

Former Croatian general has US backing

New KLA leader was responsible for ethnic cleansing

Peter Stavropoulos
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Former Croatian Army Brigadier-General Agim Ceku has been appointed by the “Kosovo Provisional Government” as the new chief-of-staff for the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Ceku, who retired from his Croatian Army post in February, will replace KLA commander Suleiman Selini, whose faction has fallen out of favor with the US State Department for refusing to participate in the Rambouillet conference.

Agim Ceku has a long history of close collaboration with the US government and his appointment is part of a reorganization of the KLA leadership to more closely align it with US strategy in the region.

As a leading figure in the Croatian military Ceku played a central role in organizing what has been to date the greatest act of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans prior to the onset of NATO bombing in Kosovo—the 1995 US-supported expulsion of nearly 200,000 Serbs from Croatia's Krajina region. His appointment to lead the KLA, undoubtedly made with US approval, exposes the hypocrisy of NATO's claims that the war against Yugoslavia is being fought to stop “ethnic cleansing.”

Ceku is an ethnic Kosovo Albanian who graduated from the Belgrade Military Academy before serving as an artillery captain in the Yugoslav Army. During Yugoslavia's dissolution in 1991 he defected to the newly formed Croatian Army to assist its drive to secession—he was decorated nine times in battles against Serb forces in both Bosnia and Croatia.

The Croatian Army's attack on the town of Medak in September 1993 was masterminded by Ceku. The “Medak Massacre,” as it became known, was such a savage bloodbath against Serb civilians that Canadian UN peacekeeping troops were compelled at one point to intervene and began a firefight which left nearly 30 Croatian militiamen dead.

Ceku went on to be one of the key planners for the August 1995 “Operation Storm,” in which Croatian troops overran the entire Krajina region of eastern Croatia, which had been held by militias of the local Serb population. According to the human rights group Amnesty International, the four-day offensive led to the expulsion of at least 180,000 people, nearly the entire Serbian population of the Krajina, a district in which they comprised the majority for hundreds of years.

Hundreds were murdered, including many who were too old or disabled to escape. The methods of Operation Storm were those of

similar attacks by nationalist forces in other parts of the former Yugoslavia: systematic and deliberate bombing of civilians, well-publicized acts of terror to spread panic, arson against homes, farms and other property, and many acts of rape.

So thorough was the expulsion of Serbs that from 1991 to 1998 the Serb population in Croatia fell from 581,663 to about 240,000. Of the more than 300,000 Croatian Serbs expelled from the country during that period, only 7,000, mainly elderly people, have returned to Croatia.

In April this year, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia—the same body which this week indicted Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic—concluded that numerous violations of international and humanitarian law took place during Operation Storm.

The ICTY's report accused the Croatian Army of carrying out summary executions, indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations and “ethnic cleansing,” and concludes: “In a widespread and systematic manner, Croatian troops committed murder and other inhumane acts upon and against Croatian Serbs.”

There has been no outcry in the American or European media, however, over this finding, and no demands that Agim Ceku and other Croatian generals, or Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, stand trial as war criminals.

The ICTY also confirmed a July 1997 report in the *Nation* magazine which revealed that the Croatian Army was trained by the Virginia-based Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), a group of retired US military officers who were contracted by the Pentagon.

One of MPRI's spokesmen who has served as a consultant to the Croatian Army since 1995 described Ceku in *Jane's Defense Weekly* (JDW) as a highly competent and disciplined officer. “We were impressed by his overview of the battleground and the ability to always predict his enemy's next move,” he noted.

The “cleansing” of Serbs from the Krajina by the Croatian Army was supported by the US and assisted by NATO bombing of Serb positions. Ceku played a central role in these operations, earning his reputation in the systematic expulsion of Croatian Serbs, at the same time developing close ties with US military officials.

After Krajina Ceku turned his efforts to the KLA, which had been involved in massacres of Serb refugees who had fled to Kosovo to escape the Croatian Army's offensive. Although the

Croatian government strongly denied foreign media reports last year that the KLA was being led by a top-ranking Croatian Army officer of ethnic Albanian decent, a KLA spokesman recently told Reuters that "from the beginning" of the latest Kosovo crisis, Ceku has been "collaborating with the KLA headquarters and has given an extraordinary contribution."

