

Some cracks in the media propaganda front: reports of grossly exaggerated atrocity stories in Kosovo

Barry Grey
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In recent days scattered reports have emerged in the American media of the inflated and misleading character of claims by US officials of Serb atrocities against the Kosovan Albanians. On June 28 the *Detroit Free Press* carried an article by foreign correspondent Lori Montgomery, datelined Prizren, which bore the headline, “Rapes not a policy in Kosovo: Assaults were individual acts by Serbs, evidence indicates.”

The article stated: “Western officials have accused Serb soldiers of raping ethnic Albanian women as a tool of war. Although numerous credible accounts detail attacks by Serb soldiers, it now appears that rape was rarely systematic and that allegations of ‘rape camps’ and ‘rape hotels’ will never be proved...”

“Along Kosovo’s Albanian border, where US officials alleged in April that Serb soldiers were raping and killing women at an army base near the southwestern town of Djakovica and in a hotel in the western city of Pec, few signs of sexual abuse could be found.”

Three days later *USA Today* carried the front-page headline, “Kosovo’s plight exaggerated.” The article began: “Many of the figures used by the Clinton administration and NATO to describe the wartime plight of Albanians in Kosovo now appear greatly exaggerated as allied forces take control of the province.” It cited House Intelligence Committee Chairman Porter Goss, a Republican critic of the US-NATO war, who said, “Yes, there were atrocities. But no, they don’t measure up to the advance billing.”

The article went on to note that US claims of up to 100,000 murdered ethnic Albanians have been replaced by official estimates of 10,000. It debunked a statement made by Clinton to a veterans group in May that 600,000 ethnic Albanians were “trapped within Kosovo itself, lacking shelter, short of food, afraid to go home or buried in mass graves dug by their executioners,” noting that thousands of Kosovars did indeed go into hiding during the war, but there is no evidence they were starving or without shelter. The article further said Kosovo’s livestock, wheat and other crops were not destroyed by Serb forces, as had been widely reported.

That evening NBC Nightly News carried a segment by foreign correspondent Andrea Mitchell on the same theme. Mitchell characterized the war-time reports of Kosovan deaths as a “gross exaggeration” and said officials now estimate the civilian death toll in Kosovo since the onset of NATO bombing last March 24 to

be between 3,000 and 6,000.

These reports have been simply ignored by the “newspapers of record”—the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—which enthusiastically backed the bombing of Yugoslavia and retailed the government claims of mass murder, rape and genocide that were used to justify the war and manipulate public opinion.

Significantly, none of the American officials who responded to the *USA Today* and NBC News defended the veracity of their earlier claims. Instead, they passed off the flagrant inaccuracies as honest and unavoidable mistakes. State Department official James Foley told NBC News that the government had no choice but to base itself on refugee accounts. Mike Hammer, a spokesman for the National Security Council, told *USA Today* there was no effort to mislead. The Clinton administration found that “as you go through a campaign like this, there is a great deal of uncertainty.”

There was, of course, nothing “uncertain” about the reports of mass killing and rape given out by President Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defense William Cohen and a host of lesser officials. These were presented to the American people and international public opinion as facts, not speculation.

Kenneth Bacon, spokesman for Defense Secretary Cohen, told *USA Today* that the “best estimates available” had been used. He defended the comparisons between Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and Hitler, adding, “I don’t think you can say killing 100,000 is 10 times more morally repugnant than killing 10,000.”

This cynical bit of moralizing is typical of the official campaign waged in support of the war. From the outset those prosecuting the bombing sought to intimidate and stifle opposition by depicting critics of NATO as defenders of Milosevic and “ethnic cleansing.” But Bacon’s response begs the question: if the issue is purely one of abstract morality, and the scale of atrocities is not important, why the systematic resort to exaggeration and falsification?

One of those interviewed on the NBC news segment, former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, while no less cynical, was a bit more forthright. He explained there was always a tendency in war to demonize the enemy so as to whip public opinion into line.

Clinton’s own statements during and after the war make clear that what is involved in the official presentation of events in Kosovo is not “making the best estimates available,” but using the

vast resources of the government and a pliant media to mislead the public into thinking Serb atrocities were on such a order—reaching the level of genocide—as to justify the aerial destruction of power plants, oil refineries, bridges, water supplies, schools, hospitals and even television headquarters, and the killing of thousands of civilians.

