

From Lebanon to Bosnia

The Robertson School of Falsification

The 2 July 1993 issue of *Workers Vanguard* (WV) carried a letter from an “active” Spartacist League (SL) supporter opposed to Serbian defensism in the event of an imperialist intervention in the Balkans. The author, identified as Jeff S., pointed out that this contradicts the SL’s attitude in 1983 during the American military intervention into the communalist conflicts in Lebanon. When the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut was destroyed by a Muslim truck bomb, the SL labeled this an indefensible act, and raised the social-patriotic call for saving the survivors. This flinch was rationalized with a barrage of double-talk about how Marxists are, in general, opposed to social violence and how, in any case, communists could support no side in the communalist conflict underway. A good chunk of the SL’s supporters, including Jeff S., were convinced by these arguments.

The situation in the Balkans today is closely analogous to that in Lebanon a decade ago. In both cases Marxists support no side in the fratricidal communalist warfare, while defending *any* faction against imperialist troops. When Bill Clinton was threatening military intervention against the Serbs last spring, a *New York Times* editorial advised him not to, and drew attention to the parallel with Lebanon:

“Senator Ernest F. Hollings of South Carolina made a telling point, too. The Reagan Administration’s eagerness to bomb the Bekka Valley and inject marines into the chaos of Lebanon led to a disastrous loss of life.”

—*New York Times*, 29 April 1993

Jeff S. is quite right that there is no reason for revolutionaries to take a different line today in Bosnia than a decade ago in the Levant. But he does not understand that the SL’s position on Reagan’s Lebanon disaster was a deliberate opportunist adaptation to the perceived exigencies of the moment. The SL leadership feared that defending the devastating blow struck against the American military in Lebanon might get them into trouble with the Reaganites. So instead they echoed the Democratic Party line and called for getting the marines out “alive.”

The SL leadership’s disingenuous response to the letter of this miseducated comrade is a cynical mix of obfuscation and outright falsification. Asserting that any comparison of the conflicts in the Levant and the Balkans is a “misapplied historical analogy” WV replies:

“The few hundred U.S. Marines sent to ‘guard’ the Beirut airport hardly constituted imperialist military intervention in Lebanon’s communalist warfare, nor was the fighting in Lebanon *at that time* primarily a civil war.”

—WV, 2 July 1993

Everything is wrong here. Even a “few hundred” U.S. gendarmes setting up a military base in a Third World

country constitute an “imperialist military intervention.” However, the American military presence was in fact much larger, as *WV itself wrote at the time!* A photo caption in the 23 September 1983 issue (published only weeks before the bombing) described the American intervention in Beirut as the “Biggest display of U.S. combat firepower since Vietnam,” while the accompanying article explained:

“...the U.S. is now committed to defending the Phalangist gangsters with an additional 2,000 troops drawn from the American fleet in the Indian Ocean, a total of 14,000 Marines both on shore and off with 12 warships standing off the coast and 100 warplanes.”

So much for the claim that only “a few hundred” marines were involved.

The claim that the fighting in Lebanon, at the point the marines were sent in, was not “primarily a civil war,” is also false. The marines were initially sent in to remove the PLO fighters. They arrived on 25 August 1982 and left 21 days later on 10 September. In the weeks that followed, the Christian “president” of Lebanon, Bashir Gemayel, was assassinated, the Israelis moved into West Beirut and the Phalangists carried out the massacres of thousands of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. On 29 September the marines reentered Beirut and took up positions at the airport. At this time the only serious fighting was between the Phalangist “Lebanese Forces” headed by Amin Gemayel, who assumed the title of president, and the various Muslim militias, principally the Druze (see: *Peacekeepers At War*, Michael Petit).

In seeking to “explain” retroactively its 1983 policy, WV (2 July 1993) asserted that, “The Marines were a token force sent in to legitimize the *Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon*” (emphasis in original). The article continued:

“Yet the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982 is a quite good analogy to the recently threatened U.S./NATO military intervention into Bosnia. For the Israelis did intervene in support of one of the contending factions in the interminable communalist bloodletting, installing the Gemayel clan of the Christian Maronites as a puppet government in Beirut.”

This attempt to minimize the role of the marines, to depict them as a mere “token force,” fits with the attempt to falsify the size of the contingent. But it does not fit with the facts. The 15 October 1982 WV accurately described the role of the U.S. forces: “They are there to shore up the new Gemayel regime which is based on the Phalange killers who carried out the Sabra and Shatila massacre.” The article also made the point that:

“By sending in the Marines on an open-ended mission in the Near East, Reagan has brazenly reasserted U.S. impe-

rialism's role as world gendarme....The U.S. forces in Lebanon are a beachhead for large-scale military intervention in the region...."

A year later, the 23 September 1983 issue of *WV* expanded on this theme and reported that U.S. secretary of state Alexander Haig saw the opening in Lebanon as: "...a great strategic opportunity' for 'redrawing a new political map for the region.' Lebanon was going to become the beachhead for Pax Americana in the Near East. The U.S. thought it could rush in, find the most unsavory and reactionary gangster among the competing feudalist chieftains, and create a viable puppet government. The Gemayel clan was supposed to be the Pahlavi dynasty [U.S. client regime in Iran] of Lebanon."

The article went on to quote a *New York Times* report that the Reagan administration "'saw the survival of the [Gemayel] Government as essential to American interests, even if this meant moving more American forces into the region.'" *Workers Vanguard* further observed that: "The Pentagon has abandoned the pretense that U.S. forces fire only when fired upon. A few days ago U.S. warships shelled positions deep in Syrian-controlled territory in retaliation for anti-Phalange forces bombarding the defense ministry in Beirut. U.S. forces are now routinely providing artillery cover for the Lebanese army...."

"The U.S. is now much more heavily involved militarily in Lebanon than in Central America both in the number of troops and the direct role they play. And that role is rapidly expanding."

Pulitzer prize winner, Thomas L. Friedman, reported that:

"Early on the morning of September 19 [1983], the guided missile cruisers *Virginia*, *John Rodgers*, and *Bowen* and the destroyer *Radford* fired 360 5-inch shells at the Druse-Syr-

ian-Palestinian forces, to take the pressure off the beleaguered Lebanese troops."

—*From Beirut to Jerusalem*

A few short weeks later, when one of the "anti-Phalange forces" hit back and leveled the marine barracks, the U.S. military lost more men than they had on any day since the Viet Cong's 1968 Tet offensive. The SL leadership suddenly began calling for getting the survivors out "alive." Today that social-patriotic flinch is rationalized with a string of absurd lies: 1) there were hardly any troops there, 2) they "hardly constituted imperialist military intervention" because they were merely "guarding" an airport, and 3) the U.S. was not intervening "in support of one of the contending factions." Every one of these falsehoods is contradicted by the reports printed at the time *in WV itself!*

Just as revolutionaries today have a duty to oppose any imperialist intervention in the Balkans or Somalia, a decade ago we had a duty to oppose the imperialist intervention in Beirut. Former SL members in New Zealand (who later helped launch the Permanent Revolution Group, the New Zealand section of the International Bolshevik Tendency [IBT]) wrote an open letter denouncing the SL's flinch. The "External Tendency of the iSt," the progenitor of the IBT's North American section, made parallel criticisms and engaged the SL leadership in a series of polemical exchanges on the question. This debate is reprinted in its entirety in our *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 2. Comrade Jeff S. (and others who mistake the contemporary SL for a revolutionary organization) should ask themselves why, a decade after the event, *WV* can only defend its 1983 position on Beirut through wholesale falsification. ■