

Biggest one-day slaughter in war

NATO cluster bombs kill hundreds of Serb troops

Martin McLaughlin
10 June 1999

The US-NATO air war against Yugoslavia culminated Monday in the biggest one-day slaughter since the bombing campaign began, with as many as 600 Yugoslav Army soldiers killed when their column was hit by cluster bombs from a single B-52 bomber.

American and NATO officials said two battalions of Yugoslav troops had left their bomb shelters to engage a Kosovo Liberation Army force that had crossed the Kosovo-Albania border near Mt. Pastrok. The soldiers, who numbered between 800 and 1,200, were caught in the open on the mountain hillside.

According to the *Washington Post* account, "Initial aerial assessments showed such massive annihilation that fewer than half the targeted troops are believed to have survived." Cluster bombs scatter hundreds of powerful explosive charges when they detonate, each charge capable of inflicting multiple casualties. The bomb is used as an anti-personnel weapon and is particularly effective against massed ground troops.

The massacre on Mt. Pastrok was the worst of a series of mass killings by NATO warplanes during the eleven-week bombardment of Yugoslavia. NATO officials estimated last week that 5,000 Yugoslav soldiers had been killed and 10,000 wounded, and the death toll has increased significantly this week, with hundreds of casualties each day from intense bombing, especially in Kosovo.

The stepped-up bombing has been closely coordinated with the KLA's activities on the ground, demonstrating the role of the guerrilla force as a direct instrument of US-NATO policy. The KLA launched an offensive in late May, which failed to hold much territory inside Kosovo. Nor was it really intended to. Its purpose was to engage Yugoslav Army forces in

combat and have NATO warplanes annihilate them from the air.

According to one summary given out by NATO, bombing this week has destroyed 29 tanks, 93 armored personnel carriers, 209 artillery pieces, 11 air defense artillery positions, 86 mortars and many other military vehicles. Given the manpower required to maintain and operate such weapons, this translates into thousands of casualties.

KLA guerrillas have also carried out an increasingly aggressive series of terrorist attacks on Serb targets in Kosovo, especially on passenger buses traveling between the cities. A Serb bus driver was killed Tuesday when KLA gunmen ambushed a passenger bus bound from Pristina, the Kosovo capital, for Belgrade. Another bus driver and four passengers were wounded in a second attack just outside Pristina, while a Serb passenger was killed in an attack Sunday on a bus near Kosovska Mitrovica.

These shootings go beyond retaliation against Serb police and government officials involved in attacks on Kosovar Albanians. The KLA is clearly seeking to intimidate the Serb minority in Kosovo and create the conditions for a full-scale flight of the Serb population once the Yugoslav Army is withdrawn and NATO troops and KLA guerrillas take over the province. As many as 200,000 Serb civilians would become targets for a new round of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia.

The gruesome death toll on Mt. Pastrok is reminiscent of another military slaughter in the waning days of another US war against a small and completely out-gunned opponent — the Persian Gulf War against Iraq. After a six-week aerial bombardment and a four-day

ground war that destroyed much of the Iraqi army, there was a wild flight of thousands of soldiers and civilians from Kuwait back across the border into Iraq. Navy and Air Force jets caught one long column of fleeing Iraqi vehicles on the Kuwait to Basra highway and pounded it mercilessly with bombs and machine-gun fire. As we described it at the time:

“Soldiers seeking to flee north away from the fighting were attacked without mercy. Pilots flying missions against the highway between Kuwait City and Basra, the main evacuation route for Iraqi troops, described the systematic bombing and strafing as ‘shooting in a sheep pen.’ The road, clogged by four lanes of one-way, bumper-to-bumper traffic, was carpet bombed by B-52s dropping 1,000-pound bombs, and repeatedly hit with laser-guided missiles and ‘smart’ bombs” (Desert Slaughter, p. 229)

Like the attack on the “Highway of Death,” there was no military necessity for the cluster-bomb attack on Yugoslav conscripts on Mt. Pastrok. The Yugoslav government had already capitulated to the US-NATO air war and committed itself to a complete withdrawal from Kosovo, while discussions were stalled in Macedonia over the exact timetable and modus operandi for implementation. The immensity of the slaughter, however, sheds light on the legitimate concerns of Yugoslav military officials over the terms of the withdrawal and their desire to secure guarantees for the safety of their retreating troops.

This assault was above all staged to demonstrate the ruthlessness of American and European imperialism, and make of the Serbs an object lesson to the other peoples of the region that no resistance to US-NATO dictates will be tolerated.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)