

Victims of NATO's war

Who is responsible for the deaths of Milena Malobabic and Sanja Milenkovic?

David Walsh
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In the last three days of May, NATO bombing assaults on Serbia resulted in the deaths of at least 50 civilians and the wounding of hundreds more.

On Sunday in Varvarin, in south-central Serbia, NATO aircraft destroyed a bridge at one o'clock in the afternoon, when the area was crowded with local people attending the town market. At least 11 civilians died and another 40 were injured in the attack. Witnesses said four cars fell into the Juzna Morava River. Bystanders who came to help those who were victims of the initial attack were hit by a second wave of bombing. Four NATO jets took part in the raid.

On Monday NATO warplanes bombed a sanitarium and old people's home in Surdulica, a town in southeast Serbia. This was the second deadly attack on the town of 15,000. On April 27 NATO missiles landed in a residential area, killing 11 people. In the most recent attack at least 27 civilians died. Approximately 100 people lived at the sanitarium complex located on the outskirts of the town. Sixteen residents and patients were killed when two NATO missiles slammed into two of the seven buildings on the property. Another five were buried under the rubble. More than 40 others were injured.

Serb media reported as well that NATO missiles killed 10 people and wounded 20 when they struck the central Serb city of Novi Pazar on Monday.

NATO spokesmen made no apology for the daytime attack on Varvarin or the deaths, describing the bridge as "a designated and legitimate target." Jamie Shea, the military alliance's mouthpiece, declared, "There is always a cost to defeat evil. It never comes free, unfortunately. But the cost of failure to defeat a great evil is far higher."

A chasm exists between the self-serving and hypocritical comments of Shea, Clinton, Blair and the rest—who proclaim that they are not waging war "against the Serb people"—and the brutal reality of NATO's war.

The claim by the American and European media that the attack on Varvarin and similar atrocities are "fatal blunders"

has worn thin. If, in the first stages of the war, allied military officials claimed that bridges and other elements of the infrastructure were attacked at night to "minimize casualties," then does this now mean that they are being attacked in the middle of the day to maximize them? There is no other reasonable conclusion to draw except that NATO is now conducting an operation aimed at killing and terrorizing Serb civilians.

The ferocity of the US-led campaign has intensified in recent days. NATO has now flown some 15,000 combat missions over Serbia in 70 days. Its aircraft are now making as many 350 to 400 attacks a day, in round-the-clock assaults. Nothing like this has been seen in Europe since the end of World War II. And there is no let-up in sight. On the contrary, US military officials promise a stepping up of the bombing to force Serb leaders to capitulate to the NATO countries' demands.

The NATO regimes and their propagandists have spent a good deal of energy in attempting to criminalize the entire Serb population, to make it an accomplice in Milosevic's "war crimes." They have seized upon a bitter ethno-communalist war in the Balkans, in which atrocities have been committed by nationalist forces on all sides, and exploited it for their own, predatory purposes. Both to cover up the crimes of the US-led forces and to make the Serbs inhuman in the eyes of public opinion, the American media has revealed as little as possible about the suffering of the Serb population.

Indeed as the air campaign becomes ever-more savage, the major media outlets in the US, particularly the television networks, provide less and less coverage of the devastation. Where is Brent Sadler of CNN who gave at least some indication of the extent of the death and destruction in reports from Aleksinac in early April? Now, nothing. Or next to nothing. Only when a particularly egregious crime takes place can the major television networks—grudgingly, always providing the official NATO excuses—be prodded

into mentioning them.

The attacks on Varvarin and Surdulica were particularly cruel and ominous incidents. That quality must have communicated itself to a number of journalists, because for once they provided a glimpse of the human face of NATO's victims.

Kevin Cullen, a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, wrote a moving and unusual account of visiting the site in Surdulica. He observed: "Outside one of the two buildings that took direct hits, the bodies of four elderly people were lined up on stretchers. Rigor mortis had set in and one woman's arm was rigidly aloft, her finger pointed almost accusingly.... The force of the explosion sheared off the tops of trees and sprayed other trees with clothing. Shirts, pants and stockings hung from evergreen trees, 50 feet in the air, like Christmas tree ornaments.

"Dr. Srboljub Aleksic, 60, the sanitarium director, stood amid the wreckage, accusing NATO of engaging in the war crimes it is so quick to accuse his president, Slobodan Milosevic, of committing.

"This building is a hospital. There is a Red Cross sign on the roof,' he said. 'For NATO to say that it didn't know this is a place for sick people is a lie."

Ironically, in addition to housing patients with respiratory illnesses and retirees, the medical complex was also home to Serb refugees from Bosnia and Croatia, forced out by US-approved "ethnic cleansing" in 1995. One of the dead was a mother of three children, Bosiljka Malobabic, who was driven from her home in Croatia. Two of her three children, Milena and Rade, were also killed. One Serb bystander commented bitterly about the 1995 events, "No one wanted to bomb Croatia."

A reporter for the *Irish Times*, Lara Marlowe, was also affected by a visit to Surdulica. And she too commented on the death of 19-year-old Milena Malobabic. Marlowe wrote: "Milena's body was the last in the row, and she was a sadly pretty girl, with black hair and silver hoop earrings, whose blue-green eyes seemed to stare out in pain, even in death. She was one of a family of four treated for tuberculosis at the sanatorium."

Reporters apparently found the girl's notebook outside the bombed sanitarium. "'This notebook is dedicated to Dejan,' she had written inside the front cover, entwining her beloved's 1972 birth date with her own. 'If you only know how much I suffer now,' she began a poem in Serbian, the first letters of which formed an acrostic of his name. 'Maybe it's wrong, but I want to go back to you. Your Milena still loves you, but I feel the wound...'"

And what about Sanja Milenkovic, 17, a top mathematics pupil at a Belgrade high school, who had just crossed the bridge in Varvarin when NATO planes bombed it?

According to Carlotta Gall in the *New York Times*, the girl was so badly wounded by shrapnel that she died on the way to the hospital. "After the first strike, people rushed from the nearby market to help those injured on the bridge. Then the planes came back and struck again, unleashing two bombs that smashed the bridge off its concrete supports and sent lethal shrapnel flying up the street into the marketplace, witnesses said."

Gall described the aftermath: "Eight bodies were lying on stretchers in the morgue at the entrance to the town cemetery. Father Ciric stood out in his black suit trousers and city shoes. The other men were in cheap workers' clothing. Their bodies were mangled horribly. The woman whose body was found in the river, in her stocking feet, alone appeared calm in death. Ms. Milenkovic's body was still at the hospital."

This is the horrifying logic of NATO's war against Serbia. Milena Malobabic and Sanja Milenkovic had the tragic misfortune to cross paths with the US-dominated war machine. In a profound sense, they are the victims of politically-motivated homicide. Who, if anyone, will ever be called to account for these crimes? Will Clinton, Clark or Blair?

The US and other governments proceed in part with further and more intense attacks because there is not yet a mass public outcry against their actions. This barbaric war—which is not in fact a war, but a one-sided bombing campaign—is being fought in the name of the American, British, French, German and other peoples. These populations must come to understand its true dimensions and implications. Those who continue to delude themselves with the thought that the US-led forces are conducting this war to set things right in the region, to establish "democracy," to defeat "a great evil," had better think again. No military assault conducted in this fashion, indiscriminately targeting civilians and destroying the economic and social life of an entire people, can possibly have progressive goals.



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