

Playwright Harold Pinter presents a powerful case in opposition to NATO bombardment of Serbia

By Ann Talbot
7 May 1999

Playwright Harold Pinter, an outspoken opponent of NATO's war against Serbia, presented a coherent and well-argued case opposing the military action on BBC 2 television last Tuesday evening. Using news footage and interviews specially recorded for the programme, Pinter showed how the media are being manipulated, and that the humanitarian justification for the war is false.

In a powerful condemnation of the war, Pinter described the NATO onslaught against Serbia as "a bandit action, committed with no serious consideration of the consequences, ill-judged, ill-thought, miscalculated, an act of deplorable machismo".

Pinter was shown questioning British Defence Minister George Robertson at a news conference. The playwright, citing the Geneva Convention outlawing military attacks on civilian targets, demanded to know how the bombing of a Serbian TV station could be described as anything other than murder. "Mr. Pinter has obviously got a new occupation now but I know his views," was the arrogant reply from Robertson. He justified the bombing by claiming that such targets were the "brains behind the brutality", and "part and parcel of the apparatus that is driving ethnic genocide".

Such claims--which have been used repeatedly to justify whatever horrors NATO perpetrates--were challenged in the programme. Former Labour Foreign Secretary Dennis Healey rejected the idea that the expulsion of the Kosovar Albanians was the same as genocide. He pointed out that NATO's actions were contrary to the United Nations charter, which Britain had signed. NATO was bombing a fellow UN member, without UN authority.

Jake Lynch of Sky News explained how the news media are being manipulated to support the aggressive war drive. When NATO bombed a refugee convoy there was a delay of several days before the cockpit video, normally shown at the next daily press conference, was released to the media. This was to enable NATO to cause the maximum confusion, he

explained. First NATO claimed there had been two separate incidents. The next day this was amended to one incident, and then later a US Brigadier General cited the figure of two again.

Lynch said this was a graphic exercise in news management. When the video was eventually shown, an audible murmur went round the press conference--"that's a tractor". Lynch pointed out that if it had been shown straight away, without the lavishly composed graphics, the "PR impact would have been much more negative for NATO". Reporters were sent to Brussels to report the war, not to help NATO, yet there was a slippage in journalistic technique. NATO "confirms" things have happened; Belgrade only ever "claims" things.

Pinter gave a detailed account of the bombing of the Serbian television station. He showed the letter in which NATO spokesman Jamie Shea had assured the International Federation of Journalists only days before the bombing that the television station would not be attacked. Philip Knightley, author of *The First Casualty--History of Propaganda*, explained why the TV station was targeted: "NATO didn't want it revealed that it had bombed a civilian convoy and left to itself would never have revealed it until the war was over. But they were forced to admit to the bombing of the civilian convoy because Serbian TV said that it had happened, then took Western reporters in a bus to show them the results of it."

NATO had rightly described the murder of an anti-Milosevic journalist as a brutal act of repression, Pinter said, yet they have never expressed any regret for the killing of those people who were told they were safe at the TV station. "Both are ugly murders of human beings who propagate words or images that somebody else doesn't like."

Turning to the refugee crisis Pinter showed that there is a direct correlation between the number of refugees and the amount of popular support for NATO bombing. He derided the talk of moral authority, demanding to know "who

bestowed it on the NATO countries?... Bombs and power--that's your moral authority." The moral position of the US was highly ambiguous, he went on. "When human rights groups discovered US jets used by the Turkish airforce to bomb Kurdish villages within its own territory the Clinton administration found ways to evade laws requiring suspension of arms deliveries. 1.4 million Kurds fled Turkish repression from 1990 to 1994. Yet Turkey is invited to the top of the table at NATO's birthday party."

The US denied that genocide was taking place in Rwanda--with 800,000 dead--because it was not in the interests of the United States to be part of a UN intervention force. But it calls the Serbian ethnic cleansing "genocide" because it was politically expedient to do so, he continued. He also made clear his disgust for Prime Minister Tony Blair: "Under the rhetoric, Blair's real character has become clear. There's nothing like a missile, there's nothing like power, it was really worth waiting for!"

Pinter revealed the US record of complicity with ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. The greatest single act of displacement and ethnic cleansing in the entire Yugoslav war was that of 200,000 Serbs from Croatia in 1995. He showed an extract from an interview with the then US Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, who said of this episode, "It always had the prospect of simplifying matters." Pinter explained that the "operation was carried out by officers trained by NPRI, an organisation of US army veteran commanders and was armed with a great deal of US weaponry, in an attack of which the US had full knowledge." Its purpose was "creating convenient ethnically-pure maps without committing US ground forces."

In his memoirs, US Ambassador Holbrook admits to encouraging Croatian assaults on the Serbs, telling the Croatians to hurry up before the Serbs regroup, and then merely rebuking the Croatian leader, Franjo Tudjman, during their cosy chats. Madeline Albright, then US ambassador to the UN, timed the release of aerial photos of mass graves of Muslims killed by Serbs at Srebrenica for the same day as the Croats were expelling the Serbs, in order to divert the world media's attention. These photos had been taken weeks before by a US spy satellite but were held back in order to mask one atrocity with another.

Pinter also showed the cynical way in which the US government deals with the UN. In 1995 the bombing of the Bosnian Serbs needed direct authority from the UN, but Secretary General Boutros Boutros Gali was unwilling to grant it. So Madeline Albright by-passed the secretary general, getting permission from his deputy Kofi Annan, while Boutros Boutros Gali could not be contacted as he was on a commercial flight. Kofi Annan effectively secured

himself the secretary general's job that day, Pinter declared. Now, the US did not even bother to contact the UN.

The US had exacerbated the situation in Kosovo, Pinter argued. He pointed out that over the course of 10 years, before the West had begun negotiating with the hard line KLA and despite the fact that war was often raging in other parts of former Yugoslavia, Kosovo saw tension but little bloodshed. In fact, a comparable number of people were killed there as in Northern Ireland. However, once the KLA began their uprising 2,000 died in one year of violence.

Mark Almond of Oxford University, and a writer on Balkan history, was interviewed about the Rambouillet talks. "In a little-noticed annexe to the agreement, NATO insisted that its forces should be allowed to have freedom of movement over the whole of Yugoslavia, not just Kosovo. There was no real constraint over what sort of forces there would be, and, to a great extent, what their activities would be." Pinter explained what this meant: whether "you are a dictator, the prime minister of a democratic country, or even Mrs. Thatcher, and your sovereign territory is going to be occupied, you might as well resist or your time in power is over."

Almond said there was a cynical aspect to the build-up of the crisis, with "deliberate provocation of reprisals by the KLA". He went on, "This aspect has been neglected in the press. It wasn't simply unprovoked and meaningless racial violence on the part of the Serbs--though we've seen quite a lot of that too--but a complex struggle for power over Kosovo, in which the loss of lives of ordinary Kosovo Albanians and others were really treated as pawns."

Showing video footage of crowds on a bridge over the Danube inside Serbia, Pinter commented, "Only two years ago hundreds of thousands of young people were out on the streets against Milosevic. Our blundering policy of bombing now finds them linking hands on bridges waiting to be hit." He warned that if ground troops were sent in, civilian casualties would mount and Kosovo would be made a wasteland. "By the time NATO land forces will have finished their work there will be nothing left to liberate". This was the "crazed logic of escalation," he said.

Pinter brought together academics, politicians and relief workers in condemning the war against Serbia. The programme showed that opposition to it runs deep.

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