

The record of the Kosovo Liberation Army: ethnic politics in alliance with imperialism

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Despite its key role in the Balkans war, little has been made known to the general public about the political objectives of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) or *Ushtria Clirimtare e Kosoves* (UCK). Calls are nevertheless being made by the US Congress and the Albanian government for NATO to openly arm, train and finance this organisation, in order to expand its military operations in Kosovo.

To the extent that the media refers to it at all, the KLA is portrayed as a liberation movement fighting to free ethnic Albanians in Kosovo from the grip of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. But, just like the other militia groups that have sprung up in the Balkans over the past decade, the KLA's program is ethnic separatism. Its aim is to sever the Serbian province of Kosovo from the rest of Yugoslavia, driving out Serbs, Montenegrins and other minorities as part of a long term goal of creating an ethnically pure Greater Albania. This would include the existing nation of Albania, Kosovo and the Albanian-populated areas of Macedonia and Montenegro.

The slogan of a Greater Albania has its roots both in the xenophobic nationalism of the post-war Albanian Stalinist leader Enver Hoxha and in the reactionary ideology of the Albanian puppet regime set up by the Italian fascists and German Nazis during World War II.

Far from being a "liberation movement," the KLA has much in common with the US-backed "contras" used in El Salvador and the Islamic fundamentalist mujahideen who fought the Soviet-backed Afghani regime with CIA assistance in the 1980s. While the Clinton administration has not, to date, publicly supported the KLA, a number of writers have pointed to the involvement of the CIA and the German Bundes Nachrichten Dienst (BND) in its organisation and funding. Furthermore, like the Contras and mujahideen, the KLA relies heavily on smuggling and drug running to finance its military operations. [1]

From its formation in the early 1990s, the KLA strategy has been based on provoking acts of repression by the Yugoslav army and police against the Albanian population in Kosovo, creating "humanitarian disasters" that would force the US and other major powers to intervene militarily on its behalf. This strategy has dovetailed with the specific goals of the United States--to dismember the Yugoslav federation and establish a permanent military presence in the geo-politically vital Balkans region. Thus NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia is the outcome of a mutually beneficial arrangement between the US and the KLA.

During the past year, the KLA has burgeoned from small, uncoordinated groups of armed guerrillas to a substantial fighting force equipped with sophisticated weaponry. Its importance to the US was signalled at the Rambouillet negotiations held in February and March, when the KLA, with the support of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in particular, was not only represented for the first time, but its leader Hashim Thaci was inserted as head of the Kosovar negotiating team.

The origins of the present crisis in Kosovo lie in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the impact of the severe economic dislocation fueled by the IMF and World Bank's

structural adjustment plans. The deepening economic calamity--soaring inflation and huge job losses--saw the outbreak of a wave of strikes and struggles by the Yugoslav working class. Seeking to divert the rising class struggle and to bolster their own positions, ex-Stalinist bureaucrats and nationalist demagogues in each of the former Yugoslav republics began to promote nationalist sentiments, vying for support from the various imperialist powers.

In the propaganda war now being waged in the international press, Milosevic and Serbian nationalism are equated with evil, while the KLA and its Greater Albanian nationalism are ignored or treated with benign tolerance. In fact, as even a cursory examination of the last two decades reveals, militant Serbian and Albanian nationalism emerged as two sides of the same process of social and economic disintegration. As the poorest and most economically backward region of Yugoslavia, Kosovo foreshadowed, and indeed spurred on, many of the political developments that were to erupt later in the more developed republics.

Despite its abundant natural mineral wealth, Kosovo is heavily dependent on inefficient agriculture, with little industry and a poorly developed infrastructure. In 1979, its illiteracy rate of 31.5 percent for all those over 10 years of age was the highest in the country, while its per capita income was only \$US795 compared to \$US2,635 for Yugoslavia as a whole. Declining prices for its limited products meant that the province was dependent on Yugoslav and foreign banks for more than 90 percent of its financial resources. Unemployment rose from 19 percent in 1971 to 27.5 percent in 1981 and reached a massive 57 percent in 1989.

