

KLA Country (A Forewarning from Kosovo)

From the Archive: President Clinton's 1999 air war on Serbia supposedly to stop genocide in Kosovo became the model for neocon/liberal hawk "humanitarian" wars this century. But as Kosovo descends again into political violence the war also foreshadowed what can go wrong, as Don North reported in this prescient story from 1999.

By Don North (Originally published on Aug. 12, 1999)

Serbia was the NATO's victory in Kosovo expelled the Serb military and stopped the brutal "ethnic cleansing" of the province's Albanian majority. But in a post-war inspection, I found that the pro-Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army is quickly establishing itself as the real power on the ground, sowing the seeds for more violence and corruption ahead.

In effect, the ethnic Albanian guerrilla force emerged from hiding after the Serb withdrawal in June 1999 to claim the spoils of a war in which the KLA never won a battle. Ignoring commitments to disband as a military force, the KLA instead asserted its power by dividing the province into seven KLA regions. The KLA set up roadblocks in areas supposedly under the control of NATO's "KFOR" occupation troops, a clear message to Serbs that the KLA was the province's new master.

Since then, the KLA has been blamed for a new round of "ethnic cleansing," a systematic campaign to transform Kosovo into an ethnic Albanian territory by terrorizing Serbs and Gypsies and driving them into exile. The revenge attacks have included mass murders, destruction of property and the razing of Serb religious shrines.

Even as 37,000 NATO peacekeepers fanned out across Kosovo, the scene on the ground suggested that little could be done to preserve Kosovo as a multi-ethnic home for both Serbs and Albanians. Tens of thousands of Serbs fled with the retreating Serb army and many others have left since the NATO troops arrived. The present Serb population may be fewer than 30,000, down from a pre-war estimate of about 200,000.

The emerging reality is far removed from President Bill Clinton's soaring rhetoric about his hopes for a land free from "anyone who seeks to use racial, religious or ethnic differences to promote hatred." From the moment I arrived in the provincial capital of Pristina on June 14, 1999, it was clear that Kosovo was headed in the opposite direction.

Like other provinces of the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo fast was becoming a place controlled by an intolerant ethnic organization seething with nationalism and revenge. In effect, NATO's air war had created a new Albanian Republic of Kosovo to take its place beside the Balkans' other ethnic territories: Croatian Bosnia, Muslim Bosnia and the Serb Republic.

NATO found the KLA militants willing to give lip service to the rules of the international occupation but grudging in their follow through, if not outright defiant. In some areas, Russian KFOR troops considered friendly to the Serbs – have come under sniper fire.

In the French-patrolled town of Mitrovica, about 50 miles north of Pristina, a KLA-backed mob stormed across a bridge toward a Serb neighborhood. The mob was pushed back by French troops, with one French soldier seriously injured. Angered by the failed march, KLA leader Hashim Thaci denounced the French troops as “undemocratic and arrogant.”

I witnessed another typical confrontation between a young KLA leader and a U.S. Army colonel in the small village of Kacanik, about 50 miles south of Pristina. The KLA had set up illegal checkpoints on the road, prompting Col. Joe Anderson of New York City, the 82nd Airborne commander in the area, to complain to the young KLA commander, Xhabir Zharku.

“I'll make it simple for you,” Anderson declared. “If we find anymore checkpoints here, we're going to apprehend your people. I'm telling you as commander in this zone, it's not authorized. So we can do it easy or do it hard. But the next checkpoint we come across of any kind, we will apprehend your people. Understand what I'm saying?”

But Xhabir Zharku appeared unfazed by Anderson's threat. Sitting behind a large desk under the red Albanian flag with a black double-headed eagle crest, the KLA commander defended the use of roadblocks. “These checkpoints are only to register returning residents for health reasons,” Zharku argued.

“That role is not authorized,” Anderson countered.

“I took the mines,” Zharku responded. “Nobody gave us help, and we fought in the mountains. These are our people and this is our country and that means we control it.”

“But you don't control it,” said Anderson. “For the fifth time, you have no authority for checkpoints. And if I don't have your cooperation, I'll move you out, too. I'll say it one more time, you can assist your people, but security and law enforcement is KFOR's job.”

In the weeks that followed, KLA militants only continued to stir up more trouble. On July 23, 1999, unidentified gunmen believed to be KLA guerrillas massacred 14 Serb farmers, ages 18 to 63, who were harvesting a field near Gracko, a small farming village just south of Pristina. Overall, about 30 Serbs a week were dying at the hands of revenge-seeking Albanian Kosovars, human rights observers estimated.

