japanese occupiers (and sometimes rearm them to deal with revolutionaries) before engaging in military conflicts with the Indonesian republicans. In Surabaya, the second-largest city in Indonesia, British and British Indian troops were involved in the heaviest battle of the war, which left thousands of Indonesians dead.

British troops were also instrumental in allowing the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration to land in Jakarta and other key cities. A further 8,000 deaths resulted in Jakarta alone. The largest cities of Sumatra, Palembang and Medan were bombed, in preparation for the return of Dutch troops before Special Forces unleashed terror on the populations. At least 3,000 members of the republican militia and their supporters were killed in a few weeks.

Raymond Westerling the British commando trained commander of the Dutch forces was particularly

brutal in his methods, methods reminiscent of those later to be used by the United States military in Vietnam. Although Westerling was accused of war crimes in South Sulawesi an agreement between Indonesia and the Netherlands in 1949 (the year NATO was formed) prevented him from ever being put on trial for his actions. However, the Dutch government did eventually (2013) apologise for the brutality and Dutch courts subsequently ruled that the Dutch state was responsible for the executions of 11 men during Westerling's South Sulawesi campaign.

In Summary

Every bit as brutal as other imperialist powers.

Portugal

In 1933 Antonio de Oliveira Salazar established the Estado Novo in Portugal. It evolved from the Ditadura Nacional (National Dictatorship) which was set up following the military coup in 1926. The Estado Novo remained until its overthrow in the Carnation Revolution of 1974. The Estado Novo was to all intents and purposes a fascist state. According to Salazar 'we are opposed to all forms of Internationalism, Communism, Socialism, Syndicalism and everything that may divide or minimize, or break up the family. We are against class warfare, irreligion and disloyalty to one's country; against serfdom, a materialist conception of life, and might over right'. The last part of this statement can be rejected as mere window dressing since the Portugal of Salazar and his successor was based very much on might over right. In any case, while Salazar personally may have had some disagreements with fascism, as practised by Hitler, Mussolini or Franco (who he actively supported in the Spanish Civil War), there is little doubt that the Portuguese state in 1949 was fascist. And the Dutch government had no problems engaging with this fascism.

The vast majority of people in Portugal lived in extreme poverty, though there was an exceedingly wealthy capitalist class. Strikes were illegal. The secret police carried out arrests of anyone suspected of opposing the regime. And then there were the colonies.

At the time it joined NATO Portugal had colonies in Angola, Guinea Bissau and Cabo Verde and Mozambique in Africa, Goa in India and East Timor and Macau in Asia. All of them were run on brutal racist and colonial lines characterised by deep-seated racism, mass forced labour and an almost complete failure to modernise. In Angola, which was nominally part of Portugal, there was not a single university in 1960. All demands for independence were ignored and, at least in the African colonies, Salazar unleashed wars that would eventually lead to the overthrow of the regime.

In Summary

A fascist state with a brutal racist rule over its colonies and a total lack of democracy in Portugal itself.

United Kingdom

The main thing to remember about the government that took the UK into NATO is not simply that it was a Labour government but that it was the much-lauded Labour government of 1945. The Labour government of the NHS. The Labour government of nationalisation. The most reforming Labour government in history. Unless you ignore foreign policy. In which case it was like every other Labour government - virtually identical in policies to the Tories when it comes to the defence of the interests of British imperialism on a world scale.

As I have already noted above British troops ensured that after the collapse of the Japanese government 'order' would be maintained in Vietnam and Indonesia so that the colonies could be handed back to their French and Dutch 'rulers'. Many of the troops were not happy about this but nevertheless collaborated with returning these parts of Asia to European powers.

Much is known about the role of Britain and its military in the partition of India, the creation at the expense of the Palestinians of the state of Israel so I want to concentrate on a much less well-known instance of British troops being used to crush liberation movements: Greece.

British troops entered Greece in 1944 after the withdrawal of German armies. There was a fairly strong resistance movement, particularly EAM (National Liberation Front) which was dominated by the KKE (Communist Party of Greece).

