

The West is in Moral Trouble Whether or Not There Is an Ethnic-Cleansing Plan

Documents show that NATO ignored risks

Jan Oberg

The Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research (TFF)

www.transnational.org

We are told there the West knew already last autumn that President Milosevic had a plan to ethnically cleanse all Albanians from the Kosovo province. However, while it is true that Yugoslav forces have exploited NATO's bombing campaign to drive out Albanians in a way and to an extent that must be morally condemned, the unproved allegation that there existed a plan tells more about NATO than about President Milosevic—and what it tells is not to the advantage of the former.

The disgusting expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo can't be defended. The Yugoslav authorities who carry it out, or let individuals do it, cannot defend such human rights violations with reference to NATO bombing. Some Serbs may see NATO's destruction of Yugoslavia as work commissioned by Kosovo-Albanians/KLA, but it is Yugoslavia's task to fight NATO, not to take revenge against those who are innocent civilians.

Having said that, NATO and the West cannot be trusted when it seeks to legitimise its Balkan bombing blunder by insisting that it has "evidence" of an ethnic cleansing plan, without providing even the slightest evidence. Here are some reasons why this is utterly irresponsible and, thus, undermines NATO credibility—and the credibility of a free press that does not ask more critical questions:

First of all, we never heard anybody talk about such a plan before NATO's bombs started falling. Second, the argument for bombing was related to whether or not Yugoslavia would sign the Rambouillet Dictate. We never heard anybody saying that NATO would bomb Yugoslavia should they carry out an ethnic cleansing plan.

Third, if such a plan was known already during autumn, how could the West invite representatives of a killer regime to Paris? How could the US send ambassador Richard Holbrooke to Belgrade to try to make a last-minute deal with such "a serial cleanser" President?

Fourth—and worst, perhaps of all—if the West knew of such a plan why did it do absolutely *nothing* to plan for the humanitarian emergency it would cause? Why did the West/NATO not actively threaten to prevent it *or* initiate bombings much earlier? Isn't it simply too immoral to know about such a plan and do nothing?

Fifth, if Milosevic, Serbia or Yugoslavia wanted to get rid of all Albanians, why did they choose this particularly awkward moment—when OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] verifiers were roaming around every corner of Kosovo, being the ears and eyes in the re-

gion? (Yugoslavia had discontinued an OSCE mandate already in 1992 in response to OSCE's suspension of its membership of OSCE). Why did it let the Kosovo-Albanian leader Dr. Rugova and his followers hold elections, set up a government, travel unrestrainedly in and out of the country, and build parallel institutions? Why did it let the KLA develop since 1993 to the extent that it could occupy and control about 30% of the territory of Kosovo last autumn? It could have prevented all of this.

Sixth, how come neither the OSCE mission nor any of the numerous humanitarian organizations in Kosovo warned the world that such an incredibly big and inhuman plan was about to be implemented?

Seventh, if NATO and the intelligence services of leading NATO countries which have been in the region all the time knew about such a plan from about October last year—when US super-negotiator Richard Holbrooke struck the deal with Milosevic—why did NATO not plan better the present air campaign? Diplomatically speaking, it looks a bit confused and unplanned.

NATO's leaders owe us some good answers to these 7 questions. By contrast, there is evidence that the US and NATO did know that the bombing could create havoc. On record we have facts like these:

Macedonian and OSCE warnings in July

The North Atlantic Assembly (NATO Parliamentarians) held a seminar on "Security in South-Eastern Europe" at Lake Ohrid in Macedonia from July 4-6, 1998—when the war was raging between the KLA and Serb-Yugoslav forces and after NATO's air exercise—Determined Falcon—over Macedonia in June. The report [AR202. SEM 98 7] was published in February this year and contains the following interesting information:

The participants discussed how to stop the fighting in Kosovo; NATO's position had 'crystallised' in June 1998 and NATO defence ministers had met on June 10-11 to instruct the Military Committee to see how the alliance could use the full range of military capabilities to (a) stop the violence, (b) disengage Yugoslav forces and (c) provide for negotiations.

Deputy head of the OSCE mission in Skopje, Mr. Julian Peel Yates, argued at the seminar that the June 1998 air exercise over Macedonia had aroused ambiguous feelings among the Macedonians; it was perceived as an encouragement to the KLA and divided the population along ethnic lines. Furthermore it could 'lead the country on a collision course with Yugoslavia. 'Mr. Blagoj

Handziski, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, also alluded to these dangers.' Later, one reads: 'Mr. Alexandros Papadogonas (Greece) noted that military intervention could result in 'ethnic cleansing' of the Serbs and lay down a dangerous precedent. Julian Yates also cautioned against the temptation to use military force to fill a political vacuum.' And 'Representatives from the region unanimously demanded to be involved in enhanced consultations prior to any operation.'

