

What really has happened in Kosovo

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In the US-NATO assault on Yugoslavia, accusations of genocide in Kosovo play the same role in the propaganda war as cruise missiles and cluster bombs in the air war. The claims that Serbian troops and paramilitary forces are slaughtering thousands, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians, the comparisons of Slobodan Milosevic to Adolf Hitler, the invocation of the Holocaust--all these serve as weapons, if not to convince, at least to intimidate public opinion.

The purpose of this propaganda, whose tone has been set by the White House, is to block any critical thought or even serious reflection on the part of the American people about the mushrooming conflict in the Balkans. The hysterical comparison of the events in Kosovo to the Nazi death camps--which reached their peak in claims by some US officials that as many as 500,000 Albanian men were unaccounted for--demonstrates the extreme weakness of the political position of the Clinton administration, which has been unable to find any rationale for the bombing except these wild and unsupported allegations.

The American media has taken its cue, as it generally does, from the State Department, Pentagon and CIA. Newspaper editorialists and columnists, television journalists and commentators, all have parroted the same phrases--ethnic cleansing, genocide, mass murder--and sought to demonize first Milosevic and then the whole population of Serbia as guilty of crimes on the scale of Hitler's SS.

It is all the more significant, accordingly, when a series of reports in one of the newspapers most fervently supporting the war, the *New York Times*, contradicts this picture of the conditions in Kosovo. These articles were written over the past ten days by Steven Erlanger, the *Times* correspondent inside Yugoslavia, who has traveled extensively in both Serbia and Kosovo.

What emerges from his account a much more complex and nuanced picture of a society ravaged by war. Prior to the war, tensions within Kosovo centered on a conflict between an armed Albanian guerrilla movement, the KLA, and Serbian forces, with inevitable harm to civilians but still, compared to the present conditions, on a comparatively small scale.

The beginning of the NATO bombing campaign was the occasion for the unleashing of a wave of terror on both sides, with ultra-right Serbian nationalists playing a major role, while the Yugoslav military launched an offensive against the KLA which quickly gave the Serbian side the upper hand.

The US government claims that the purpose of the bombing was to end ethnic cleansing, but Erlanger's reports suggest that bombing, not Serb atrocities, was the major factor in the flight of refugees. The mass flight reached the dimensions of hundreds of

thousands as a combined product of increasingly severe bombing and a panic fueled by NATO propaganda warning that all Albanians who did not flee would be killed by Serbian terror.

On May 4, Erlanger visited Pristina, capital of Kosovo, noting the presence of many Albanians, especially the elderly, who "move freely through the town." Local Albanians describe the two weeks of attacks by Serb ultra-nationalists, including masked paramilitaries, who rampaged through the city, burning, looting and forcing Albanian families to leave. A Serb official admits that patriotic Serbs have a lot to be ashamed of for what was done in their name, and says that 350 Serb civilians, policemen and soldiers have been arrested for crimes committed during that time.

Pristina residents described three waves of refugees from the city, the first by those ordered or forced to leave when the bombing began. Then, according to Erlanger, "The second wave left because of the bombing downtown on the night of April 6, with everyone who owned a car taking off and as many as 5,000 people at a time at the bus and train stations. The third wave left in a general panic, because everyone else seemed to be leaving."

While exact numbers could not be determined, the *Times* reporter clearly suggests that the number of people fleeing Pristina from NATO bombs far exceed the number initially driven out by the Serb nationalist pogrom. Moreover, in the later waves of flight thousands of Serb residents left the city as well, with many Serb men sending their wives and children to safety to escape the bombing.

On May 6, the *Times* reporter visited Prizren, a large town near the Albanian border of Kosovo, scene of a recent exodus of Albanians. This how he describes the circumstances:

"In the last week, as NATO intensified its air strikes in the area, as many as 30,000 of Prizren's Albanians, United Nations officials said, were pushed and panicked into mass flight in the few days following a bomb blast in a poor residential area. At least 5 civilians were killed and 23 wounded, Serbian news media reported." Here again a bomb, most likely dropped by an American warplane, was the trigger for mass flight.

In many cases, Albanians fled not because of direct threats, but because of fear. One older Albanian told the *Times* reporter people were terrified by both the bombing and the Serbs. "They told some people to move, but not in my neighborhood," he said. "Nobody came to tell us to leave, but some were threatened."

Both Albanian residents and UN officials noted that Prizren's Albanian population did not leave during the first six weeks of the war, but in the first week of May the city was bombed by NATO warplanes almost daily. One Serbian woman told Erlanger, speaking of the Albanians, "We're afraid, they're afraid... my

Albanian neighbors ask me when this madness will stop. When they are bombing, we are all together."

Erlanger notes, as he makes his return to Pristina, that two former KLA strongholds, Dule and Suva Reka, "are practically depopulated, with most shops and houses burned."

