

Michael Ignatieff in the New York Times

Liberal historian defends the Balkan War against Kosovo "revisionists:" Sophistry in the service of imperialism

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One of the most significant aspects of the US-NATO war in the Balkans was the politically indispensable role played by prominent liberal and “left” academics, writers and intellectuals, who uncritically accepted the justifications given out by US and European officials and placed themselves at the disposal of the pro-war media. Many of those who took for good coin the moralistic phrases of Western leaders and accepted their portrayal of the war as a humanitarian crusade against ethnic genocide had, in their younger days, protested against US military interventions in Vietnam and elsewhere.

On one level their evident loss of historical perspective—indeed, their failure to evince any capacity for critical thought—could be attributed, at least in part, to the generally reactionary political climate and the highly sophisticated, relentless character of the media campaign in support of the war. But on a deeper level, the transformation of an entire layer of former opponents of imperialist war into political camp followers of the US military had to reflect a process of political decay with deep social and historical roots.

This is confirmed by the response of leading representatives of Western liberalism to the mounting evidence that those who conducted the war systematically spread unfounded and grossly exaggerated atrocity stories in order to manipulate public opinion. Some latter-day believers in the humanitarian mission of American missiles have come forward to defend ex-post-facto the legitimacy of the war, denouncing as Kosovo “revisionists” those who, in light of the findings of war crimes investigators, have questioned NATO’s war claims and demanded an accounting from the US and its allies.

One such defender of the war is Michael Ignatieff, who published a column in the *New York Times* on the eve of Clinton’s visit to Kosovo under the headline: “Counting Bodies in Kosovo.” Ignatieff, biographer of the post-war British liberal icon Isaiah Berlin, is himself a highly visible spokesman for contemporary liberalism. He is about to publish a new book entitled *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond*. A recent press

release from New York University, where Ignatieff is associated with the university’s Remarque Institute—named after the author of the famous anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*—describes him as a “historian, moral philosopher and cultural analyst.”

Ignatieff begins his *Times* column by citing recent reports by war crimes investigators in Kosovo, who to this point have found 2,108 bodies, a figure that includes Albanian Kosovar civilians killed by Serb forces, Kosovars killed by NATO bombs, KLA fighters and Serb fatalities. He acknowledges that investigators examining the sites of alleged mass graves have in many cases found no evidence to support the war-time claims of NATO leaders.

He goes on to admit that during the war NATO British Prime Minister Tony Blair accused the Serbs of turning Kosovo into a “slaughterhouse” and US Secretary of Defense William Cohen declared that 100,000 Kosovars were missing as a result of Serb atrocities. (He omits Cohen’s public speculation that “They may have been murdered,” and leaves out as well an April, 1999 report by the US State Department that said 500,000 ethnic Albanians were missing and feared dead. He also fails to mention Clinton’s statement at a White House press conference after the war that “tens of thousands of people” had been killed in Kosovo on Milosevic’s orders.)

He notes as well NATO spokesman Jamie Shea’s comparison of Milosevic to the Cambodian mass murderer Pol Pot. Notwithstanding such examples of mass deception, however, Ignatieff concludes: “The NATO leaders’ rhetoric was highly moralistic, but by and large they did not exaggerate the body count. The revisionists’ claim that we were lied to is simply not proven.”

What is the main thrust of this argument? Ignatieff would have us believe that whether the Serbs killed hundreds of thousands of Kosovars, or ten thousand, or fewer can have little bearing on our judgement of the war.

It is, of course, true that Serb massacres occurred, for which

the regime of Slobodan Milosevic and its chauvinist policies bear a major responsibility. But it is not a matter of indifference, from a political as well as a moral standpoint, how many were killed.

Ignatieff cannot have it both ways. Either the war was waged, as the US and NATO said at the time, to halt genocide against the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, or the claims of genocide were false, in which case this highly charged term was cynically used to whip up pro-war hysteria and intimidate opponents of American and European military intervention.