In 1981, Kosovo was wracked by three months of protests and strikes that brought the province to a virtual halt before Yugoslav security forces backed by tanks crushed the opposition. The protests had begun among students at Pristina University over immediate issues such as overcrowding, poor food and facilities, but were diverted in a chauvinist direction by extreme Albanian nationalist elements. Under the 1974 Yugoslav constitution, Kosovo had been granted a large measure of autonomy with its own political, financial, legal and cultural institutions and widespread use of the Albanian language. But in the demonstrations, calls for a "Kosovo Republic" and a "unified Albania" began to be raised, accompanied by attacks on ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins, who were beaten, their homes and businesses burned, and their shops looted.

The suppression of the protests was followed by arrests and purges from the provincial League of Communists--Yugoslavia's ruling party. Over the next eight years, thousands were jailed, hundreds more dismissed from school, university and employment. This repression nourished the rising Albanian nationalism within underground groups in Kosovo and in the substantial Albanian diaspora abroad, particularly in Germany and Switzerland.

A number of political factions emerged, oriented to the Stalinist regime of Enver Hoxha in Albania and adopting its mixture of Maoist phraseology and Albanian chauvinism. These groups engaged in various protest activities: defacing government buildings, monuments and Serbian

cemeteries, distributing anti-government literature and, in some cases, conducting isolated terrorist attacks against the Yugoslav government in Kosovo and Europe.

The rise of Serbian nationalism in the late 1980s was directly bound up with the developing tensions within Kosovo and the growing fears of the substantial Serbian minority within the province. Many Serbs and Montenegrins already felt disadvantaged by the language provisions and employment policies of the 1974 autonomy arrangements which discriminated in favour of ethnic Albanians. Now they faced growing anti-Serb agitation from Albanian separatists who were seeking to split Kosovo from Serbia, despite its longstanding historical and cultural ties.

From 1986, Kosovar Serbs began to appeal to Belgrade for intervention. In April 1987, the new Serbian Communist party president, Slobodan Milosevic, made two visits to Kosovo, which were to prove to be a turning point. Up until then, Milosevic was not known for his statements on Kosovo and in fact had been criticised by more nationalist elements. But from this first visit, when he held meetings with local party leaders, he quickly drew the conclusion that a populist base could be built by exploiting the grievances of Serbs in Kosovo. Just four days later, after his political aides had worked feverishly to build rallies and demonstrations, he returned to the province and amid hysterical cries of "Slobo! Slobo!" called on Serbs to remain in Kosovo and proclaimed "no-one should dare beat you again".

Milosevic used the issue of Kosovo to consolidate his position and stage an inner-party coup, replacing rival party and state leaders with those of his own party faction. He pushed through amendments to the federal constitution in November 1988. In February 1989, despite widespread protests and a hunger strike by Kosovar miners, he revoked Kosovo's autonomy, instituting a series of discriminatory measures against ethnic Albanians. Over the next three years, tens of thousands were sacked, many for refusing to sign loyalty pledges. Albanian language television, radio and the daily press were shut down. Schools were closed because teachers refused to implement the "uniform teaching plan and program of Serbia".

The processes which propelled Milosevic to prominence were replicated in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia as political careerists drew the conclusion that the only way of shoring up their positions in the face of mounting concerns over jobs and living standards was to foment a climate of fear and apprehension in relation to other ethnic and religious groups. Similar developments were taking place throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as the Stalinist regimes collapsed and former bureaucrats scrambled to create a power base for themselves by whipping up nationalist sentiment.

In 1989, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) was formed and by the end of 1990 claimed around 700,000 ethnic Albanian members. Its leader, Dr Ibrahim Rugova, styled himself after the so-called "Velvet Revolution" that had brought playwright Vaclav Havel to power in Czechoslovakia. With his trademark silk scarf and unkempt appearance, Rugova, a literary critic trained at the Sorbonne University, advocated passive resistance to the Yugoslav administration as the means for obtaining independence for Kosovo. Like Havel, Rugova's opposition to Stalinism was from the right, based on restoring capitalism and market economics.

Over the next five years, the LDK sought to do what was being done by the leaderships in Slovenia, Croatia and the other Yugoslav republics: find a powerful backer prepared to sponsor the establishment of an independent state. Rugova engaged in a continual round of international conferences and meetings, seeking to manoeuvre among the major powers in the hope that he would gain their political recognition and financial support.

