

Kosovo: Evidence of KLA torture and murders revealed by BBC

Paul Mitchell
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Fresh revelations have emerged about torture and murders carried out by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) during the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia in 1999 and the occupation that followed.

Allegations that the KLA maintained a secret network of prisons in their bases in Kosovo and neighbouring Albania were made on the BBC programmes “Crossing Continents” and “Newsnight,” broadcast April 9. This is probably the first time a major news network has carried out an investigation into the claims which have been largely ignored, even suppressed, for more than a decade. According to “Crossing Continents,” the evidence reveals “another side to the conflict which the world was not supposed to see.”

Reporter Michael Montgomery, who has spent years investigating the disappearance of thousands of ethnic Albanians, Kosovo Serbs and Roma gypsy civilians during and after the conflict, spoke to sources, including relatives of those who died and are still missing, and former KLA soldiers. Many still remain extremely wary talking publicly about what happened. They face intimidation and some have been killed, according to United Nations officials.

One KLA prisoner explained, “I’ve seen a lot, people beaten, stabbed, hit with steel pipes, left without eating for 5 or 6 days. People had bullet proof vests on and were shot to see if it was working, thrown into tombs, beaten up and killed.”

“What can you feel when you see those things?” he added. “It’s something that is stuck in my mind for the rest of my life. You cannot do those things to people, not even to animals.”

Eight former KLA soldiers spoke to Montgomery, some saying they were “disgusted” by the atrocities that took place and others saying that it is time to come to terms with the past now that the goal of Kosovan independence has been reached.

One described how captured Serbs and Roma civilians were hidden from passing NATO troops and probably taken across the border to Albania and killed. “Now, looking back,

I know that some of the things that were done to innocent civilians were wrong. But the people who did these things act as if nothing happened, and continue to hurt their own people, Albanians.”

Another recounted how he drove trucks packed with shackled prisoners—mainly Serbian civilians—to Albania where they were tortured and killed: “I was sick. I was just waiting for it to end. It was hard. I thought we were fighting a war [of liberation] but this was something completely different.”

Montgomery visited the site where some of these atrocities happened—a derelict factory in the Albanian town of Kukes, which was a strategic KLA military base supplying hundreds of recruits, weapons, food and medicines—and the town of Burrel in the centre of the country, where the KLA operated a barracks.

Information about terrible activities taking place at Burrel first reached the International Centre for the Red Cross in 2000 after KLA fighters reported that Serb civilians were taken there in 1999 and their organs removed and sold abroad for transplant operations. An investigation at a farmhouse carried out by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) found syringes, empty bottles of drugs including strong relaxants, drip bags and other surgical equipment. Human blood covered the floor.

The Burrel atrocities only became public knowledge last year, after ICTY Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte, now Swiss ambassador to Argentina, published them in her book, *The Hunt*. While criticising UNMIK officials for allowing former KLA members to carry out “a massive campaign of systematic harassment and intimidation of witnesses” at the tribunal and protecting Kosovo’s former prime minister and top KLA commander, Ramush Haradinaj, from prosecution for war crimes, del Ponte revealed that an investigation into the “organ harvesting” at Burrel was dropped because it was “impossible to conduct.” (See: Kosovo: The Hague acquits former PM Haradinaj of war crimes amid alleged witness intimidation, 16 April 2008)

In “Crossing Continents,” former head of UNMIK’s Office for Missing Persons and Forensics Jose Pablo Baraybar explains, “There were people that are certainly alive that were in Kukes, in that camp, as prisoners. Those people saw other people there, both Albanians and non-Albanians. There were members of the KLA leadership going through that camp. Many names were mentioned, and I would say that that is an established fact.”

Baraybar revealed that UNMIK was aware that the KLA operated a “loose network of detention centres” and that there was enough evidence to warrant further enquires, but “no proper investigation was ever carried out.” Since then some of the evidence, Baraybar claims, has been destroyed even though he would have thought well-established “chains of custody” for documents should have prevented that happening.

Amnesty International spokesperson Sian Jones told “Crossing Continents” that UNMIK “chose not to investigate” the war crimes and was “notoriously slow in going after KLA officers.” There were “lots of allegations, lots of victims but little true justice,” Jones continued.

Jones said it was “absolutely reprehensible” that both the United Nations, which “is supposed to maintain international standards,” and NATO neglected the security of civilians after the war, especially embattled minorities like the Serbs.

“I think that the most shocking thing really is that the international community was sent in with responsibility for providing a safe and secure environment in Kosovo and these acts happened right under their noses... it was a massive failure to protect minority communities from human rights abuses when that international community was supposed to protect them.”

To this day, former Kosovo prime minister and opposition MP Agim Ceku (ex-chief of the KLA headquarters) denies the abuses. “I don’t believe them. I’ve not heard them,” he told Montgomery.

“Truth and justice is on our side. It was a clean war and a clean army,” he added.

Kosovo prime minister and former KLA political director Hashim Thaci told “Newsnight” reporter Nick Thorpe, “Some people did some bad things after the war. Some people misused the KLA uniform. People were coming from different parts and pretending they were from the KLA and did some bad things in the name of the KLA.”

“We have distanced ourselves from these people. The misuse was minimal,” he concluded.

Although “Crossing Continents” and “Newsnight” have pursued the question of KLA atrocities, they did not examine why “the world was not supposed to see” them.

The fact is the KLA played a key role in the United States’

strategy of breaking up the Yugoslav republic into its constituent parts, thus ensuring US hegemony within the Balkan region and threatening the broader geo-strategic interests of Russia.

NATO launched the war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 on the pretext that the regime of Slobodan Milosevic was carrying out ethnic cleansing in Kosovo—a charge the ICTY was unable to prove.

However, the real origins of the Kosovo crisis lie in the economic breakdown of the former Yugoslavia that was fuelled by the IMF and World Bank’s structural adjustment plans in the late 1980s and early 1990s. To divert social opposition to the destruction of jobs and living standards and to enhance their own positions, ex-Stalinist bureaucrats and communalist demagogues in all of the former Yugoslav republics promoted nationalist sentiments and contended for support from the various imperialist powers. Militant Serbian and Albanian nationalism emerged as two sides of this process of social and economic disintegration.

The KLA carried out a series of military attacks aimed at destabilising Kosovo and provoking Western intervention. Western governments and the media began glorifying the KLA as a liberation movement fighting to free Kosovo from a tyrannical Milosevic regime, while it served as a US proxy force on the ground to complement NATO’s aerial bombardment campaign.

Kosovo declared independence last year, after nine years of UNMIK occupation, but the vast majority of the population remains condemned to poverty and unemployment. Last year, Human Rights Watch reported that “Violence, impunity for common and political crimes, intimidation and discrimination are commonplace,” particularly against the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Over 200,000 displaced Serbs have been unable to return or are fearful of doing so, and others have been driven out or live behind barricades and razor-wire in a northern ghetto in Kosovo.



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