

The Kosovo war: between two eras

By Martin Shaw,
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Ten years ago, on 24 March 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) launched a bombing campaign against Serbia over the repression by the Slobodan Milosevic regime of the majority Albanian population in the southern province of Kosovo. The assault is widely remembered as the beginning of a war that was to last seventy-eight days, until a United Nations [resolution](#) [1] and agreement on the ground that would see Serbian forces withdraw from Kosovo while leaving its final constitutional status as contested as before.

In fact, the attacks of 24 March (limited in the first instance to Kosovo) and subsequent weeks (when they were extended to Belgrade and other parts of Serbia proper) were part of a larger and [longer](#) [2] pattern of events. The war in [Kosovo](#) [3] had begun over a year earlier when Slobodan Milosevic, Serbia's president, responded to a growing insurgency by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) with a brutal counterinsurgency. In the next months - and in a pattern familiar from earlier phases of the ex-Yugoslav wars in 1992-95 - Albanian villages were torched, suspected KLA supporters massacred, and tens of thousands of people in the territory displaced. Milosevic continued the repression despite an agreement with [Richard Holbrooke](#) [4] (then Bill Clinton's envoy to Yugoslavia, now Barack Obama's to Afghanistan and Pakistan); the west then failed to impose a settlement in talks at Rambouillet, near Paris, to ensure that it was halted. Nato [intervention](#) [5] followed; by then, over a thousand people (most, but not all, Albanians) had died in Kosovo.

Nato's bombing was attacked vigorously by sections of the international left as a new kind of ("liberal", or "humanitarian") imperialism, which invoked Tony Blair's crusading [speech](#) [6] in Chicago on 22 April 1999 as a moralising [justification](#) [6] for violent and illegitimate interference in the affairs of sovereign states.

The problems with this view included the erasure of even the immediate background of conflict in the [region](#) [7]. By 1999 there had been almost eight years of war and genocide, whose roots lay in [Slobodan Milosevic's](#) [7] political use in 1987 and after of complaints by the Serbian minority in Kosovo as a springboard towards power in Serbia and the then intact Yugoslav Federation.

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True, Milosevic was not the only leader to blame for the breakdown of Yugoslavia and Serbs not the only party to commit extensive atrocities. Yet his accession [8] to power in the largest of the Yugoslav republics was the catalyst for the crisis, and he was (directly and indirectly) behind the Serbian nationalist campaigns that initiated the wars and was responsible for far greater suffering and death than any other. When large-scale violence finally arrived in Kosovo in 1998 - three years after the Dayton accords [9] which had concluded the 1992-95 war in Bosnia, but which left Milosevic in office and the Kosovo question unresolved - Milosevic's Serbia was again the main perpetrator. This time, it was a challenge the west could not ignore.

The Yugoslav difference

The tenth anniversary of the Nato campaign in Kosovo - which in turn coincides with the alliance's sixtieth anniversary summit [10] on 3-4 April 2009, jointly hosted by France and Germany - has been somewhat unremarked by both its opponents and supporters (in Serbia [11] itself apart). This may owe something to the fact that it has been overshadowed by the Iraq war four years later, which was more of a "global" event (again, the bombing of the Chinese embassy [12] in Belgrade on 9 May apart) and one even more passionately disputed than Kosovo. It may also be because what happened in Kosovo contrasts so painfully with events elsewhere in post-cold-war Europe, now vividly memorialised in this twentieth-anniversary year since 1989.

The difference was largely over the relationship between democracy and nationalism. Czechoslovakia (for example) experienced a peaceful ("velvet") revolution [13] that brought democracy from below, which allowed the release of national energies and sentiments to be accommodated by a conflict-free separation [14] into two states. In Yugoslavia (like the post-Soviet Caucasus), the opening of political space and limited democratic reform was accompanied by a fomenting of nationalism from above by irresponsible leaders, and the use of violence to settle disputes.

In Kosovo, local Albanian leaders had hoped that - given Albanians' 90% preponderance in the population - an extension of democracy would consolidate their rule. Instead Milosevic reduced Kosovo's constitutional status within Serbia in 1989-90, expelled Albanians from all state institutions and used Kosovo's vote in the Yugoslav presidency in a bid for Serbian dominance in the federation. When Slovenian and Croatian leaders resisted to the point of seeking independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav National Army attempted to prevent the breakaways. Slovenia was allowed, after a half-hearted and abortive ten-day military campaign, to secede; but in Croatia, Serbian forces practiced the first genocidal violence (euphemistically called "ethnic cleansing") in Europe since the messy aftermath of 1945. When Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence in 1992, Serbs carried out larger-scale genocidal expulsions against Bosnian Muslims and others, and soon Croatian nationalists in Bosnia opened a similar campaign.

The road to war

Kosovo's Albanian leaders had escaped war and genocide in the early 1990s through a policy of non-violent resistance that avoided provoking Serbian power (and arguably because Serbian forces were otherwise engaged); but they were poorly rewarded by the west. By 1995, United States-backed Croatian and Bosnian forces were making some progress against the Serbs; the massacre at Srebrenica [14] forced the international community at last to act forcefully; and Bill Clinton (facing re-election the following year) saw the need to force a settlement. All these factors influenced the agreement at Dayton [14] in November 1995.

But Kosovo, because it was a province of Serbia rather than a republic (and because its conflict had not taken violent form) was left out of the process. In response, the KLA emerged to wage armed struggle against Serbian power and provoke a crisis [15] in which the west would have to intervene. For Clinton and the newly elected Tony Blair - who with his foreign secretary, Robin Cook, broke with the policy [16] of the previous Conservative government of (effectively pro-Serbian) disengagement from Yugoslavia - it was not acceptable for Milosevic to start another campaign so soon after Serbia had been brought under control in Bosnia.