On the morning of 3rd December 1944, a mere six weeks since liberation from Nazi occupation, EAM held a demonstration in central Athens. Twenty-eight civilians, mainly young men and women, were shot by British troops or by Greeks who had collaborated with the Nazis and were given weapons by the British army. A few days later RAF planes began strafing left-wing areas of Athens. This was the beginning of the Battle of Athens fought between British troops alongside Nazi supporters against the Greek partisans.

At this time Churchill was Prime Minister. He was opposed to EAM and the KKE, wanting to restore the monarchy – a monarchy that had been very slow to oppose the Nazi invasion. He was dubious that Stalin wouldn't keep his side of the bargain drawn up with Churchill in which Greece was to be part of the British 'sphere of influence'. In fact, Stalin kept to the agreement and gave no assistance to EAM. The only support the left received was from Tito in Yugoslavia but that was soon cut off once Stalin turned on Tito and the Yugoslavs had to look to save their revolution.

However, anyone expecting a change in policy once Labour had won the 1945 election was to be sorely disappointed. British troops continued to fight the left-wing partisans as Greece descended into civil war. The Attlee government supported the royalists and former Nazi supporters against the left. Greeks suspected of having helped ELAS (the military arm of EAM), including during the Nazi occupation, were rounded up, sent to detention camps, tortured and even murdered while the Labour government supported the torturers and murderers.

The man sent by the Labour government to take command of the 'British Police Mission' Sir Charles Wickham certainly had plenty of experience: from 1922-25 he was the first Inspector General of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. He was known for incorporating Protestant paramilitaries into the RUC. Not surprising, therefore, that he incorporated former Nazi activists into the Greek Police force. And not surprising that under his command prisoners were subjected to the most horrendous beatings and torture.

By 1947 the KKE was illegal, and thousands of leftists were held in prisons or torture camps with significant numbers exiled, either internally or in British detention camps across the Middle East. But by then the Greek economy was on the point of collapse and Attlee decided he could no longer afford to prop up the right-wing forces. He informed President Truman that Britain would be pulling out of Greece so Truman sent American troops to support the anti-Communist side.

In Summary

Under the radical Attlee government, Britain continued imperialist policies throughout the empire. It maintained an undemocratic statelet in the North of Ireland. It helped restore colonial rule in Vietnam and Indonesia, often using Japanese prisoners of war to do so. It began to fight a war in

Malaya in the 12 months before joining NATO. Above all, it supported the pro-monarchy, pro-fascist forces in Greece and ensured the defeat of left-wing forces and decades of right-wing oppression.

United States

The United States was, and remains, the overwhelmingly dominant force in NATO. While US governments frequently proclaim the US to be the 'land of the free' the reality, especially in foreign policy, is completely at odds with this delusional belief.

Since the end of the 19th century, the United States military had intervened in virtually every country of Latin America, frequently overthrowing governments considered too radical and imposing right-wing, often military, regimes. Outside of the Americas, the US had installed itself as the de facto government of the Philippines. Nowadays it has extended its reach into Africa, much of Asia and most recently Australia.

By the end of the second world war, the US government was becoming increasingly concerned about the growing spread of the left, particularly the Communist parties, especially in Europe. That is what led them to the policy of containment and that, in turn, led to NATO.

There is little doubt that Stalin imposed undemocratic regimes in his own image on the countries of eastern Europe. But all this was in line with the utterly cynical division of Europe carried out by Stalin and Churchill. As noted above, Stalin kept his word in Greece and refused support to the Greek Communists. He respected the agreement in relation to Austria, where the Soviet Union had considerable troops. And he completely broke with Tito and the Yugoslav Communists because, under the agreement with Churchill, Yugoslavia was supposed to be under British influence.

It is extremely difficult to believe that US President Harry Truman was unaware of any of this: I suspect he knew full well that Stalin had no interest in promoting revolutions anywhere. Indeed, once American troops replaced British troops in Greece, then there was plenty of first-hand evidence that Stalin would let the KKE be defeated.