In early August, Human Rights Watch blamed KLA members for a string of murders, kidnappings and beatings directed against Serbs and Gypsies. Though Human Rights Watch did not accuse the KLA leadership of directing the violence, the group condemned the KLA high command for not taking action to stop it.

Beyond the evaporating hopes for a multi-ethnic Kosovo, chances also are disappearing for a multi-party democracy in an Albanian-run Kosovo. The KLA has begun asserting broad authority over the province's economy, politics and security. The KLA seems intent on establishing a one-party Kosovo not unlike the old communist regimes of Serbia and Albania.

As the KLA's consolidates its control, non-violent Albanian Kosovar leader Ibrahim Rugova reportedly fears for his life because of threats from the KLA. The KLA's new dominance could make the idea of free elections in the future a farce.

Since the June cease-fire, an open border with lawless Albania also has allowed organized-crime gangs to relocate in Kosovo, where new opportunities exist because of the shattered society and the prospects of a golden shower of international aid.

The chaos has allowed KLA warlords to expand heroin smuggling routes that run from the Middle East through Kosovo to Europe. Interpol estimated that 40 percent of the heroin traffic into Europe transits Kosovo, a figure that is expected to increase.

The very thin blue line of United Nations police totaling only about 300 in mid-August (1999) with the eventual goal of about 3,000 is arriving to find a Kosovo already in the grip of KLA-connected criminal gangs.

Even Albanian journalists are appalled by what the KLA is doing.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Baton Haxhiu, editor of *Koha Detore*, an Albanian-language daily, said, "The only political group with any structure is the KLA. They use it to take power, backed by a police they alone will control. It will be hard to turn Albania into Kosovo, but I expect very easy to turn Kosovo into Albania. Each day it is becoming more dangerous to think and speak independently." [NYT, July 29, 1999]

Besides foreshadowing more trouble in the region, the KLA's actions have undercut one of President Clinton's chief arguments for U.S. policy in the troubled region, a determination to end the region's ethnic violence.

Even as this new reality becomes apparent, however, Clinton has continued to single out Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic as the villain responsible for the region's "ethnic cleansing."

"I do not believe we should give reconstruction aid to Serbia as long as it rejects democracy and as long as Mr. Milosevic is in power," Clinton asserted on July 30, 1999, during a visit to Sarajevo, the capital of nearby Bosnia. "We have had enough of ethnic cleansing. I did not involve the United States in Bosnia or in Kosovo to hurt Serbian people. We took a stand for the humanity of all people, and against anyone who seeks to use racial, religious or ethnic differences to promote hatred."

But NATO leaders have failed to condemn the ethnic Albanian attacks on Serbs with the same vigor. Taking a more philosophical view after the 14 Serb farmers were killed, British KFOR commander, Gen. Mike Jackson, explained that "attitudes or thinking can't be changed with a soldier."

Since the early 1990s, Milosevic and the Serbs earned themselves the role as the region's "black hats," blamed for the bulk of ethnic violence in the historically divided Balkans. But there was always plenty of blame to go around for the tit-for-tat ethnic fighting.

Still, the prevailing anti-Serb attitude within the international community helped explain why there was so little protest in 1995 when the Croatian Army marched through U.N. lines and expelled several hundred thousand ethnic Serbs from a Serb enclave in Croatia. Thousands of Serb civilians were killed in that round of "ethnic cleansing."

Milosevic and the Serbs became the heavies again when they confronted a rebellious Albanian majority in Kosovo.

Fearing the loss of another piece of historic Serb territory, Milosevic cracked down on the province's autonomy and appealed stridently to Serb nationalism. As tensions mounted, the ethnic Albanians, who had become the overwhelming majority of Kosovo's population, resisted Serb authority.

By early 1998, the KLA had emerged as a troublesome guerrilla force best known for its tendency toward terrorism and its connections to the heroin trade. During 1998, I traveled with KLA forces and felt sympathy toward their resistance to Serb repression, though troubled by many of their tactics.

The KLA's chief accomplishment was to provoke a harsh counterinsurgency campaign by the Serb army and police forces that sent the KLA reeling in a string of bloody confrontations. But the Serbs also took aim at suspected KLA supporters. In some of the worst abuses, Serb soldiers stepped aside and allowed Serb paramilitary thugs to terrorize the Albanian Kosovars.

By spring 1998, villages considered sympathetic to the KLA were put to the torch, with civilians suffering rape, torture and executions. KLA guerrillas fled into Albania and into the mountains. An uneasy truce existed through the winter, but the KLA regrouped in early 1999. The Serbs retaliated with more brutality.