Germany's recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in late 1991 rapidly set in train the disintegration of Yugoslavia, opening up bitter ethnic fighting

as groups suddenly found themselves divided by what had previously been internal state borders. Backed by the US and other major powers, Bosnia Herzegovina and then Macedonia followed suit. But neither the European Commission nor the UN supported independence for Kosovo, which had been recognised internationally as part of Serbia since 1912. In April 1992, Kosovo, as a province of Serbia, became part of the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which also included the republic of Montenegro. Vojvodina, like Kosovo, remained a province of Serbia within the new Yugoslav state.

The LDK, along with other Kosovar parties, organised elections for a self-declared "Republic of Kosovo". The "parallel" government headed by Rugova organised a network of schools and health clinics staffed by Albanians who had previously been sacked from their posts. Even though Albania was the only country to officially recognise Kosovo, Rugova was nevertheless able to hold talks with the international negotiators Lord Owen and Cyrus Vance in September 1992. US intervention in Kosovo--internationally recognised as a Serbian province--began as early as October when the Bush administration approved an initial \$5 million in aid and warned the Serbian government against "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo.

The LDK's policies helped create a virtual apartheid state in which Albanians and Slavs had little contact or communication with one another. As Miranda Vickers explains in her book *A History of Kosovo*: "Although by the beginning of 1996, a few Albanians and Slavs still worked together, the vast majority lived strictly apart--they used separate bars and restaurants, and while Serbs travelled on the trains, Albanians took the buses. For Albanians public contact with Serbs inside Kosovo was off-limits, and the LDK used its power to isolate those violating that unspoken rule. Only a few elite intellectuals could appear publicly on panel discussions with Serbs without fear of public censure. Other Albanians reported receiving warnings from members of the LDK to avoid anything resembling dialogue with Serbs." [2]

The turning point came at the end of 1995 with the signing of the US-brokered Dayton Accord by the warring parties in Bosnia. Despite the hopes of Rugova and others, the Dayton agreement omitted any mention of independence for Kosovo, nor did it appear likely that the US would change its position in the future.

The US relied heavily on the Milosevic regime to police the Accord, under which the Bosnian Serbs had been compelled to abandon their demand to secede from Bosnia. Any move towards independence for Kosovo would have undermined the very foundation of the Accord, namely, the international recognition of the borders of the former Yugoslav republics, but not of any areas within those republics. In other words, the quid pro quo between Milosevic and the US was that the Bosnian Serbs would remain as an enclave within Bosnia, in return for the maintenance of the status quo in Kosovo.

The contradictions inherent within the Dayton agreement highlighted the impossibility of creating nations based on ethnicity out of the former republics, where ethnic and religious groupings were thoroughly mixed and intermingled. Such a project inevitably led to conflict, war and "ethnic cleansing", as nationalist leaders and their militia in each area sought to create their own racially pure republics.

Within Kosovo, the Dayton Accord left Rugova high and dry. All his plans and intrigues to obtain international support for his "parallel government" had come to nothing. Criticisms of the Rugova leadership became more strident as the bitterness and disappointment over the Dayton agreement gave rise to demands for a more aggressive approach to achieving independence. The KLA emerged as one expression of this turn to increasingly militant tactics.

The KLA was reportedly formed in Pristina in 1993. A leading role in its creation was played by the Popular Movement for Kosovo (LPK)--one of the separatist groupings to emerge from the 1981 Kosovo protests.

Based in the Decani area near Pristina, the KLA carried out a number of attacks on individual Serb police and soldiers. In 1995, it took its activities to a new level by attacking a Serb border patrol in April, and a Serb police station in August using automatic weapons and a bomb.

From the events in Bosnia and the signing of the Dayton Accords, the KLA leaders concluded that the only way to achieve their aim of an ethnically pure Kosovo was to goad the Yugoslav army, through terrorist provocations, into attacking wider and wider sections of the Albanian population, creating the conditions for military intervention by the major powers. Their tactics were directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Albanian villagers at the hands of Serbian police. They calculated that the more horrific the impact on civilians, the more Albanians were arrested, beaten or killed by Serb security forces, the stronger would be their own position in forcing the US and NATO to act.

