

Kosovan "mass graves" agitation: US media seeks to justify NATO war

the Editorial Board
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As NATO forces extend their reach throughout Kosovo, the American and British media are seeking to bludgeon public opinion and justify the war against Yugoslavia after the fact. At the center of this propaganda effort is a series of reports on alleged mass grave sites found by NATO soldiers and Kosovo Liberation Army guerrillas.

The two most important American daily newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, each published lengthy and lurid reports Wednesday about the extent of the carnage wrought in Kosovo during the ten weeks between the onset of the NATO bombing and the Yugoslav capitulation. Similar reports appeared on the American television networks.

In addition to reinforcing the Clinton administration's claims that American warplanes dropped tens of thousands of tons of bombs on Yugoslavia for "humanitarian" reasons, the press campaign over alleged Serb atrocities provides a pretext to justify the expulsion of the 200,000 Kosovan Serbs from the province. This process has already begun, with tens of thousands of Serb civilians fleeing as KLA forces take over towns in the south and east of Kosovo.

There has been little coverage of the flight of the Serbs, which will escalate as NATO and KLA forces enter the more heavily Serb-populated areas in northeastern Kosovo and along the northern border with Montenegro and Serbia proper.

Equally significant is the abandonment of any media reporting from within Serbia on the casualties of the US-NATO bombing campaign. For every heart-rending article about the deaths of Albanian civilians in the ethnic civil war in Kosovo, an equally moving account could be provided of the deaths of Serbian civilians under NATO bombing.

Moreover, the suffering and death in Serbia will continue, as the long-term impact of the destruction of electricity, water supplies, roads, bridges, hospitals and the basic infrastructure of modern life is felt. It is all but impossible to estimate the ultimate effect of environmental contamination caused by the destruction of oil refineries and storage depots and the radiation released by US missiles containing depleted uranium.

The current US-NATO propaganda campaign makes no attempt to square today's atrocity stories with yesterday's. A case in point is Thursday's release by the British foreign office of an estimate that 10,000 Albanian Kosovars had been killed in 130 separate massacres, a figure that was given enormous international publicity.

David Gowan, a British government spokesman on the investigation into war crimes charges in Kosovo, said, "It's very difficult to give an overall number but what's clear is that the picture is far worse than we thought." This comment is inexplicable except as an attempt to extract the maximum propaganda value from the pictures now coming out of Kosovo. The British estimate actually represents a lowering, by at least a factor of ten, of the most farfetched claims made during the war, when US and NATO officials declared that between 100,000 and 225,000 Albanian men were missing and potentially murdered.

Nor is there any reason to believe that the figure of 10,000 is accurate. The press accounts of the British claim conceal the fact that Whitehall prepared this estimate several weeks ago, based on "military and media reports as well as interviews with refugees in Albania and Macedonia." In other words, the figure of 10,000 is not based on any tabulation of graves or bodies actually *found* in Kosovo, although media reports give that impression.

Official US statements on the alleged death toll in Kosovo are equally suspect. Pentagon spokesman Mike Doubleday said NATO soldiers had "come upon or heard about 90 suspected mass grave sites since entering Kosovo on Saturday." There are a sufficient number of qualifiers in that sentence to send up many warning flags. What initially appears to be significant evidence of several thousand deaths turns out to be more rumor and speculation than fact: these are "suspected" sites, some only "heard about," which troops have "come upon"—i.e., not investigated.

What becomes a "suspected" mass grave site, more often than not, is a claim or suspicion voiced by someone from the KLA—officer, soldier, interpreter—to a NATO military commander, who in turn communicates it to an American or British reporter. No one in this chain is an objective observer. All have a vested interest in depicting the conditions in Kosovo in as dark and incriminating a fashion as possible, to justify the US-NATO war.

It is worthwhile to analyze one of the major reports on the mass graves, which appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* Wednesday, written by John Kifner and Ian Fisher. The report focuses on the town of Djakovica, in southwestern Kosovo near the border with Albania, and cites claims that as many as 1,000 Albanian men were seized there by the Serbs, taken away and presumably murdered.

While the impression is given throughout the article that the events in Kosovo were the outcome of a deliberate campaign of ethnic cleansing, driven by the genocidal hatred of Serbs for Albanians, a number of facts are acknowledged which suggest a different explanation.

Kifner and Fisher write: "Djakovica has long been a center of Albanian nationalism. The whole region, known as Has on both sides of the border, is regarded by the interrelated Albanian clans as one entity."

And later: "The Kosovo Liberation Army bases are on the other side of the craggy mountains, in lawless northern Albania, and their supply routes run down the mountain passes into the valleys here. Thus the town has enormous strategic importance.

"Tactically, the area lies on the main highway close to the border."

These circumstances suggest that Djakovica was a particularly brutal focus of military conflict between the Yugoslav Army and armed KLA secessionists, the kind of civil war which in country after country produces atrocities, especially among civilians linked to the guerrilla fighters.

But instead of this conclusion, the *Times* writers add, without any substantiation: "In the Serbs' well-planned campaign, mass killings in the first days spread terror, emptying villages near the borders, encouraging

others to follow on the routes now cleared."

Then come four or five examples of alleged mass graves, with a total number of victims approaching 200, but with little proof that those buried are civilians, rather than KLA fighters, or even that any bodies are buried at all. One example is a "patch of churned earth" pointed out by KLA soldiers who said up to 100 people were buried there.