In a grisly glimpse of his plans as KLA commander, Ceku was quoted in a BBC translation of a Croatian news report saying, "There is only one way out. And we have advocated it from the very beginning: a final defeat of the Serbian army and its expulsion from Kosovo; a defeat similar to the one they suffered in Croatia." This statement is tantamount to calling for the expulsion of all Serbs from Kosovo.

In an interview with the London *Sunday Times*, Ceku called for an open alliance with NATO, "Our guerilla war will permit us to act all around Kosovo to achieve the goal of expelling the enemy from our country ... but a military ground intervention by alliance forces is the key for defeating what is the last dictatorship in Europe.... The co-ordination of NATO's military efforts with the KLA general staff would have a strong impact on ending the war."

Ceku's appointment is a declaration of war against the Serb population in Kosovo. His comments reveal the KLA is aiming to establish an Albanian ethnically pure Kosovo by terrorizing and expelling Serbs in much the same way as was done in the Krajina. The other non-Serb minorities in Kosovo, including Bulgarians, Albanian Christians and Romany (Gypsies) would likely face the same fate at the hands of a KLA regime.

Two BBC reports confirm this underlying intention of the KLA. "The KLA believes that either through war or by peaceful means, independence is inevitable. It would surely be hastened if no more Serbs lived in the land they cherish as the cradle of their civilization.... Its goal is to unite the Albanians of Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania into a greater Albania."

A *Jane's Defence Weekly* report underlines this point. "Despite denials by the ethnic Albanian leaders, there is no doubt that, situated as they are close to the Albanian frontier, the temptations of a future tie-up with a Greater Albania remain high on the agenda."

Another *Jane's* report underscores the role of the KLA as a creature of NATO:

"It is neither yet a proper army nor has it managed to expel the much stronger Serbian police and military forces, but its status has been raised by its acceptance by the international community as the rightful participant in the negotiating process ... should the Serbian authorities accept the Kosovo Interim Agreement, the political arm of the KLA would transform into the Kosovo Liberation Party. The requisite political wisdom and resources to take on a civilian role without surrendering its position to the previous civilian structures of the Kosovo Albanians are already in evidence."

The timing of Ceku's appointment is also significant. With the failure thus far of NATO's bombing campaign to force the Yugoslav government to capitulate, moves have been under way to strengthen the KLA and prepare for a possible ground invasion.

The BBC and *Newsweek* magazine report this week that President Clinton has approved CIA training of the KLA to carry

out sabotage within Yugoslavia. According to *Newsweek* the CIA will be training the KLA in "age-old tricks like cutting telephone lines, blowing up buildings, fouling gasoline reserves and pilfering food supplies—in an effort to undermine public support for the Serbian leader and damage Yugoslav targets that can't be reached from the air."

US National Security Adviser Sandy Berger secretly briefed members of the House and Senate Intelligence committees on these plans the week that Ceku's appointment was made public. US officials are consciously creating the conditions for a massacre of Kosovo Serbs in the same fashion as those organized by Ceku in Croatia. *Newsweek* says, "Intelligence officials also worry it would be difficult to control the US-trained rebels once boot camp is over and they are set loose on Milosevic." They quote a former chief of intelligence planner for the US Air Force, "I'm afraid they could use their training to carry out atrocities... If they think they can rein them in, it's tremendous naivete."

The KLA have suffered significant losses at the hands of the Yugoslav Army and have been unable to play the role expected of them by NATO. It is estimated that fewer than 4,000 KLA fighters are left in isolated areas of Kosovo, far less than the 24,000 the KLA claimed to previously have under its control. Military strategists see Ceku's appointment as necessary to accomplish a number of NATO objectives of which the transformation of the KLA is essential for military, financial and political reasons.

The KLA ranks in Albania have swelled from a number of sources over the last two months. Recruitment is being carried out in Britain and the US while an estimated 10,000 have arrived in Albania, mainly from Germany, Switzerland, France and Austria. Reuters has reported that the KLA is also forcing male Kosovar refugees to join its ranks.

Jane's reported that US military Special Forces and British SAS were fighting alongside the KLA inside Kosovo. The French news agency Agence France Presse reported earlier this month on the deaths of three French army paratroop officers who were killed in a clash with the Yugoslav army while commanding a KLA unit trying to cross into Kosovo from the Albanian border.

The US-NATO backing to the KLA and its new military leader is the most telling refutation of the claims made to justify the war. While NATO and the US government have said that the bombing of Yugoslavia has been necessary to stop ethnic cleansing they have given their support to a general who is responsible for what was, before the NATO bombing, the worst pogrom in the Balkan conflict.



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