

Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right: A Cartographer's View of the Yugoslav War

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The brutal ethnic cleansing underway in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia seem on the surface to be mutually contradictory forms of violence. NATO claims the bombing is a "humanitarian intervention" to prevent the sort of ethnic cleansing that has escalated since the air strikes began, and claims that it favors a multiethnic future for Kosovo and the rest of the Balkans. Yet the recent history of the region shows that NATO has not only failed to prevent ethnic cleansing and ethnic partition, but has itself helped to recarve new ethnic boundaries in the Balkans.

The map of the Balkans has changed several times in this century as a result of war. Secessions from the Ottoman Empire before World War I, and from the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the war, led to the creation of Yugoslavia in 1918. (Even the name "land of the South Slavs" omitted Albanians.) During World War II, Axis powers redrew the map to divide Yugoslavia along ethnic lines, at the same time as they interned many Serbs and Jews in concentration camps. Croatia seceded to become a German satellite state, and annexed Bosnia. The Italian colony of Albania annexed Kosovo. Hungary and Montenegro also annexed parts of Serbia.

Yugoslavia reassembled its constituent parts after 1945, but never resolved the bitterness left by the war. As the country has fallen apart in the 1990s, the map of the region increasingly resembles the map of the early 1940s. Croatia is again independent, and controls part of Bosnia. Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo want independence, and Montenegro may be next. In this process, Americans want to see "white hats" and "black hats," but the reality we can only see "gray hats," with ethnic cleansing affecting civilians of all ethnic groups.

*In Croatia in 1991, secession from Yugoslavia ignited a war with the Croatian Serb minority. A 1995

offensive by the Croatian Army ethnically cleansed at least 100,000 Serbs from the Krajina region, where they had lived for centuries. Washington not only failed to object to the violent ethnic cleansing, but helped facilitate it. Retired U.S. generals had trained the Croatians, and the U.S. Air Force bombed a Serb airfield in Croatia on the eve of the offensive into Krajina and western Bosnia. Many of the expelled Serbs were resettled in Kosovo, exacerbating the ethnic tensions that have now erupted into war.

*In Bosnia in 1995, the Croatian victory over the Serbs, along with Serb cleansing of Muslim communities, helped set the stage for the Dayton Accords. In Dayton, the U.S. rubber-stamped the de facto ethnic partition of the country, dooming any hope for a multiethnic future that includes Muslims, Croats and Serbs. Bosnia retains a fictive independence as a NATO "protectorate," with Westerners at the helm of its political and economic structures. But the two sections of Bosnia now have two currencies, two political systems, and two armies, linked to Croatia or Serbia. Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic split Bosnia between them in 1995 much as Hitler and Stalin divided Poland in 1939.

*Now in Yugoslavia in 1999, we are told that NATO bombers are attacking Milosevic and "the Serbs." Yet the bombs have fallen on neutral Montenegro, ethnic Albanian Kosovo, the ethnically Hungarian northern region of Vojvodina, and Serbian democratic opposition cities such as Nis. The war may yet result in the ethnic partition of what remains of Yugoslavia into two or three countries. In another scenario, Milosevic may decide to give up Kosovo to NATO, in return for taking full control over Montenegro, or even formally annexing the Serb region of Bosnia.

Two wrongs don't make a right. NATO bombing and Serbian ethnic cleansing are not proving to be in contradiction to each other. As Commanding General Wesley Clark has said, the Serbian offensive against Kosovo civilians was "entirely predictable." The bombing did not prevent the cleansing, but served as a catalyst for a self-fulfilling prophecy. The two forms of violence are mutually reinforcing, and feed off of each other in numerous ways. They may also result in the same outcome: the redrawing of the map of Yugoslavia into small and powerless ethnic enclaves.

For the past decade, the U.S. could have backed the efforts of the Serbian opposition and Albanian civil resistance, but waited until war broke out to pay attention. We should listen to the anti-Milosevic Serbs who oppose the bombings (and other Milosevic critics such as parts of the Serbian Orthodox Church), and the Albanians who tried to avoid war. We should support a settlement of the conflict, through the United Nations rather than only NATO and Belgrade.

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Links opposing both Milosevic's ethnic cleansing and NATO's bombing campaign:

Institute for Public Accuracy

Z Magazine--Kosovo page

The Nation--Kosovo Destroyed

The Progressive

Common Dreams-- News and Views for Progressives

War Resisters League

International Action Center

A Century of U.S. Interventions--from Wounded Knee to Yugoslavia



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