Led by the United States, NATO demanded the right to intervene inside Yugoslavia and issued what amounted to an ultimatum to Milosevic. When Milosevic balked, NATO launched an air campaign on March 24 against Serb targets in Kosovo and throughout Serbia.

NATO's bombings raised Serbia's nationalistic passions even higher. On the ground, Serb forces inflicted widespread atrocities against ethnic Albanians, while NATO jets accidentally killed thousands of civilians as "collateral damage." All told, about one million Kosovars fled as refugees, roughly one-half of the province's pre-war population.

Faced with unrelenting NATO air attacks and political pressure from his Moscow allies, Milosevic finally capitulated in June, winning only NATO's assurance that Kosovo would remain part of Serbia. Yet, as Milosevic's forces retreated, the KLA quickly advanced toward strategic towns and roadways.

Though considered ineffective in waging guerrilla warfare or when matching up against the regular Serb army, the KLA finally was benefiting from more professional leadership. The KLA had come under the command of a U.S.-trained Croatian Army general, Agim Ceku, who had assisted the 1995 ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Croatia. Besides sharing his experience with the KLA, Gen. Ceku organized a purge of moderate Albanians from the KLA's ranks.

NATO troops also rushed to take up peacekeeping positions, supposedly to protect the civilian populations, both Serb and Albanian. When I reached Kosovo on June 14, 1999, British Gen. Mike Jackson was touring the Serb neighborhoods of Pristina, urging the residents to stay. But many Serbs doubted that NATO could protect them from KLA revenge, a suspicion that was grounded in reality.

Crisscrossing Kosovo, I found that the pattern of law and order in NATO's five occupation zones varied depending on the nationality of the KFOR troops. There were frequent reports of Italian and German troops virtually ignoring their

peacekeeping duties in favor of the KLA.

In the southwestern town of Prizren, thousands of armed KLA troops marched in from Albania as the small 200-man force of the German 12th Panzer Division stood aside. In film clips shown on TV in Pristina, some German soldiers were seen embracing the KLA guerrillas. When Albanian youths stoned a busload of fleeing Serb civilians, the Panzer troops did not unshoulder their rifles.

A BBC-TV crew told me that Albanians torched 20 Serb homes in the western city of Pec as Italian KFOR troops, resplendent in their parrot-feather plumes, looked on. Half of a group of 200 Serb refugees returning from Montenegro immediately decided to turn back.

The British seemed sincere in their peacekeeping efforts but less than aggressive. In Pristina, British troops tried to disarm about 50 KLA fighters holed up in one apartment building. Three hours of negotiations led to a standoff with the KLA guerrillas allowed to keep their AK-47s and the British explaining that the goal was to "disarm" the KLA's "command and control," rather than just collect guns.

South of Pristina, near Gnjilane, the U.S. Marines from the 26th Expeditionary Force took "disarming" more literally. They stopped a force of 160 KLA guerrillas heading to the village of Zegra. The Marines seized more than 100 AK-47s and assorted other weapons. In another incident, Marines confiscated KLA weapons prompting a torrent of insults from nearby Albanians.

In the 82nd Airborne's territory, Col. Anderson deployed his 4,000 troops with a clear goal of establishing law and order and grabbing as many of the KLA's guns as possible. He showed me a large warehouse where his troops had stacked a motley collection of weapons taken from the KLA. But many rifles were rusted and the AK-47s were in disrepair, suggesting that the KLA was keeping its best weapons.

One KLA sub-commander promised to deliver his weapons to the warehouse but had second thoughts. "He decided he would keep his guns against the orders of his senior commanders and mine," Anderson said. "It's an indication that discipline within the KLA ranks is beginning to break down, when subordinates decide to buck their commanders' orders."

Or it was a sign that the KLA commanders were willing to surrender only their old and useless weapons. Other times, NATO succeeded in forcing only cosmetic changes on the KLA. For instance, KFOR's rules prohibited KLA forces from swaggering around villages in their combat fatigues. But many KLA guerrillas simply switched to wearing civilian black shirts, trousers and berets, making

them look a bit like a Hitler youth group and still very intimidating.

Whatever the sincerity of NATO's peacekeeping, however, KLA-backed Albanian revenge swept across Kosovo, with widespread reports of beatings, murders and destruction of ancient Serb monasteries. In Vetina, in the American sector, Capt. Mat McFarlane of Burke, Virginia, said the revenge begins after dark.