What we see here is clear evidence that government representatives in the region as well as OSCE warned NATO's parliamentarians already in July 1998 about some of the risks involved in NATO military action: destabilisation of Macedonia, Macedonian-Yugoslav conflict and ethnic cleansing.

General Shelton's warning that ethnic cleansing would increase under bombings

The New York Times reported on March 28 that on March 15 "Clinton and his cabinet members, including William Cohen, the defence secretary, and Sandy Berger, the national security adviser, sat in silence as Shelton [General Hugh Shelton, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff] outlined the thrust of the analysis. There was a danger, he told them, that far from helping to contain the savagery of the Serbs in Kosovo—a moral imperative cited by the president—air strikes might provoke Serb soldiers into greater acts of butchery. Air strikes alone, Shelton stated, could not stop Serb forces from executing Kosovars."

President Clinton's preoccupation with the Lewinsky affair

Furthermore, the New York Times on April 18 and 19 told its readers that President Clinton took no part in planning the war: "Distracted by the Lewinsky scandal, President Clinton was not even present at the fateful meeting last January when a plan was formed to use the threat of air power to demand Serb acceptance of a peace deal in Kosovo enforced by Nato ground troops.

The White House meeting on January 19, at which Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, successfully argued for a much tougher stance against Belgrade, was a vital moment in the build-up to war. But Mr. Clinton was preoccupied with his impeachment trial, according to a report yesterday in The New York Times that paints a picture of a President whose attention was focused elsewhere as Kosovo erupted.

At the January meeting Ms. Albright overcame the reservations of other senior advisers and the plan, demanding Serb acceptance of NATO troops in Kosovo under threat of force for the first time, was sent for approval to Mr. Clinton, who was at the moment preparing his State of the Union address while the US Senate listened to arguments on whether he should be thrown out of office."

With this in the background and looking at the rhetoric and failure of the bombing campaign by its own official criteria—creating peace and stability in Europe, prevent-

ing a humanitarian catastrophe and forcing Belgrade to accept all the West's conditions—one is increasingly led to believe, rather, that the whole catastrophe we witness now was *caused* by leading decision-makers ignoring early warnings from the region and top-level military expertise, by the US President being 'distracted' and by bad judgment and a gross underestimation of the complexity of what was at stake. Or, you may say, by a dangerous combination of hubris and human folly, of too much military power combined with too little intellectual power.

Until we are shown empirical evidence of a grand Yugoslav ethnic cleansing plan and until we get some good answers from President Clinton, Secretary of State Albright, Prime Minister Tony Blair, State Department spokesman James Rubin and NATO spokesman Jamie Shea to why NATO chose to go ahead against the above-mentioned warnings and obvious risks, there is little reason to believe their words.

The ethnic-cleansing "plan" probably exists only in various propaganda departments in NATO capitals. Truth-seeking journalists should keep on pounding questions about these matters. Why? Because a humanitarian NATO mission that has to be explained and legitimised on such factually loose and morally dubious grounds, must give cause for grave concern.

Additional Considerations

There are further reasons to be suspicious of the claim that ethnic-cleansings were planned in the absence of bombings.

The massing of Yugoslav troops near the province of Kosovo (so-called "Operation Horseshoe") can be explained as an unsurprising reaction to a civil war, as preparations to counter a possible springtime offensive by the KLA. Especially given the relatively small number of deaths in the first year of civil war (roughly 5 per day on all sides), there is no obvious reason to explain the deployment of troops as a "final solution".

According to the prevailing reports, Kosovar Albanian civilians are alternatively being forced out of the province, then prevented from leaving the province, then forced out again ... in what does not seem to be a singleminded, well-planned manner.

Even if the massing of troops was preparation for horrible mass deportations, this may have been intended precisely as a way to get Western nations to back away from their repeated bomb threats. An obvious lesson of Iraq, Sudan, and Afghanistan (and Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Bulgaria, ...) is that there is no way for small nations to prevent or counter high-tech bombings directly.

It would be unsurprising for those threatened with bombings to react on the ground where they are strongest, not miles in the air where the US and NATO are strongest. But the (potential) existence of a plan contingent on bombing or war threats cannot justify the bombing or war.

--Eric Lormand