However, revolutions can break out spontaneously or despite the intentions of political leaders. So NATO was not about the threat from the Stalinist regime but the threat of revolutions in countries like Greece, France and Italy and in the colonial world. The military might of NATO, dominated as it was by the United States, went alongside the use of American economic muscle: the Marshall Plan. Countries of western Europe would receive aid, crucial to recovery from the damage and deprivations of six years of war – but only if they did what Washington wanted. This is most clearly illustrated in the case of another founder member of NATO, Italy.

In Summary

The United States had a long history of involvement in invasions of other countries and overthrowing of governments. It had a long history of installing corrupt, brutal, repressive regimes. Almost immediately before the formation of NATO, it was supporting a corrupt regime of Nazi sympathisers in Greece. Soon it would be overthrowing democratically elected governments in Iran and Guatemala as well as wars in Korea and Vietnam. While it is unlikely anyone in Washington seriously believed the Soviet Union under Stalin was going to launch a military campaign against western Europe they couldn't rule out the possibility that the working class of western Europe would launch a revolutionary insurrection that would overthrow capitalist rule.

ITALY

Italy was the only former Axis state to be allowed to join NATO as a founder member. That was not, however, a foregone conclusion. It depended on defeating a strong left-wing alliance between the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in which the most radical party was undoubtedly the PCI. Such a victory was unthinkable to a wide range of groupings.

Most of the officials who had served Mussolini's fascist state were still in their posts. The purge of fascists was relatively weak- not least, because as PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti explained, there were so many of them that it would take forever to bring them all to trial.

In addition, the mafia and mafia-like organisations, which had been repressed under Mussolini, started to resurface. They were able to get protection from the main capitalist party that emerged, the Christian Democrats - protection that continued well into the 1980s, probably beyond.

There was also the Vatican which had only come to accept an Italian state in its 1929 Concordat with Mussolini.

The PCI was also not helped by agreeing to become Stalin's attack dog against Tito. The resulting expulsion from Istria in Croatia of some, though by no means all, of the Italian population as a result of constant PCI attacks on Tito and the Yugoslav communists from Italy and Italian sources in Croatia hardly endeared the PCI to non-members.

Elections were held in 1948 which were expected to be won by the PSI/PCI slate. To prevent this the Vatican instructed the priest in every parish of Italy to read a sermon proclaiming that anyone who voted for the PSI/PCI would be excommunicated. In a country with a strong Catholic tradition, such a threat could carry some weight. The mafia carried out attacks on some left-wing politicians.

But the most important intervention came from the United States. Many Americans were descended from Italian immigrants and they were encouraged to contact family members in Italy to get them to vote against the PSI/PCI slate. Italian American singers, such as Frank Sinatra, and movie stars broadcast to Italy urging people to vote for the Christian Democrats.

However, the US was taking no chances. Italians were informed that they would not receive Marshall Aid if the left won the elections. And just in case anyone was unable to grasp the point the US 5th fleet was on constant patrol along the coast of Italy.

Vatican, mafia, fascist, Christian Democrat and US bullying won. Christian Democracy triumphed and went on to form thoroughly corrupt governments for nearly 50 years until it finally dissolved in a web of corruption. But Italy was made safe for capitalism and was rewarded with founding membership of NATO.

In Summary

Italy was essentially a pawn in the plans of US governments and military to ensure western Europe remained safe for capitalism. As well as the PCI being a pawn in Stalin's break with Tito and the Yugoslavs.

The remaining Founder Member States

Largely there to make up the numbers with no influence.

Canada

Racism towards the First Nation people and Inuit. Xenophobia towards the French-speaking minority. Very little influence, possibly with Britain.

Denmark

Racism towards Greenlanders. No influence.

Iceland

Mainly an airfield for the United States, continuing a role it played in the second world war. No influence.

Luxembourg

No influence whatsoever

Norway

At the time possibly the poorest state in Europe (until the discovery of North Sea Oil). Again no influence whatsoever

Conclusion

Whatever politicians may say NATO is not an organisation committed to upholding international law and human rights. From the outset, it was a weapon for imperialist domination of the world. Its 12 founding members included 6 states that were actively oppressing colonial peoples. It included a fascist state (Portugal) and one in which fascists still carried some influence (Italy). Even before the Warsaw pact had been formed NATO had expanded to include another 2 right-wing governments, Greece and Turkey. The United States even proposed admitting Franco's Spain in 1953 though that was too much for most of the existing member states. The Spanish Civil War and Franco's support for Hitler and Mussolini were still too recent a memory. Spain had to wait until 1992 for membership.

