

Investigations belie NATO claims of "ethnic genocide" in Kosovo

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Substantial evidence has emerged refuting the central justification for NATO's war against Serbia—the claim that the Milosevic regime was conducting "ethnic genocide" against Albanians in Kosovo.

During the conflict, the NATO powers asserted that somewhere between 100,000 (according to US Defence Secretary William Cohen) and 500,000 (according to an April 1999 statement of the US State Department) Albanian Kosovars had been killed by Serb forces. Such far-fetched claims were already being discounted by the end of the war last June.

But now the much-reduced official estimate of 10,000 Kosovar deaths has been discredited by the results of investigations carried out by the Hague war crimes tribunal and other agencies. Most post-war surveys estimate the actual number of deaths attributable to Serbian forces at less than 2,500.

The October 31 *Sunday Times* of London reported that an all-party committee of MPs had asked Britain's Foreign Secretary Robin Cook to answer for having misled the public over the scale of civilian deaths in Kosovo. Labour MP Alice Mahon, who chairs the Balkans committee, said, "When you consider that 1,500 civilians or more were killed during NATO bombing, you have to ask whether the intervention was justified."

The November 3 *Toronto Star* ran an article by Richard Gwynn that drew the conclusion, "No genocide means no justification for a war inflicted by NATO on a sovereign nation. Only a certainty of imminent genocide could have legally justified a war that was not even discussed by the UN Security Council."

The US State Department claims that some 1,400 bodies have been recovered from 20 percent of suspected massacre sites. But priority was given to those sites assumed to contain the most bodies. The Texas-based publication *Stratfor* last month noted that "evidence of mass murder has not yet materialised on the scale used to justify the war". This is despite the fact that there are teams from 15 nations conducting investigations.

Stratfor states that of the 150 suspected sites examined, "the bodies are generally being found in very small numbers—far smaller than encountered after the Bosnian war". Of the civilian dead found thus far, a good number were apparently executed, but others died as a result of fighting between Serb forces and the NATO-backed Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and some were killed by NATO bombs.

During the war, the Trepca mining complex, supposedly the hub of Serbian ethnic cleansing operations, was compared in the

British press with the Nazi death camps. NATO and the KLA claimed that as many as 1,000 bodies a day had been dropped down the shafts, incinerated or dissolved in hydrochloric acid. In the aftermath of the war, however, investigators surveying the mine complex have found no evidence of executions.

In two trips to Kosovo since the war's end, the American FBI has found a total of 30 sites containing some 200 bodies. A Spanish team investigating one zone in Kosovo found no mass graves and only 187 bodies, all buried in individual graves. One team member, Emilio Perez Pujol, said, "There never was a genocide in Kosovo. It was dishonest and wrong for Western leaders to adopt the term in the beginning to give moral authority to the operation."

The Western media has, in the main, ignored these reports. But there has been an attempt at a counter-attack by some supporters of NATO's war. The London *Times* ran an article that said "the actual number of civilians killed" was "irrelevant". The "prevention of mass murder and ethnic cleansing, on whatever scale, remains a war aim of which NATO can be proud," the paper declared. *Guardian* columnist Frances Wheen coined the term "Kosovo revisionists", equating those who dispute NATO claims of genocide with right-wing historians who deny the Nazi holocaust against the Jews.

Such statements amount to a rationalisation in advance for any military intervention that the US, Britain or NATO might decide to undertake, on the grounds of alleged human rights abuses, against any sovereign country. If the self-appointed world policemen—who happen to be the richest and militarily most powerful nations—are not even obliged to prove that the targeted country is guilty of killing and repression on a mass scale, they have a license for colonial-style domination not seen since the days of the "White man's burden" at the end of the last century.

Guardian columnist Wheen's attack on "Kosovo revisionists" is an inversion of reality. By ignoring established facts for definite—and reactionary—political ends, he is, in fact, aping the approach of Nazi apologists who downplay Hitler's crimes.

Commentators like Wheen who seek to dismiss the growing evidence of NATO lies generally attribute to their opponents the most despicable motives. They portray people who demand an accounting from NATO governments for their actions are indifferent to the Kosovar Albanians' plight and politically complicit with Milosevic and his crimes against ethnic minorities.

But if the scale of the alleged atrocities is not important, why did NATO choose to systematically falsify the reality in Kosovo? Or if

one claims that the grossly inflated reports of executions, rapes, etc., were simply the result of innocent mistakes, how does one account for the fact that the errors unfailingly involved exaggerated estimates of Serb violence?

