

The massacre of Serbs in Gracko: Who is responsible?

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The massacre of 14 Serb farmers in the Kosovan village of Gracko is the most horrific attack to date on Serbs and Gypsies since the entry of NATO troops into the province six weeks ago. The villagers, aged 15 to 60, were harvesting their crops on July 23 when they were cut down by automatic weapons fired at close range from several directions. The attackers—soldiers of the Kosovo Liberation Army, according to the testimony of Gracko inhabitants—mutilated the bodies of their victims.

In the wake of the massacre, press reports have acknowledged that the wave of killings, abductions and house burnings of Serbs has continued, despite the presence of 36,500 NATO troops. The Gracko killings will undoubtedly prompt more Serbs to flee the province, which has already lost anywhere from 80,000 to 150,000 of the 200,000-strong Serb population that existed prior to the NATO occupation of Kosovo.

US, NATO and United Nations officials have uniformly denounced the killings in Gracko and declared their determination to find and punish those responsible. Hashim Thaci, the KLA figure promoted by Washington as the political head of the separatist guerrillas, condemned the assault and declared his organization played no role—a claim that stretches the limits of credulity.

No one in the American media has dared to suggest that those who conducted the NATO war and now preside over the occupation of Kosovo bear any responsibility for this latest eruption of communal bloodletting.

As horrifying as the scene in Gracko, it is all too commonplace in the remnants and former republics of Yugoslavia. No one can reasonably maintain that it, and worse atrocities to come, are wholly unanticipated events.

For nearly a decade the tortured land of the former Yugoslavia has witnessed such communal atrocities committed by nationalist forces on all sides. Even ordinary farmers and city-dwellers have participated in

brutal assaults on civilians of different ethnic backgrounds in the cycle of attacks and reprisals unleashed by the breakup of Yugoslavia. There has been more than enough suffering to go around—among Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Kosovan Albanians and Serbs.

This in a country which for decades was able to provide at least the minimal political and social conditions for the various ethnic groups of which it was composed to live in peace, and where it had become common for people of different backgrounds to marry, socialize and develop close personal relations.

The tragic legacy of imperialist intervention and communal politics is all too apparent in Gracko, a Serb village not far from Pristina surrounded by Albanian villages under KLA control. Many of the inhabitants of Gracko are refugees from Bosnia and the Krajina region of Croatia. With good reason, they and their fellow Serbs put little stock in the assurances of NATO and UN officials.

The people of Gracko say they appealed repeatedly, but in vain, for NATO troops to provide protection during the harvest, when they had to go into the fields to gather their grain and corn. Normally they would venture out of their village only in convoys.

They know that the very forces to which they are appealing for protection have embraced the KLA as a partner in the occupation of Kosovo. As one Gracko resident said, pointing to British and Canadian forces patrolling the area, “How can we be protected by the armies that bombed us?”

The response of US and NATO spokesmen to the Gracko massacre is laced with cynicism. They may very well have been shaken by the atrocity and consider it an unwelcome event. It clearly undercuts their attempt to legitimize the KLA and portray the NATO occupation as a neutral, democratic and civilizing mission.

But their attempt to wash their own hands of

responsibility is hardly credible. In the first place, the Americans, the British and the entire political and military leadership of NATO are well aware of the character of the KLA and those who run it. The *New York Times* article on the Gracko massacre was written by Chris Hedges. Just a month ago (June 25) the *Times* published an article by Hedges entitled “Leaders of Kosovo Rebels Tied to Deadly Power Play.” The piece described in some detail the methods of terror and assassination employed by Thaci and his lieutenants against rivals in the leadership of the KLA. (See “KLA leader Thaci ordered rivals executed, rebel commanders say,” posted June 29 by the WSWWS).

On July 23, the same day as the Gracko massacre, Hedges published a further article exposing the fraud of KLA “disarmament”. His *Times* article reported, “NATO officials said that it was apparent the rebel commanders had hidden large stockpiles” of heavy weapons, which were due to be turned over to NATO forces that week. The article continued: “But senior NATO officials said the equipment turned in so far by the KLA to the 14 designated sites was broken, in poor repair or useless. They said rebel commanders were arguing about what military hardware had to be turned over, and in some areas had failed to cooperate with peacekeepers.”

The head of the NATO occupation force, Lieut. Gen. Sir Michael Jackson, was quoted playing down the failure of the KLA to disarm and praising KLA commander Agim Ceku. The latter is, like Thaci, a favorite of the United States. Ceku came to prominence as an officer in the Croatian army who oversaw the US-backed expulsion of some 200,000 Serbs from the Krajina region in 1995.

It is no accident that the US has allied itself with such ruthless chauvinists as Thaci and Ceku. The political character of Washington's allies among the Albanian Kosovars gives the lie to its ostensible support for a “multi-ethnic” and “democratic” Kosovo.

This public face of US policy in the Balkans was restated Monday by Clinton's National Security Adviser Samuel Berger. Speaking of the Gracko killings, Berger began by endorsing Thaci's claim of KLA non-involvement. He then said, “America did not fight in Kosovo for one ethnic group and against another. We fought for a stable, peaceful Europe and for the principle that no people can be singled out for destruction because of their ethnicity or religion.”

Such noble words are contradicted by the entire thrust of US policy in Yugoslavia, and the outcome that this policy has produced. American policy, beginning with its

support for the secession of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia, and continuing with its embrace of Kosovan nationalism, has encouraged the destruction of a multi-ethnic Yugoslav federation and the carve-up of the country into ethnically pure mini-states and cantons. Washington has underwritten the narrow and selfish nationalist aims of elites within all of the various groupings of the former Yugoslavia—Slovenian, Croatian, Bosnian Muslim, Albanian Kosovan—with the exception of the Serbs.

It cannot be credibly argued that the aspirations of nationalist elites in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia or Kosovo have any greater legitimacy than those of their counterparts in Serbia. Indeed, the regime in Belgrade and the large Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia had well-founded fears and legitimate grievances over the sudden transformation of these republics, in which minorities were guaranteed certain rights under the federal constitution, into independent states ruled by anti-Serb nationalists.

But in the aftermath of the Cold War, US policy came to be driven by the assessment that Serbia, politically the dominant republic in Yugoslavia, represented the chief obstacle to its expansionist geo-political and economic aims in the Balkans and the oil-rich regions further to the east. It had to be weakened, if not destroyed.

The tragic and escalating cycle of ethnic bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia is not an unfortunate anomaly of a policy driven by altruism, but rather the inevitable and organic product of US imperialist *realpolitik*.



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