"It starts about nightfall," McFarlane told me. "Homes or barns burning, and shootings. We respond with mobile or foot patrols and try to apprehend the lawbreakers and seize their weapons. There's really no pattern to it, just Serbs and Albanians staking claims to territory and blaming each other for the violence. They seem to have grown up in an environment of threats and killings as a way of life."

In Pristina, a few blocks from my apartment, a prominent Serb economic professor and two colleagues were brutally murdered, even as British paratroops patrolled the streets in armored personnel carriers and on foot. The three victims were tied up with duct tape and bludgeoned to death with a hammer.

Other times, the reprisals targeted the small businesses and media outlets that hold a community together. The Vocar market, near Pristina's Grand Hotel, was run by friendly Serbs who sold groceries at a fair price. But in early July, the store closed after a rock was hurled through its plate-glass window.

The Serb-run Media Centar at the Grand Hotel was another target. Computers and fax machines were stolen. KLA hooligans took over the hotel lobby, got drunk and began looting. The Media Centar's director, Radovan Urosevic, soon left for Greece, while his partner, Milivoje Mihalovic, editor of Radio Pristina, turned off the mikes and headed north to Serbia.

Another facet of the Albanian revenge has been to target Serb religious sites. British troops found the Fourteenth Century Monastery of Svete Trojice in Suva Reka completely destroyed. Serbian Orthodox priest Sava Jajic led me to another ancient monastery, a 15th Century structure in Devik, that had suffered KLA looting.

One of the nuns, Sister Anastasia, described how guerrillas from the local KLA chapter smashed religious icons that were several hundred years old. She pointed to a large oil painting of a favorite Orthodox saint which had been defaced by a KLA activist who had carved the group's initials in Albanian "UCK" into the painting with a bayonet.

Father Sava, known as the "cyber-monk" for his informative e-mails sent around the world, protected Albanians in his own monastery in Decani during the Serb "ethnic cleansing" campaigns. Because of that, he has seen Albanians return the

favor by defending the monastery from retaliation.

"If they [the KLA] are going to kill the monks, they [the KLA] must kill us first," said Shaban Bruqi, an Albanian villager. "They [the monks] saved us."

On July 2, 1999, Father Sava joined with a small group of Serb and Albanian leaders issuing a joint statement seeking reconciliation.

"We want to realize our joint goal of a civil society in Kosovo, a society where no one has to fear for his life, his family, his job or his home because of his ethnicity or belief," the communique read. "The road to reconciliation will be long and difficult. There is no such thing as natural hatred among people in Kosovo."

But that night, a less-forgiving attitude was on display in Pristina. Celebrating the ninth anniversary of an Albanian declaration of independence for Kosovo, thousands of Albanian Kosovar youths drove through the streets waving Albanian flags and firing AK-47s. The shooting continued until 3 a.m.

Despite the best hopes of many well-intentioned citizens from both ethnic groups and the brave peacekeeping efforts of some NATO troops, the future of Kosovo seems headed in a very different direction than Father Sava or President Clinton might hope.

Rather than a multi-cultural society living in peace, Kosovo likely will be dominated by KLA gunmen determined to purge the province's centuries-old Serb ethnic presence. As a consequence of NATO's military intervention, Kosovo appears to have traded the brutality of Serb paramilitary thugs for the brutality of like-minded Albanians.

With corrupt warlords vying for control, Kosovo seems headed for a future that resembles more Albania or Chechnya than some Western-style democracy.

Don North is a veteran war correspondent who covered the Vietnam War and many other conflicts around the world. He is the author of a new book, *Inappropriate Conduct*, the story of a World War II correspondent whose career was crushed by the intrigue he uncovered.

Other historic reporting on the Kosovo crisis from Consortiumnews.com:

"Why Kosovo?" by Don North. Originally published Nov. 6, 1998. The early days of the war and what the two sides were fighting over.

"Irony at Racak: Tainted U.S. Diplomat Condemns Massacre" by Don North. Originally published Jan. 26, 1999. An American condemnation of a Serb massacre in Kosovo recalls U.S. ambivalence about massacres in Central America.

“Wag the Dog in Reverse” by Mollie Dickenson, Originally published May 4, 1999. Bill Clinton’s political crisis over sex distracts from a real war in the Balkans.

“Television Wars” by Don North, Originally published May 4, 1999. NATO intentionally bombs a Serb TV station.

“Target Yugoslavia” by Robert Parry, Originally published May 4, 1999. The Clinton administration tries out high-tech info-war tactics on the Serbs.