There was, then, new determination when the March 1999 attacks were launched - but also illusion. Nato was no more capable than the KLA of directly halting Serb assaults on the civilian population. Clinton was initially firm - so much so that he proclaimed that the policy of aerial bombardment would exclude other tactics - and most European leaders agreed that Nato troops could not be risked on the ground. Even Nato fighter-pilots were not to risk flying lower than around 5,000 metres, where anti-aircraft fire might have hit them. Thus Nato relied on high-level bombing alone, an approach that (however precisely targeted) inevitably involved casualties among the Serb - and Albanian - civilian populations. This was the most blatant case of "risk-transfer war [20]" where the risks of fighting are transferred to civilians (see The New Western Way of War [21], [Polity, 2005]).

The result was overall a relatively low-casualty campaign, with around 500 civilian deaths (and a similar number of Yugoslav military); so "successful" was this policy that *not a single* Nato soldier or airman was killed by Serbian fire.

The Nato calculation

An even more serious consequence of Nato's absence on the ground was that it left Slobodan Milosevic free to retaliate by attacking the very civilians in whose name the bombings were launched. In the days after the aerial attacks started, Serb forces launched their most vicious and ambitious assault yet: murdering the men in Albanian villages and driving out the women and children, apparently in a genocidal thrust to destroy much of Albanian society in Kosovo (perhaps too as the intended prelude to resettlement of the region with Serb refugees from other parts of Yugoslavia).

These operations killed up to 10,000 Kosovo Albanians (according to the Independent International Commission on Kosovo [22]), and 1.5 million people - almost the entire population - fled or were expelled. Hundreds of thousands made for the hills, where they eked out a precarious existence for the next ten weeks. Almost a million made for the borders - where many were fleeced of their valuables by Serbian soldiers before crossing - and ended up in fast-improvised refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania. There, global media publicised their

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plight and thus increased pressure on Nato leaders, who now had only until the autumn to ensure their return to Kosovo.

In short, Nato might have chosen to confront Milosevic but it woefully underestimated its enemy. Nato initially assumed that a limited, demonstrative bombing campaign would be sufficient to make the Serbian leader back down - perhaps using the assault on Serbian cities [23] to tell his people that he had no alternative. However he failed to follow the script, and instead read weakness into Nato's approach. Nato leaders then had no choice but to escalate the bombing and, when this still did not budge Milosevic, to revisit their exclusive reliance on air-power. Tony Blair was alone in being keen on a ground invasion, though it seems clear that Clinton allowed US military leaders, like General Wesley Clark, to begin preparing [24] for this; Milosevic was probably aware of this when he changed tack and agreed to the peace plan, backed by his Russian allies, under which Serbian troops withdrew in June 1999.

The shadow of Iraq

The war was successful from an Albanian nationalist point of view, in that it led to the population's return [25] and removed Serbian control. In recent years, moreover, the west has finally moved Kosovo to the conditional independence it declared [25] on 17 February 2008 (although this remains unrecognised by many states which fear its secessionist precedent). It could also be accounted a success - though a close-run one - from Nato's standpoint, in that the immediate goals were achieved and the alliance's credibility salvaged (this in its fiftieth anniversary year); the limited success in Kosovo also enabled it to contain the low-level but potentially destabilising violence in Macedonia that followed.

But these achievements came at a very big human cost. It is worth asking whether a more imaginative and internationally supported extension of the civil-resistance strategy by the Kosovo Albanians might have achieved a better outcome [26] with less suffering.

Indeed, the conflict has left a painful human-rights legacy. The families of up to 1,900 victims of the Serbian response to the Nato bombing campaign still (according to Amnesty International [27]) await justice. The hastily improvised United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMiK [28]) failed to prevent the continuing nationalist polarisation of the country that followed the settlement of June 1999, in which Albanians succeeding in driving out Serbs (and members of other minorities) from many areas and the latter consolidating their control of enclaves like northern Mitrovica.

What happened on both Serb and Albanian sides [29] is not just a question of actions by "individuals" but of organised campaigns in which violence and intimidation seem to have gone hand in hand with the establishment of democratic politics (see Ian Williams, "A gruesome anniversary in Serbia [30]", *Guardian*, 23 March 2009). Kosovo's independence, moreover, has yet to bring its population the benefits it seeks: in a difficult environment where despite western subsidies create dependencies and disconnection from Serbia's economy reinforces isolation, Kosovo has seen little economic progress and still has very high rates of unemployment.

Some leftist critics were more concerned by Nato's bombing than by the genocidal violence of the Milosevic regime, and saw Kosovo solely through the prism of their opposition to the British and American governments. Yet while the west's failures were real and the price high, these governments (and there were many others, including Germany's) were responding - however inadequately - to an immediate and acute human crisis.

The events in Kosovo in 1999 can be pressed into the service of a narrative reinforced by the invasion of Iraq in 2003: of the unrelenting venality of "humanitarian" war (in either its liberal or

neo-conservative variants) in the service of a wider hegemonic project. But the "regime-change" fantasies of George W Bush were forged in a period after 9/11 when the United States was more willing to risk the lives of its own soldiers - as well as of "enemy" civilians - in a far more destructive war. Kosovo needs to be considered in relation to what went before as much as what came after, there as elsewhere.

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