

New York Times exposé of the Kosovo Liberation Army

KLA leader Thaci ordered rivals executed, rebel commanders say

David Walsh
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An article that appeared in the *New York Times* Friday sheds additional light on the character of the Kosovo Liberation Army, the group that the US and NATO have made their partners in their military occupation of the Yugoslav province.

The lengthy piece, by Chris Hedges, based on interviews with current and former KLA commanders, former officials of the Albanian government and Western diplomats, paints the KLA leadership as brutal, corrupt and power-hungry. It reports allegations that Hashim Thaci and his two right-hand men—Azem Sylja, the KLA's defense minister, and Xhavit Haliti, its ambassador to Albania—ordered the murder of top commanders in their own organization and potential rivals within the Kosovo Albanian nationalist movement.

Hedges interviewed a former member of the secessionist movement in Switzerland, Rifat Haxhijaj, who told him: “When the war [against Serb authority] started, everyone wanted to be the chief. For the leadership this was never just a war against Serbs—it was also a struggle for power.” A Western diplomat, commented “that Mr. Thaci's ruthless tactics are legendary in the region.” The diplomat explained: “Thaci has a reputation for being pretty tough ... Haliti and Sylja are not known for their sweet tempers. This is a rough neighborhood, and intimidation and assassinations happen.”

Hedges reports an incident from 1997 in which a Kosovo Albanian reporter, Ali Uka, was found dead in his apartment in Tirana, the Albanian capital, “his face disfigured by repeated stabbings with a screwdriver and the jagged edge of a broken bottle.” Uka was a supporter of the Kosovo independence movement, but

he had criticized it in print. His roommate at the time of his death was Thaci, nicknamed Snake, about whom, Hedges notes, “Violence has long swirled...”

The KLA leadership has developed an intimate relationship with the Albanian government, “which has a reputation for corruption and has been linked by Western diplomats to drug trafficking.” According to former and current KLA officials, Thaci conducted assassinations in cooperation with the Tirana regime, which often placed members of its secret police “at the disposal of the rebel commanders.” At least two Albanian secret police officers were allegedly fighting with the KLA forces. Two former KLA officers and a former Albanian police official told Hedges that Haliti “was working in Kosovo with 10 secret police agents from Albania to form an internal security network that would be used to silence dissenters in Kosovo.”

Thaci and his aides were reportedly involved in smuggling guns from Switzerland in the three years before the KLA uprising began in early 1998. Thaci and Haliti have families in Switzerland, but the latter, according to the Hedges piece, “has formed a new family in Tirana, where he has a large villa and close links with senior Government leaders.” The *Times* article reports that in April 1998 a rebel commander who had transported many of the weapons accused Haliti of profiteering. The commander charged that Thaci's right-hand man was buying boxes of grenades for \$2 a piece and charging the movement \$7 for each grenade. The commander, Ilir Konushevci, was ambushed and murdered a few days later in a KLA-controlled region of northern Albania, in a killing blamed on the Serbs.

Bujar Bukoshi, the prime minister in exile of Ibrahim

Rugova, one of Thaci's more moderate rivals, notes that “Cadavers have never been an obstacle to Thaci's career.” Apparently the KLA planned an unsuccessful assassination attempt against Bukoshi last May.

Thaci and his cohorts also allegedly eliminated a military rival financed by the Rugova group. In the summer of 1998, while the KLA was suffering military reverses, Ahmet Krasniqi, a former colonel in the Yugoslav army, was given \$4.5 million in funds raised by Rugova's administration to establish a rival military structure known as the Armed Forces of the Kosovo Republic. After tensions mounted between Krasniqi's group and the KLA, Thaci and the Albanian government decided to eliminate Krasniqi, according to former KLA commanders and former Albanian government officials. On September 21 Krasniqi was murdered in Tirana by Albanian secret police or the KLA, or both.

According to Hedges, “After Mr. Krasniqi's death, former rebel commanders said, the killings, purges and arrests accelerated. Rebel police, dressed in distinctive black fatigues, threw into detention anyone who appeared hostile to Mr. Thaci. Many of these people were beaten.” After the start of the US-led NATO bombardment, “two more outspoken commanders, Agim Ramadani, a captain in the former Yugoslav Army, and Sali Ceku, were killed, each in an alleged Serbian ambush.” A former senior KLA officer in Tirana told Hedges that Thaci was responsible for the deaths.



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