

War crimes tribunal report shows Western powers exaggerated Kosovo victims of ethnic cleansing

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22 August 2000

“The final number of bodies uncovered will be less than 10,000 and probably more accurately determined as between two and three thousand.” This was the conclusion reached by The Hague tribunal into war crimes in Kosovo as reported by press spokesman Paul Risley last Thursday.

In three months of exhumations this summer, the tribunal's international forensic experts found 680 bodies at 150 sites. This was in addition to the 2,108 bodies found at 195 sites last year. “By October we expect to have enough evidence to end the exhumations by foreign teams and they will not be necessary next year,” Risley said.

The figure of 3,000 falls well below those cited during the conflict. At the height of the bombing, Western governments spoke of indiscriminate killings and as many as 100,000 civilians taken out of refugee columns by Serbs. US Defense Secretary William Cohen told CBS News in May 1999 that 100,000 men of military age were missing, and “may have been murdered”. David Scheffer, US envoy for war crimes issues, put the figure even higher, stating that more than 225,000 ethnic Albanian men between the ages of 14 and 59 were missing.

With the end of the NATO bombing campaign, then junior minister at the British Foreign Office Geoff Hoon said on June 17, 1999 that “at least 10,000” Albanian civilians had been killed. This figure was repeated five months later in a memorandum to the House of Commons, said to be based “on a variety of intelligence and other sources.”

The Hague tribunal report has therefore proved politically embarrassing for Western governments and the media alike. Graham Blewitt, deputy prosecutor at

the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, warned against playing what he called a “numbers game”, before alleging that the final death toll could be 4,000 to 5,000, or alternatively that it may never be revealed because it was “known” that many of the bodies had been “incinerated” by the Serbs. NATO said that the figure of 10,000 dead had never been “an alliance estimate”, while its spokesman Mark Laity said, “NATO never said the missing were all dead. The figure we stood by was 10,000. If it's wrong, I'm prepared to put up with a little bit of egg on our face if thousands are alive who were thought to be killed.”

NATO justified its 76-day bombing campaign against Yugoslavia on the grounds of preventing a mass humanitarian disaster. What the Western powers now cynically dismiss as a “numbers game” is the one they played to the hilt prior to the conflict. Exaggerated figures of Serbian atrocities against ethnic Albanians were given out and an equals sign drawn between the Kosovo civil war and the Nazi Holocaust.

This propaganda is refuted by the casualty figures now being confirmed.

There was little or no coverage of the war crimes tribunal's announcement in the US and British press. Most major newspapers were anxious that it was buried, since they had uncritically endorsed NATO's supposed aims and regurgitated its allegations of genocide by Serbia.

Only Britain's *Guardian* newspaper felt it necessary to speak in justification of their support for NATO's bombing in light of The Hague tribunal's initial findings. An August 18 article stated that “commentators yesterday stressed that the new details

should not obscure the fact that the major war crime in the tribunal's indictment of the Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milosevic, and four other Serb officials is the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo and forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of people.”

The same issue carried a lead editorial informing its readers, “NATO's war with Yugoslavia sparked more controversy in this country than any other foreign crisis for half a century.... *The Guardian* shared in the debate and supported the government's decision to intervene.”

The rest of the editorial is taken up with justifying why the newspaper was correct to do so. After claiming that it had subjected all aspects of the war to “close scrutiny”, it noted recent reports that Britain and the US had covered up the inaccuracy of their bombing campaign. Regarding the “exaggerated massacre claims,” the *Guardian* insists, “the charge is more one of misjudgement and manipulation. No one in government could be sure what was happening inside Kosovo when the air strikes were under way. But instead of advocating caution towards atrocity accounts from traumatised refugees, NATO governments tended to repeat them, to maintain support for the bombing.”

The editorial concludes, “Yet the sum of all these criticisms does not change the central issue. Was intervention needed?” The newspaper answers that “massive crimes were being perpetrated in Kosovo. That was why we advocated outside intervention and for all the mistakes and in spite of the lies we continue to believe it was right.”

The *Guardian* does not pose any probing questions about the revised casualty figures. It never asks, for example, what proportion of the 3,000 bodies exhumed were killed prior to the NATO bombing, what proportion were Serb or Albanian and which bodies showed clear signs of having been the victims of torture or summary execution. The UN has no intention of revealing such evidence and the *Guardian* has no intention of demanding that it do so.

The *Guardian's* role in the Kosovo campaign, along with its Sunday sister paper, the *Observer*, was a crucial one—even within the framework of the near unanimous support offered by the media to NATO. The newspapers are widely regarded as the house journals of Britain's liberal intelligentsia and were previously seen as a forum for dissenting views—including criticism of the military activities of the major powers.

Like so many former reformists, liberals and pacifists, however, the *Guardian* and *Observer* have lurched ever further to the right. Their hawkish stand in defence of NATO's bombardment of Serbia aided the Blair government in its efforts to both justify the war and intimidate the relatively small numbers of liberals, intellectuals and artists who maintained an oppositional stance.

The *Observer* editorialised against the war's opponents, claiming in March last year, “There is no alternative.... We have to live in the world as it is, not some Utopia.” *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Freedland wrote on March 25, “The old left needs to look at the world that's actually taking shape. Wednesday's Lords ruling on Pinochet suggests a new brand of international law, one that doesn't allow heads of state to kill and maim indiscriminately, even within their own sovereign lands. The night-sky over Belgrade tells the same story. Together they're making the world a less cosy place for dictators—and safer for the weak and powerless.” Whole articles were devoted to denunciations of those who opposed the war and exposed NATO propaganda, such as the playwright Harold Pinter and journalist John Pilger.

With such a despicable record to defend, the *Guardian* clearly did not feel it could simply ignore The Hague tribunal's latest admissions. Instead, it felt obliged to reiterate NATO's own threadbare rationale for the bombing of Serbia in a pathetic attempt at self-justification. It is to be hoped that those who in the past naively took the newspaper's claim to editorial integrity at face value will draw the appropriate conclusions from this sorry episode.



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