The choice of words throughout the article is quite conscious. Albanian deaths are the result of "massacres." The possibility that Albanians—and Serbs—might have been killed as the result of fighting between the KLA and Serb forces, especially in this town of admittedly "enormous strategic importance," is nowhere raised.

The article is written as though atrocities in Kosovo come as a shock. There is a tone of moral indignation, not found, for instance, when the *New York Times* writes about the deaths of Palestinians on the West Bank, or Kurds in Turkey, or Tamils in Sri Lanka, let alone the victims of American military violence in Iraq, Somalia or Panama.

The reports in the *Times*, and reports and editorial commentary throughout the American media, routinely assert that the Milosevic regime in Belgrade executed a deliberate plan to expel the Albanian population of Kosovo in order to ensure Serbian control of the territory. These claims, made without any evidence, run up against one central obstacle—the fact that the mass flight of Albanian Kosovars did not begin until after the NATO bombing commenced on March 24.

The US-NATO version of events is that the bombing itself played no role in the flight of the Kosovars. Given that the bombing of Serbia itself resulted in the displacement of an estimated one million Serb civilians—a fact virtually unreported in the American media—that is difficult to believe.

But if one concedes, for the sake of argument, that NATO shares no responsibility for the exodus of the Kosovo Albanians, then another conclusion must follow. Since the mass expulsions did not get under way until after the NATO bombing started and the 2,000 observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had been withdrawn, it follows that Milosevic's plan for "ethnic cleansing" was predicated on the onset of an air war against his country. Indeed, to be consistent one would have to conclude that Milosevic positively desired devastation at the hands of the US and NATO and deliberately provoked the air war, so as to carry out his plan for ethnic cleansing under its cover.

The more one examines the claim of a Serb master plan to purge Kosovo of Albanians, the less it holds together. Another explanation is more persuasive. The Milosevic regime had plans for a military offensive against the KLA, which included the forced removal of Albanian civilians in areas, especially near the Albanian border, which were key KLA supply routes. Similar methods have been employed in virtually all "counter-insurgency" wars of the 20th century, nowhere more brutally than by the US in Vietnam.

The combination of this intensified civil war and the NATO bombing touched off a killing spree in which the most fanatical and brutal Serb nationalist elements, especially paramilitary groups like the "White Eagles," played a major role. This would explain why in some regions terrible atrocities were carried out, while in many areas, especially those where the Serb population was larger and more secure and the KLA had less influence, the Albanian population suffered considerably less.

One significant account published in the *New York Times* Wednesday, but buried on its inside pages, supports this analysis. The article is by Steven Erlanger, who was the *Times* correspondent in Belgrade during the bombing and one of a handful of Western journalists who have at times written with a degree of objectivity.

Erlanger visited the Pec in western Kosovo, the province's second largest city, and interviewed an Albanian woman who had worked for the OSCE monitors. She said: "When NATO started bombing, the police and the paramilitaries started destroying everything that was Albanian." The

reporter detailed the destruction in the city "by Serb forces and paramilitaries in their rampage of revenge when NATO began bombing Yugoslavia in March." This characterization suggests that the NATO bombing played an indispensable role in touching off the wave of atrocities against Albanians.

The political motivation for the barrage of atrocity stories in the American media is spelled out in an editorial published in the *Times* on Thursday. Under the headline, "Lessons of the Balkan War," the editors state ominously, "This was the first military conflict since the end of the cold war fought primarily for humanitarian purposes. It will probably not be the last."

The *Times* declares that the intervention into Yugoslavia "is a powerful signal to other tyrants that the instigation of ethnic violence, even within their own borders, can reach a point that the world will not tolerate." This is the language of colonialism, in which a handful of the most powerful imperialist countries trample on the sovereignty and national rights of lesser powers, even as they presume to speak for "the world." In the 19th century, military intervention and occupation by Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Holland and Italy of large parts of Africa and Asia were given a moral gloss with phrases like "the white man's burden." Going into the 21st century the rhetoric has changed, but the content remains essentially the same.

The *Times* does not name the countries that could become the next Kosovos, but the manipulation of ethnic antagonisms would provide similar pretexts for US intervention across a broad swathe of southeastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, all territories formerly incorporated into or dominated by the Soviet Union.

According to the *Times*, "the immediate hazard in Kosovo was a demonic assault on the principles of a civilized society. NATO bombed Serbia for 78 days to combat lethal ethnic cleansing, to reverse the expulsion of more than a million ethnic Albanians from their homes and to prevent Slobodan Milosevic from terrorizing the Balkans."

At another point the editorial states: "The mass graves, gutted buildings and torched farmhouses of Kosovo are not the inevitable product of military conflict. They are the result of a premeditated assault by Mr. Milosevic against ethnic Albanians."

We have examined elsewhere the complex historical background to the war in Yugoslavia, which bears no relation to the simplistic version of the *Times*. It should simply be pointed out that when NATO began bombing, neither "lethal ethnic cleansing" nor the flight of the Kosovars had yet taken place. As for Milosevic and the Balkans, the Serbian ruler has never intervened beyond the borders of the former Yugoslavia. It was the US and NATO which, in the course of the war, bombed Bulgaria, blocked shipping in Romania, turned Albania, Macedonia, Hungary and Greece into military staging areas and converted the Balkans as a whole into a war zone.

There was a premeditated assault in the Balkan War of 1999. It was the deliberate attack on a small nation of 11 million people by a coalition of 19 of the richest and most powerful countries in the world, spearheaded by the world's bully, the United States of America.

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