

The Milosevic trial: Damning admissions by former British Liberal Party leader Lord Ashdown

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Lord Paddy Ashdown was the first Western leader to appear as a prosecution witness in the trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. He will in all probability be the only one to do so.

Ashdown was leader of the Liberal Democrat Party in Britain during the 1990s and will become the United Nations High Representative in Bosnia in May.

In April 1999 Ashdown said Milosevic was the “central problem” in Yugoslavia, repeating Western statements that the civil war in Kosovo had only one source: Milosevic’s genocidal policies. He called for Milosevic’s indictment at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and one month later Milosevic was indicted for war crimes.

Ashdown was called by the prosecution to give an eyewitness account of his four-day visit to the Suvo Reka Valley in Kosovo in September 1998. He testified that he saw 16 burned-out villages and spoke to villagers hiding nearby who all told him similar stories, of how the Yugoslav Army had told them to leave their villages before shelling and looting them.

Ashdown said he then consulted with British officials, who agreed the Yugoslav Army action was against the Geneva Convention and could be considered a war crime. On the last day of that September 1998 visit he handed Milosevic a pre-prepared letter from British Prime Minister Tony Blair telling him to stop the “excessive and indiscriminate use of force” in Kosovo. In the courtroom at The Hague trial, Ashdown turned to Milosevic and said, “I said to you that if you took those steps and went on doing this you would end up in this court. And here you are.”

Milosevic has defended the Yugoslav Army action, saying it was involved in a counterinsurgency campaign in Kosovo against a terrorist organisation, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). He insists that anti-terrorist operations are standard practice in all Western countries and the “war against terrorism” has dominated Western policy since the

September 11 attacks.

Therefore Ashdown’s admission to the court that the KLA was a terrorist organisation was a setback for the prosecution. It prompted Milosevic to remark that Ashdown was the first witness to admit that fact. Ashdown also admitted having seen substantial quantities of small arms being smuggled across the border from neighbouring Albania. Last year he wrote that the “KLA rebellion in 1998” lit “the fuse which led to war and NATO’s intervention”.

Whilst admitting that Yugoslav forces were engaged in a counterinsurgency operation, Ashdown’s indictment of Milosevic was that the response to the KLA was an overreaction. The Yugoslav Army went in to “shoot cattle, burn houses, break the stoves in those houses, urinate on those houses,” he said, comparing this to an “indiscriminate scorched earth policy of a kind not seen since the days of the German occupation”.

Ashdown then drew an unfortunate contrast with the British Army, saying it “has never used tanks, artillery, looting and burning to drive people out of their homes, and if we did we would be before this court”. When Milosevic tried to answer this statement by raising the British Army’s role in Northern Ireland, he was stopped by Judge Richard May because his reference to Bloody Sunday was deemed too “political”. Milosevic was referring to the well-known incident when a peaceful civil rights march in 1972 was met by indiscriminate British gunfire that left 14 civilians dead. General Sir Michael Jackson, who led the British forces in Kosovo, was a captain and adjutant to the Parachute Regiment during Bloody Sunday. Ashdown himself served as a soldier in Belfast in 1970 and has written of how the army “arrive as heroes to the oppressed, but soon become the enemy who keeps them from their political ambitions”.

At the trial Ashdown tried to prove Milosevic had a worked-out plan to carve up the Balkans by referring to the dinner he, Ashdown, had with Croatian President Franjo

Tudjman in May 1995. Tudjman sketched a map of Yugoslavia on a menu and drew a line through Bosnia-Herzegovina, saying that in 10 years time one part would belong to Croatia and the other part to Serbia. According to Ashdown, Tudjman and Milosevic seemed to have reached an agreement, but he did not give any direct evidence of Milosevic's involvement.

This story is of dubious pedigree in that it bears a somewhat remarkable similarity to a famous event some 50 years earlier. In October 1944, Joseph Stalin met with Winston Churchill to discuss post-World War II Europe. Sliding a slip of paper suggesting a 50:50 split of the Balkans across to Stalin, Churchill wrote, "There was a slight pause. Then he took his blue pencil and made a large tick upon it, and passed it back to us. It was all settled in no more time than it takes to set it down."

More important in some respects than the veracity of the events described by Ashdown is the fact that he should cite the late Franjo Tudjman at all as a reliable source. The evidence of Tudjman being an advocate of ethnic cleansing is not disputed. He was an admirer of the Ustashe Nazi collaborators in World War II. In his book entitled *Nationalism in Contemporary Europe*, Tudjman argued that Bosnia-Herzegovina should form part of Croatia because "together they comprise an indivisible, geographic and economic entity".

After Bosnia declared independence in 1992 and a civil war broke out, audiotapes recorded Tudjman talking about "cleansing" the area around Baranja. In 1995, having rearmed in contravention of a UN arms embargo, and with secret US support, Croatia launched Operation Storm, a bloody offensive resulting in the flight of at least 250,000 Serb refugees from the Krajina region and the establishment of Croatian control over much of Bosnia. It remains the greatest single instance of ethnic cleansing in the Balkan conflict.

Rather belatedly, British Foreign Office Minister Tony Lloyd explained to a Parliamentary committee in 2000 that the Balkan region was dominated by Tudjman "and if anyone deserved to appear before the war crimes tribunal alongside Milosevic, it was him. I regret to say, however, that he did not."

According to the report published by the same committee, it was Milosevic who—with the encouragement of the West—went to the Bosnian Serb Parliament in 1993 to persuade it, unsuccessfully, to accept the Vance-Owen plan. Drawn up by another Liberal Democrat leader, Lord David Owen and US envoy Cyrus Vance, the plan envisaged Bosnia being divided up into 10 autonomous provinces or cantons largely along ethnic lines. Of Milosevic, Owen said he was "heading towards leading Serbia back into the

European family. I have no doubt of that."

At the trial, Milosevic drew attention to the extraordinary level of activity in the Balkans carried out by Ashdown—the leader of a small opposition party in Britain. As a young man, Ashdown served in the Royal Marines and the Special Boat Service—the navy's equivalent of the SAS. Afterwards he is supposed to have worked for the British intelligence service MI6, whilst serving as First Secretary of the British mission to the United Nations in Geneva. Towards the end of his career as Liberal Democrat leader in the late 1990s, he made several expenses-paid trips to Yugoslavia courtesy of George Soros's Open Society Institute. The pro-capitalist institute operates mainly in former Stalinist countries and boasts of the "exceptional levels of cooperation and coordination" between Western institutions in the Yugoslav election campaign in 2000, which led to the overthrow of Milosevic.

What service did Ashdown perform for the Soros foundation and the British government? Although he poses as protector of the Kosovars and a humanitarian envoy—he gave evidence to The Hague with tears in his eyes—Ashdown will be remembered as the most bellicose and consistent advocate of a full-scale ground war and occupation in the Balkans. A recent *Economist* article entitled "Paddy Ashdown, latest proconsul: Must outsiders run the Balkans indefinitely?" described Ashdown's calls for a stronger military presence in the early 1990s in the Balkans when European governments "dithered".

In 1999 Ashdown warned the British parliament about the conflict in Kosovo. He said there would not be a "durable and sustainable peace" unless the Western powers established "by law or in fact, an international protectorate." He explained that, "Rambouillet is one way to do that, but if Milosevic will not agree we shall do it anyway. The only way to do that and to secure peace is to have troops on the ground."

Last summer—as the threat of civil war grew in Macedonia—Ashdown said, "If the West is to extract peace out of this witches brew, it will only be by taking the initiative." He called for a "third major NATO deployment" and "a wider regional settlement—a Dayton for the southern Balkans."



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