In recent years NATO has intervened in a number of conflicts, including Bosnia and Kosova, in the name of 'humanitarian intervention'. As someone who was closely involved in supporting the struggle of Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosova for independence from the Greater Serbian chauvinism projected by Slobodan Milosevic, I was never once convinced that NATO gave a damn for Bosnians or Kosovars. The partition of Bosnia at Dayton, largely under US pressure is convincing proof of that. NATO no more cares for Ukrainians than it did for Bosnians. We should demand it follows the Warsaw Pact and dissolves completely and forever.

Geoff Ryan

2 comments

Allan Todd

10.02.2022 AT 12:24 PM

Excellent piece, Geoff! Now's probably a good time to remember that, during 1989 & 1990, US Secretary of State James Baker 'promised' Soviet leaders - on several occasions - that, if the Soviet Union agreed to German reunification, NATO wouldn't expand eastwards from what was West Germany's borders!

And for how the US/NATO deliberately destroyed Yugoslavia, see Kate Hudson's 'Breaking The south Slav Dream' & D. Gibbs' 'First Do No Harm.'

REPLY

Geoff Ryan

10.02.2022 AT 9:42 PM

Thanks Allan. I very much agree with you about James Baker. However, I don't agree about the breakup of Yugoslavia. In my view the breakup was precipitated by internal factors related to disagreements about economic issues and democratization. The dispute was primarily between the League of Communists of Serbia and the League of Communists of Slovenia. When Slovenia left the Yugoslav federation the Yugoslav army (JNA) intervened but withdrew after 10 days. The leader of the League of Communists of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic had come to power as a result of extreme Serb nationalist views expressed when encouraging nationalist Serbs in Kosova to oppose the demands for equality being raised by Albanian Kosovars. The key difference between the Serbian and Slovene leaderships was over the reorganisation of the Yugoslave state. The Serbs wanted a much more centralized state dominated by Serbia, the Slovenes wanted a looser, decentralized confederation. Milosevic was not unduly concerned about the secession of Slovenia or the failure of the JNA to prevent it. Slovenia was the most ethnically homogenous of all the Yugoslav republics containing very few Serbs. Hence Milosevic's low key approach. However the secession of Slovenia set off another dynamic. It not only encouraged Milosevic in his project to recentralize the Yugoslave federation around a dominant Serbia it also raised fears in the other republics, particularly Croatia and Bosnia. The rightwing Croatian leadership found itself pushed into declaring independence by the secession of Slovenia and the increasingly nationalist agenda coming out of Serbia. These are the real reasons for the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia not the recognition of Croatian independence by the German government as much of the left claimed at the time. Incidentally Austria, the Vatican and several other states all recognized Croatian independence before the German government did. They failed to understand that the central conflict was between the leaderships of Serbia and Slovenia, not Serbia and Croatia. This latter conflict was a result of the independence of Slovenia which Milosevic did virtually nothing to prevent. Croatia, however. With a sizeable Serb population, was a different matter and Milosevic and the Serb nationalists in Belgrade were not prepared to meekly accept Croatian independence. They unleashed an extremely brutal war spearheaded by far-right and frankly fascist forces. And once the war in Croatia was over Milosevic turned to Bosnia Herzegovina which, not surprisingly, also sought independence from a Serbian nationalist dominated Yugoslavia. I think that once Milosevic enthusiastically endorsed Serb nationalism and then did very little to encourage leaders of the League of Communists of Slovenia to remain in the SFRY then independence for Croatia was inevitable, to be followed inevitably by Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosova and finally the withdrawal of Montenegro from its Serbian alliance

P.S.

- Anti*capitalist Resistance. 10 Feb 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/nato-and-imperial-domination/>
- Geoff Ryan is a member of Undod, YesCymru, Labour For An Independent Wales, and Carmarthen East & Dynefwr Labour Party.