As the influence of Rugova and the LDK began to wane, the KLA became more open and aggressive. In April 1996, in a letter to the BBC's Albanian language service, the KLA publicly acknowledged for the first time its responsibility for attacks on Serb police and civilians. Its racist outlook was highlighted by the ongoing targeting of refugee camps set up to house thousands of Serbs driven out of the Krajina region of Bosnia in August 1995 as part of the "ethnic cleansing" carried out by the US-backed Croatian army and militia. According to Kosovar Albanian leaders, the resettling of 10,000 of the estimated 200,000 Krajina Serb refugees in Kosovo was part of a plan by Milosevic to alter the ethnic balance in the province in favour of Serbs.

In 1997, the KLA's access to arms and more advanced weaponry was rapidly augmented by the eruption of civil war in neighbouring Albania, following the collapse of the government of Sali Berisha. Different factions raided the country's armouries, taking millions of automatic weapons, some of which found their way into the KLA training camps set up by Berisha in the north, near the Kosovo border.

In September 1997, the KLA carried out its most sophisticated military assault to date--10 co-ordinated attacks, with the use of anti-tank weapons, at locations up to 150 kilometres apart. In February 1998, it attacked Serb houses in the villages of Klinë, Decani and Djakovica, and a Serb refugee camp at Baboloc, and ambushed Serb policemen on the road between Glogovac and Srbica, finally provoking a major counteroffensive by Yugoslav security forces against KLA strongholds. Some 80 Albanians, including women and children, were killed in the central Drenica region of Kosovo.

The "Drenica massacre" saw a sharp shift in attitude by the US administration to Kosovo and the KLA. On the eve of the Serbian counterinsurgency, Robert Gelbard, the senior US envoy to the Balkans, visited Pristina where he denounced the KLA as a "terrorist organisation"--a remark widely interpreted as giving the green light for the Serb repression. But within days, Madeleine Albright attacked Milosevic saying: "We are not going to stand by and watch the Serbian authorities do in Kosovo what they can no longer get away with in Bosnia". The arms and economic embargo against Yugoslavia was toughened and the US warned that it reserved the right to take unilateral military action against Serbia.

A number of commentators have remarked on the explosive growth of the KLA following the Drenica massacre. In the space of just a few months, the organisation grew from a few hundred fighters to a military force, which, by its own reckoning, amounted to 50,000. Its weapons now included shoulder-fired anti-tank rocket launchers, mortars, recoilless rifles, anti-aircraft machineguns as well as automatic assault rifles.

This rapid expansion coincided with preparations on the part of the US and NATO for military operations in Kosovo and Yugoslavia as a whole. The scenario being drawn up involved significant similarities to the operation organised by NATO in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995. There, NATO bombing of Bosnian Serb positions was supplemented by ground

attacks carried out by Croatian army and militia--financed, armed and trained by the US and its surrogate private military outfits. That the KLA was receiving covert financial support, arms and training from the US is borne out by reports of the CIA's involvement, by its growing contact with senior US officials such as Gelbard and Richard Holbrooke, and by the whole subsequent course of events.

As early as May 1998, NATO began to bolster its military capabilities in both Albania and Macedonia. NATO representatives met with the Albanian government and agreed to provide military assistance, including vehicles and communication equipment. In mid-June, 80 NATO warplanes conducted exercises over Albania and Macedonia, and in August and September, NATO troops participated in joint ground manoeuvres in both countries.

Gary Dempsey, from the conservative US-based Cato Institute noted in October 1998: "The Clinton administration has diligently put everything in place for intervention. In fact, by mid-July US-NATO planners had completed contingency plans for intervention, including air strikes and the deployment of ground troops. All that was missing was a sufficiently brutal or tragic event to trigger the process. As a senior Defence Department official told reporters on July 15, 'If some levels of atrocities were reached that would be intolerable, that would probably be a trigger.'"