Within days of the onset of NATO bombing, Clinton described the ensuing Serb attack as an attempt to wipe out the Kosovan Albanian population. In a radio address from the Oval Office on April 3 he said the “cold clear goal” of Milosovic was to “keep Kosovo's land while ridding it of its people.” Twelve days later he told the American Society of Newspaper Editors that Milosovic was “determined to crush all resistance to his rule even if it means turning Kosovo into a lifeless wasteland.”

On May 5, in a speech at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany, he added to the list of Serb crimes the setting up of concentration camps, something that never occurred. In a Memorial Day address on May 31 he compared Milosevic to Hitler, saying his government “like that of Nazi Germany rose to power in part by getting people to look down on people of a given race and ethnicity, and to believe they had... no right to live.” On June 11, on the eve of the deployment of NATO troops into Kosovo, Clinton described the actions of the Serbs as “an attempt to erase the very presence of a people from their land, and to get rid of them dead or alive.”

Since the withdrawal of Serb forces, Clinton's rhetoric has become, if anything, more unrestrained. Even as NATO was quietly lowering its estimates of ethnic Albanian deaths, Clinton repeatedly said the evidence of death and destruction in Kosovo was “even worse than we imagined.” In a June 20 interview on Russian television he said, “We were only trying to reverse ethnic cleansing and genocide.” Two days later, in a speech to KFOR troops in Macedonia, he spoke of “young girls [being] raped en masse.”

In his White House press conference of June 25, Clinton all but declared that the continued rule of Milosevic would signify the collective guilt of the Serb people in the atrocities carried out against the Kosovan Albanians. Justifying his opposition to Western aid for the reconstruction of Serbia, he said, “And then they [the Serbs] are going to have to decide whether they support his leadership or not; whether they think it's OK that all those *tens of thousands* of people were killed and all those hundreds of thousands of people were run out of their homes and all those little girls were raped and all those little boys murdered.” (Emphasis added)

The function of such exaggerated and often unsubstantiated atrocity claims, relentlessly repeated and reinforced by the most sophisticated, modern techniques of media manipulation, is to overwhelm the critical faculties of the public. The aim is not so much to convince as to benumb and bully, and thereby obtain, if not active support, at least passive acquiescence.

However the falsification is not simply a matter of exaggerated atrocity stories and statistics. There were, after all, terrible crimes committed against innocent Kosovars, and on a large scale. At least as decisive in the US war propaganda is the removal of the events in Kosovo from their real context, and the erection of a

completely self-serving and distorted version of recent Yugoslav history. Only on such a basis could the violent and tragic events in Kosovo be attributed to the evil motives and machinations of one man, the new Hitler, Slobodan Milosevic, and the role of the United States and the other imperialist powers be whitewashed.

According to Clinton and his NATO allies, all of the tragedy and turmoil of the past decade in the former Yugoslavia are the result of Milosevic's grand design to forge a Greater Serbia at the expense, even the destruction, of the Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians. That Milosevic is a Serb nationalist, and that Greater Serbian chauvinism is a reactionary political force, are truisms. This, however, is only one part of the picture.

What is left out is the disruptive and destructive role played by US-dominated financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, which imposed austerity and capitalist market policies on Yugoslavia throughout the 1980s, driving up unemployment and poverty and undermining the economic foundations of the federated Yugoslav state. These policies encouraged the growth of nationalist tendencies among all ethnic groups.

In 1991 and 1992 the European powers and the US supported the secession of three Yugoslav republics—Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia—without allowing any expression of the will of the Yugoslav people as a whole, or any negotiations with Belgrade to secure the rights of large Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia. These suddenly found themselves stripped of their constitutional guarantees and ruled by hostile nationalist regimes. As many had predicted, the inevitable result was an eruption of civil war.

The Croatian nationalism of Tudjman, Muslim nationalism of Izetbegovic and Albanian nationalism of the Kosovo Liberation Army are no less intolerant and reactionary than the politics of Milosevic. In the successive civil wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, all sides have resorted to methods of “ethnic cleansing,” not simply the Serbs.

What set Milosevic up for demonization and destruction, however, was the conclusion reached by the United States that Serb nationalism cut across its strategic interests in the Balkans. Thus Washington came to support, financially, politically and militarily, the nationalist cliques in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo as instruments of its policy directed against Serbia. In Kosovo this first took the form of covert CIA support for the KLA, which began several years ago to wage an armed struggle for the secession of the province from Serbia.

This is the real context within which the US decided to go to war. The US-NATO bombing, on top of the ongoing struggle between Belgrade and the KLA, created the conditions for the eruption on a mass scale of Serb violence against Albanians, and the reprisals by Albanians against Serbs which have followed the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo.



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