

Kosovo - the site of a genocide that never was

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Kosovo - the site of a genocide that never was - is now a violent “free market” in drugs and prostitution. What does this tell us about the likely outcome of the Iraq war?

Muted by the evidence of the Anglo-American catastrophe in Iraq, the “humanitarian” war party ought to be called to account for its forgotten crusade in Kosovo, the model for Blair’s “onward march of liberation”. Just as Iraq is being torn apart by the forces of empire, so was Yugoslavia, the multi-ethnic state that uniquely rejected both sides in the cold war.

Lies as great as those told by Bush and Blair were deployed by Clinton and Blair in their grooming of public opinion for an illegal, unprovoked attack on a European country. Following the same path as the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, the media coverage in the spring of 1999 was a series of fraudulent justifications, beginning with the then US defence secretary William Cohen’s claim that “we’ve now seen about 100,000 military-aged [Albanian] men missing . . . they may have been murdered”. David Scheffer, the then US ambassador-at-large for war crimes, announced that as many as “225,000 ethnic Albanian men aged between 14 and 59” may have been killed. Blair invoked the Holocaust and “the spirit of the Second World War”. The British press took its cue. “Flight from genocide,” wrote the Daily Mail. “Echoes of the Holocaust,” chorused the Sun and the Mirror. In parliament, the heroic Clare Short compared to Nazi propagandists those (such as myself) who objected to the bombing of defenceless people.

By June 1999, with the bombardment over, international forensic teams began subjecting Kosovo to minute examination. The American FBI arrived to investigate what was called “the largest crime scene in the FBI’s forensic history”. Several weeks later, having not found a single mass grave, the FBI went home. The Spanish forensic team also returned home, its leader complaining angrily that he and his colleagues had become part of “a semantic pirouette by the war propaganda machines, because we did not find one – not one – mass grave”.

In November 1999, the Wall Street Journal published the results of its own investigation, dismissing “the mass grave obsession”. Instead of “the huge killing fields some investigators were led to expect . . . the pattern is of scattered killings [mostly] in areas where the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army has been active”. The Journal concluded that Nato stepped up its claims about Serbian killing fields when it “saw a fatigued press corps drifting toward the contrary story: civilians killed by Nato’s bombs . . . The war in Kosovo was cruel, bitter, savage. Genocide it wasn’t.”

One year later, the International War Crimes Tribunal, a body in effect set up by Nato,

announced that the final count of bodies found in Kosovo's "mass graves" was 2,788. This included combatants on both sides and Serbs and Roma murdered by the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army. Like Iraq's fabled weapons of mass destruction, the figures used by the US and British governments and echoed by journalists were inventions – along with Serbian "rape camps" and Clinton's and Blair's claims that Nato never deliberately bombed civilians.

Code-named "Stage Three", Nato's civilian targets included public transport, hospitals, schools, museums, churches. "It was common knowledge that Nato went to Stage Three [after a couple of weeks]," said James Bissett, the Canadian ambassador in Belgrade during the attack. "Otherwise, they would not have been bombing bridges on Sunday afternoons, and market places."

Nato's clients were the Kosovo Liberation Army. Seven years earlier, the State Department had designated the KLA as a terrorist organisation in league with al-Qaeda. In 1999, KLA thugs were feted; Robin Cook, then foreign secretary, allowed them to call him on his mobile phone. "The Kosovar Albanians played us like a Stradivarius violin," wrote the former UN commander in Bosnia, Major General Lewis MacKenzie, last April. "We have subsidised and indirectly supported their violent campaign for an ethnically pure Kosovo. We have never blamed them for being the perpetrators of the violence in the early 1990s, and we continue to portray them as the designated victim today, in spite of evidence to the contrary."

The trigger for the bombing of Yugoslavia was, according to Nato, the failure of the Serbian delegation to sign up to the Rambouillet peace conference. What went mostly unreported was that the Rambouillet accord had a secret Annex B, which Madeleine Albright's delegation had inserted on the last day. This demanded the military occupation of the whole of Yugoslavia, a country with bitter memories of the Nazi occupation. As the Foreign Office minister Lord Gilbert later conceded to a Commons defence select committee, Annex B was planted deliberately to provoke rejection.

Equally revealing was a chapter dealing exclusively with the Kosovan economy. This called for a "free-market economy" and the privatisation of all government assets. As the Balkans writer Neil Clark has pointed out: "The rump Yugoslavia . . . was the last economy in central-southern Europe to be uncolonised by western capital. 'Socially owned enterprises', the form of worker self-management pioneered under Tito, still predominated. Yugoslavia had publicly owned petroleum, mining, car and tobacco industries . . ."

At the Davos summit of neoliberal chieftains in 1999, Blair berated Belgrade, not for its handling of Kosovo, but for its failure to embrace "economic reform" fully. In the bombing campaign that followed, it was state-owned companies, rather than military sites, that were targeted. Nato's destruction of only 14 Yugoslav army tanks compares with its bombing of 372 centres of industry, including the Zastava car factory. "Not one foreign or privately owned factory was bombed," wrote Clark.

Erected on the foundation of this huge lie, Kosovo today is a violent, criminalised, UN-administered "free market" in drugs and prostitution; unemployment is 65 per cent. More than 200,000 Serbs, Roma, Bosniaks, Turks, Croats and Jews have been ethnically cleansed by the KLA, with Nato forces standing by. KLA hit squads have burned, looted or demolished 85 Orthodox churches and monasteries, according to the UN. The courts are venal. "You shot an 89-year-old Serb grandmother?" mocked a UN narcotics officer. "Good for you. Get out of jail."

Although Security Council Resolution 1244 recognises Kosovo as an integral part of Yugoslavia, multinational companies are being offered ten- and 15-year leases of the province's local industries and resources, including the vast Trepca mines, some of the richest mineral deposits in the world. Overseeing this plundered, now almost ethnically pure "future democracy" (Blair), are 4,000 American troops at Camp Bondsteel, a 775-acre permanent-base imperial presence.

Meanwhile, the show trial of Slobodan Milosevic proceeds as farce. Milosevic was a brute; he was also a banker once regarded as the west's man who was prepared to implement "economic reforms" in keeping with IMF, World Bank and European Union demands; to his cost, he refused to surrender sovereignty. The empire expects nothing less.

John Pilger's new book, *Tell Me No Lies: investigative journalism and its triumphs*, is published by Jonathan Cape

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