Another dispatch for the same reporter, also dated May 6, profiles the Llugiqi family in the Albanian village of Velika Dobranja, about 15 miles from Pristina, where the local population has never left their homes. The village is near a Serb-populated town and "a number of the Albanians here speak Serbian, and the Kosovo Liberation Army was never much of a presence. So the Yugoslav Army and militarized police have largely left Velika Dobranja to its own devices."

While the Albanian population has not been subjected to ethnic cleansing here, it has suffered from the NATO bombing. The six-year-old daughter of Rahman Llugiqi, who used to work for the Albanian service of Radio Belgrade, was killed by a missile fired at Pristina's nearby airport. Moreover the bombing and the absence of gasoline and diesel fuel have made agriculture, the principal occupation of the Albanians, virtually impossible.

Rahman Llugiqi tells the reporter, "We've heard from television that terrible things have happened, but we haven't seen it ourselves. I will not change my opinion about the Serbs--we have to live together."

On May 9, Erlanger visited the town of Podujevo, near the Kosovo border with Serbia, which was 95 percent Albanian before March 24, and suffered from a Serb nationalist pogrom, mass flight by the Albanian population, and heavy NATO bombing. He interviewed the Serb mayor, who recalled the fighting which broke out between Serbs and Albanians after the NATO bombing began. Albanians cheered the bombing in the streets, firing off guns, and KLA guerrillas killed 10 Serb policemen in a raid. There were heavy battles all around the town, and most Serbs as well as Albanians fled. More than half the ethnic Albanians have now returned to Podujevo and its surrounding district.

The mayor, a civil defense officer, bemoans the enormous destruction of bridges, utilities, warehouses and other infrastructure caused by the bombing. He concludes: "The Serbs and the Albanians here have to decide how to live together--day by day, point by point. I think it was a terrible mistake that the Albanians listened to some in the West, and a year ago, with their help, tried to solve the problems here with weapons."

Later that day, Erlanger interviewed a young Albanian woman in Pristina, who "always feared what would happen if the West intervened with force, saying it gave a license to the Serbs to take revenge on the majority Albanians here." She describes how the Serb nationalists rampaged through a wealthier Albanian neighborhood in Pristina, home of the Albanian political and cultural leadership, but left the largely working class area where her family lives untouched.

The *New York Times* reporter also interviewed Albanians and Serbs at two bars in Pristina. "Surprisingly, perhaps, in view of their pain, the Albanians seem to have more confidence and seem ready to try to live again with Serbs," he writes. He also notes the presence in Kosovo of a Canadian journalist, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, many Greek reporters, a Turkish journalist, as well

as several Serbs employed by Western news agencies.

These reports provide much evidence of atrocities and widespread intimidation of the Albanian population in Kosovo, especially during the first two weeks of violence by Serb nationalist paramilitaries. But terrible and tragic as these events were, they fall far short of the claims of genocide which have fueled the US-led bombing campaign.

Erlanger's reports confirm that the NATO bombing has caused extensive damage and many casualties among the civilian population of Kosovo, Albanian as well as Serbian. Significantly, in an interview broadcast by NBC News Thursday night, Erlanger gave a picture of the destruction in Kosovo--roads made impassable, bridges destroyed, transport systems useless, electricity and water systems destroyed--in which the bulk of the damage was caused by the NATO bombing, not the Serb forces. NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw, a strident supporter of the bombing, was compelled to admit, "What is happening inside Kosovo is a mystery."

No one could claim that Erlanger, employed by a vitriolically pro-war newspaper, is a mouthpiece for Serb propaganda. In many cases he conducted his interviews with educated Albanians who knew some English, and spoke with him in private. Moreover, his account coincides with those of other objective reporters who have visited Kosovo.

These reports in the *Times* clearly establish that, contrary to the US government claims, a large portion, if not the majority, of those who fled Kosovo did so because of the US-NATO bombing. These include, moreover, a large portion of the Serbian population, whose plight goes virtually unmentioned in the Western media.

Most importantly, the killings of Albanian Kosovars in the first two weeks came about, as Erlanger's Albanian sources themselves declare, as part of a raging civil war between the KLA and the Yugoslav military and police, which escalated to a new level of violence once the NATO bombing campaign began. In the course of this fighting, Serb nationalist paramilitaries gangs took the opportunity to attack Albanian targets, especially those who were politically and socially prominent, and to carry out massacres in towns and villages believed to be sympathetic to the KLA.

Even in these killings, the US government bears some responsibility, since it has utilized the KLA as an instrument of its policy of destabilizing the Yugoslavia regime and pressuring Milosevic to accept NATO's dictates. Now the Clinton administration is cynically seeking to transform this tragedy, the product of a decade of imperialist maneuvers and intervention in the former Yugoslavia, into a pretext for even more barbaric attacks on the people of the Balkans.



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