

"Operation Horseshoe" —propaganda and reality

How NATO propaganda misled the public

Peter Schwarz
29 July 1999

A reader from Italy wrote to the WSWs: "I am an Italian Marxist and your reader. Your Internet issues are very precious and important. Please, I need help about some questions. What do you think about Operation 'Horseshoe' and its discovery by German intelligence?" We publish the answer to this question, which is of general interest.

Dear comrade SM,

The alleged existence of plans for an "Operation Horseshoe" was a crucial element of NATO's war propaganda. Whenever someone pointed to the obvious fact that the NATO war had precipitated the mass flight of Albanians from Kosovo, rather than preventing it, the person was referred to "Operation Horseshoe". According to NATO officials, this was a detailed plan worked out by the Milosevic regime in 1998 to drive all or most Albanians out of Kosovo. Even if NATO had not attacked, it was argued, the Albanians would have been driven out. By initiating the war, NATO at least maintained the option to bring them back at a later point.

The existence and content of the Horseshoe plan was—like so many other elements of NATO's war propaganda—generally treated as fact by the media. Its content and sources were hardly checked. The only exception I found was an article published on May 19 by the foreign editor of the German daily *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Karl Grobe.

Grobe makes clear that the origins, sources and content of the Horseshoe plan are very mysterious, and that even if such a plan actually existed, it could hardly be interpreted as a blueprint for the expulsion of the civilian population from Kosovo.

The press was informed about the plan in the third

week of the war by general inspector Hans Peter von Kirchbach, the highest commander of the Bundeswehr, the German army. Kirchbach refused to give any information on the sources of the plan, because they were "too sensitive". The news agency AP later quoted "experts" who "thought" that it was leaked by a deserter or originated from secret service sources.

German defence minister Rudolf Scharping claimed that the plan had been agreed on by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and the Yugoslav military leadership in December 1998. Its main aim was, according to Scharping, to "smash or neutralise" the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and to expel the Albanian civilian population from Kosovo.

Again Scharping would not give any details, but it is obvious he was speaking about two entirely different questions. The Yugoslav army was involved in a civil war with the KLA and had suffered numerous casualties. It was therefore entirely legitimate and, from a military standpoint, necessary that it work out operational plans how best to deal with the situation. That these plans included the expulsion of the civilian population remains, at best, unclear.

According to Grobe, the plan says absolutely nothing about paramilitary groups, which played a crucial role in all cases where the civilian population was maltreated. It also says nothing about plans after the beginning of the war on March 24, i.e., the period when masses of Albanians actually did leave Kosovo. It contains, Grobe points out, hardly any details at all.

What is left, it seems, is nothing more than a plan to station Yugoslav troops in the shape of a horseshoe along the border of Kosovo. This makes sense in a war with the KLA, but hardly amounts to a plan of

systematic “ethnic cleansing”. In fact, the plan was not even new.

In October 1998—two months before the Horseshoe plan was allegedly ratified—French and British papers had already published maps showing the deployment of Yugoslav troops in the form of a horseshoe along the Kosovan border. This, however, did not prevent 200,000 Albanian refugees from returning to their homes in Kosovo after US envoy Holbrooke brokered an agreement on the stationing of OSCE observers in the province. Along with these refugees many KLA activists returned. This was, according to the German defence ministry, a matter of great concern for the Yugoslav army and led to the drawing up of the Horseshoe plan.

But it is also possible that the whole plan was invented later. “The interpretation is possible that the details made public describe the course of the mass purges after the event,” writes Grobe.

Best regards, Peter Schwarz



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