In general, defenders of the NATO war exhibit a remarkable talent for tailoring their moral indignation to conform to the foreign policy needs of their respective governments. They are curiously subdued about the ongoing war of Turkey against the Kurds, the depredations of the Sri Lankan regime against the Tamils, the decades-long Israeli repression of Palestinians, and what is certainly a genuine crime against humanity—the ongoing destruction of Iraq at the hands of the US and Britain.

Opposition to NATO's bombardment of Kosovo and Serbia proper by no means implies indifference to the suffering of Albanian Kosovars at the hands of Milosevic's forces, or support for the policies of the nationalist regime in Belgrade. The *World Socialist Web Site* did insist, however, that the grotesquely exaggerated claims made against Serbia by NATO were indicative of concealed political aims, which had nothing to do with the humanitarian pretensions of the US, Britain and the other warring powers.

In an article on June 25, the *WSWS* noted: “For the public to accept the destruction wrought by US/NATO bombs, it had to be convinced that the war was undertaken to prevent another Holocaust. The fabrication of the death toll was an essential component of a propaganda campaign which sought to disorient public opinion, distort the background of the war, and conceal the real political aims and material interests underlying the decision to go to war against Yugoslavia.”

The decision by the United States to go to war against Serbia—taken with the full backing of Britain—was based on definite Great Power geopolitical calculations. The claim to be fighting ethnic cleansing was used to justify a war drive to cripple Serbia, considered by Washington to be an obstacle to American economic and political interests in the strategically vital Balkan peninsula and the oil-rich Caucasus and Caspian regions to the east.

The war was deliberately provoked by the US, using as a pretext exaggerated claims of Serbian human rights violations against Kosovar Albanians. By 1998 the US had shifted from denouncing the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as terrorists to a policy of arming it, while imposing sanctions on Serbia and bolstering NATO's military capabilities in both Albania and Macedonia. By mid-July, the US and NATO had completed contingency plans for a military intervention in Kosovo, including air strikes and the deployment of ground troops.

On January 15, 1999, the report of a Serbian massacre at the village of Racak, whose veracity is still disputed, provided the pretext for NATO's assault on Serbia. At the Rambouillet talks in February, the Milosevic regime was presented with an ultimatum it could not accept, which included the stationing of a large, long-term NATO force within Kosovo and free access of NATO military forces to all parts of Yugoslavia. On March 24, the first NATO bombs were dropped.

Once the bombing began, and the Serbs countered with their offensive in Kosovo, the US needed to raise the stakes in the

propaganda war. As US and NATO bombs rained down on Belgrade and other cities and towns, hitting factories, hospitals, schools, churches, bridges, oil refineries, water and electricity supply installations and even TV stations, the media campaign to demoralise the Serb enemy was intensified.

A series of grisly bombings of Serb and Kosovar civilians, including the destruction of passenger trains and assaults on Albanian refugees, followed by NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, fuelled public concern and distrust of NATO claims. Relations with Russia and China deteriorated. Divisions among the NATO powers widened over the scale of the bombing and the possible introduction of ground troops, with the US and Britain generally finding themselves on one side of the argument, and Germany, France, Italy and Greece on the other.

At the end of May, to keep public opposition at bay and whip their recalcitrant NATO allies into line, the US and Britain again raised the decibel level of anti-Serb propaganda. Milosevic and four other Serbian leaders were indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Increasingly, Western officials and media pundits placed the blame for anti-Kosovar atrocities on the Serbian people as a whole, who were deemed complicit because of their alleged toleration of the “new Hitler”—Slobodan Milosevic.

In the aftermath of the war, the official pretexts have grown increasingly threadbare. The violence of the KLA against Kosovan Serbs, and its despotic and corrupt methods of rule over the province's Albanian inhabitants, have discredited Western attempts to portray the organisation as a force for democracy and national liberation. Now the claims of genocide have been exposed as well.

NATO's propaganda campaign found a receptive audience amongst a layer of ageing former liberals, ex-radicals and one-time anti-war protesters, who uncritically accepted the claims of NATO and the media and portrayed the military action against Serbia as a turning point in world history—the first war by the major powers conducted for “humanitarian” reasons. In the summer 1999 issue of *Dissent* magazine, for example, the Democratic Socialists of America representative to the Socialist International, Bogdan Denitch, justified his support for the war with reference to the “genocidal nature of the Yugoslav army's campaign in Kosovo”.

“And genocide is not too strong a word,” Denitch declared.

Even more openly and enthusiastically than at the time of the civil war in Bosnia, these forces seized on the US-NATO war against Serbia to demonstratively and publicly make their peace with imperialism. Anyone inclined to think that Denitch and company will feel compelled by the emerging facts to make a serious reappraisal and political accounting for their pro-war stance would best be advised: Don't hold your breath.



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