Again the "trigger" was provided by the KLA, which had used its growing strength and firepower to seize and entrench itself in substantial areas of Kosovo. According to one estimate by the US-based Military Analysis Network, by mid-1998 the KLA controlled between 25-30 percent of the province, with its own administration, roadblocks and fortifications. Its forces operated in a far broader area, especially at night. The KLA's expansion and its continuing attacks on Serb forces and civilians finally provoked a further Yugoslav military offensive, which not only uprooted the KLA from many areas, but threatened to wipe it out altogether.

In late September, NATO seized upon reports of a massacre of 10 women and children in the village of Gornje Obrinje to threaten air strikes against Yugoslavia. The threats were only called off at the last minute after Milosevic signed the terms laid down by Holbrooke in an October 20 agreement for the reduction of Yugoslav troops in Kosovo to levels prior to the offensive.

The KLA, which was not a direct party to the talks, used the ceasefire to regain and extend its influence, not only in villages but also in towns. It also began its own "cleansing" operation, directed against the 12,000 strong Gorani community--Slavs who are Muslims and speak Albanian, but are not ethnic Albanians. The KLA accused the Goranis, a number of whom were supporters of Rugova's LDK, of being "Serb collaborators". Among those killed was a close aide of Rugova's, Enver Maloku, a half Gorani, who was shot dead in Pristina in mid-January by gunmen rumoured to be from the KLA.

On January 15, 1999, a so-called Serb massacre took place at the village of Racak, which was to supply the final "trigger" for the present NATO air assault. To this day it is not clear whether the fatalities at Racak were the result of a massacre or a firefight between Serb forces and KLA guerrillas. Belgrade insists that the "massacre" was a set-up staged by the KLA with the assistance of the US-head of the OSCE observer teams, William Walker, a long-time US operator who had been heavily involved in US activities in Central America.

The French daily newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* both produced articles strongly questioning the account provided by Walker, which was published widely in the international media. Two Associated Press TV journalists had been invited by Serb security forces to film an attack on the KLA stronghold in Racak. Their reports and those of other on-the-spot journalists indicated that the village, which was virtually deserted, was not the scene of a massacre but of fighting between Serb police and the KLA.

Yet the following morning a number of Albanian corpses in civilian

clothes were found lined up in a ditch. Walker, without any investigation or corroborative evidence, pronounced "a Serb massacre" had taken place and set in motion the withdrawal of his observer teams from Kosovo. Many questions remain unanswered about the Racak massacre, but there is significant evidence--including the lack of blood and spent cartridges at the spot where the murders were alleged to have taken place--which suggests that after the Serb soldiers and reporters had left, the KLA dressed up their own dead in civilian clothes and placed them in the ditch.

The "Racak massacre" was utilised as the means for new threats against the Milosevic regime by the US and NATO. But this time it was clear that the talks would simply be the prelude to the commencement of a military assault on Serbia. The Milosevic regime was presented with demands that it could not possibly accept--the stationing of a large, long-term NATO force within Kosovo and free access by the NATO military to all parts of Yugoslavia, including Serbia and Montenegro.

At Rambouillet, the KLA for the first time eclipsed the LDK. Not only did the US insist that KLA representatives be present, but it was KLA leader Hashim Thaci, not Rugova, who led the Kosovar Albanian negotiating team. As far as the Clinton administration was concerned, the only hitch in the meetings was the refusal of Thaci to immediately accept the autonomy terms proposed in the agreement. But by the second round of the talks in March, the KLA leadership had fallen into line, paving the way for the opening of the NATO bombing campaign.

What is now taking place in Kosovo and Yugoslavia as a whole is the realisation of the KLA's perspective. Despite the terrible consequences for hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees, the KLA's tactics, according to its own terms, have "succeeded". For the US and NATO the KLA has become a vital tool in their objective of transforming Kosovo into a long-term military base for operations within the region. Whatever cosmetic leadership positions were afforded to the KLA in such an "independent Kosovo", it would be a puppet regime, entirely dependent on the US for economic and military survival. This is the unrelenting logic of ethnic and nationalist politics.

Notes

1. See "Kosovo 'Freedom Fighters' Financed by Organised Crime" by Michel Chossudovsky
2. Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian, A History of Kosovo*, Hurst, London 1998, p.289]



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