The term genocide has a definite meaning. It is not a catch-all that can be applied when politically expedient to condemn the repressive actions of one or another government. The term evolved during World War II to connote the wholesale slaughter of an entire people. Nazi Germany's "final solution" to the "Jewish problem"—involving the arrest, incarceration and extermination of six million defenseless people—was genocide. The attempt to equate Serb depredations in Kosovo to the Holocaust was a grotesque distortion.

Ignatieff wants to obscure the fact that the claims of genocide in Kosovo were essential to the conduct of the war. Without it, the US and NATO could not have obtained public support, or at least toleration, for the bombing of cities, towns, schools, churches, factories, oil refineries, bridges, water and sanitation installations, television and radio stations—with the hundreds, if not thousands, of civilian casualties and incalculable damage to the infrastructure of an entire country that was the inevitable result. To justify such carnage against a small and weak country, no matter how reactionary the policies of its government, millions of people had to be persuaded that the alternative was a bloodbath comparable to Nazi Germany's crimes against the Jews.

Ignatieff marshals other, no less cynical arguments to justify the war. He makes the bald assertion that if the body count is well below NATO predictions, it is because of Serb efforts to cover up the evidence of their atrocities. "The real problem in establishing how many people actually died in Kosovo," he writes, "is not Western propaganda, but Serb attempts to cover the traces of their crimes."

Considered from the standpoint of NATO claims of genocide, this explanation is patently absurd. The notion that Serb forces, under constant bombardment and in the midst of a rapid retreat, could destroy the evidence of a Kosovan Holocaust does not hold water. Where genocide or mass murder approaching genocidal proportions did occur, as in Nazi-occupied Europe and Rwanda, it was utterly impossible for the perpetrators to destroy the evidence of their systematic slaughter.

Ignatieff goes on to define what he claims is the underlying issue raised by the "revisionists:" What "threshold" of atrocities carried out by a government within its own borders justifies outside intervention? Or, as he puts it: "Just how bad should human rights violations be before we send in the planes and the troops?"

By defining the issue in this way, Ignatieff accepts the basic framework advanced by the US and its European allies to justify the war, i.e., that the aggressor was Milosevic and not the US and NATO, that the war was waged to defend human rights, and that its origins are to be explained entirely from the evil motives of Milosevic, whose hatred for Albanians led to him "cleanse" Kosovo of its majority Albanian population. The role of the US and the European powers in undermining the Yugoslav federation and promoting ethnic nationalism and separatism in all of the former Yugoslav republics—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia—is ignored.

Ignatieff proceeds to sum up the "revisionist" argument as follows: "The revisionists' key claim is that Mr. Milosevic was fighting the KLA, a terrorist group that was executing his soldiers and policemen. He responded in kind, but without genocidal massacre. The descent into massacre and ethnic cleansing occurred only after NATO warplanes attacked."

Ignatieff does not dispute this interpretation. But it leads, for him, not to a criticism of the war, but rather the conclusion that the US and NATO should have intervened sooner and with greater force, including ground troops. Employing a logical slight of hand—the assumption that Serb forces would have launched a campaign of mass expulsion whether or not NATO had launched its air war—he accuses the "revisionists" of implying that "we should have waited until the oppression turned into mass murder."

He continues: "The true lesson of Kosovo might be that we should have intervened in the summer of 1998—when the Serb offensive was beginning."

Ignatieff's argument that the US should have intervened militarily in what he acknowledges was a civil war between the Serb government and separatist guerrillas is not only a justification for American intervention in Kosovo, but a virtual blank check for US intervention against any sovereign nation which, according to Washington, is violating the human rights of its citizens. He in effect provides a rationalization for the United States to establish a neo-colonialist Pax Americana.

Ignatieff's column in the *Times* is indicative of the rightward shift not simply of one individual, but rather an entire layer of liberals and ex-radicals, for whom the Kosovo War became the end point of a protracted political journey into the camp of imperialism.



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