

Kosovo & Iraq: Same bombs, different lies

By David Edwards

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The truth about the invasion of Iraq was perhaps best summed up by Ray McGovern, one of the CIA's most senior analysts: "It was 95 per cent charade. And they all knew it: Bush, Blair, Howard." (Quoted John Pilger, 'Universal justice is not a dream', ZNet, March 23, 2004)

One might think that exposés of this kind would lead the media to take a fresh look at some of the US-UK governments' earlier claims justifying war. Consider, for example, the 78-day NATO assault on Serbia from March 24 until June 10, 1999, said to have been launched to protect the Albanian population of Kosovo.

Blair's battle between good and evil

What is so striking about the US-UK government case for war against Serbia is the familiarity of much of the propaganda. In a key pre-war speech on March 18 last year, Blair said of Iraq: "Looking back over 12 years, we have been victims of our own desire to placate the implacable... to hope that there was some genuine intent to do good in a regime whose mind is in fact evil." ('Tony Blair's speech', The Guardian, March 18, 2003)

In similar vein, Blair described the war with Serbia as "a battle between good and evil; between civilisation and barbarity; between democracy and dictatorship". (Quoted, Degraded Capability, The Media and the Kosovo Crisis, edited by Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman, Pluto Press, 2000, p.123)

Blair also referred last year to the lessons of "history": "We can look back and say: there's the time; that was the moment; for example, when Czechoslovakia was swallowed up by the Nazis – that's when we should have acted. But it wasn't clear at the time. In fact at the time, many people thought such a fear fanciful. Worse, put forward in bad faith by warmongers." (Ibid)

Four years earlier, in March 1999, British defence Secretary, George Robertson, insisted that intervention in Kosovo was vital to stop "a regime which is bent on genocide." A year later, Robertson also conjured up the ghost of Nazism to justify NATO's action: "We were faced with a situation where there was this killing going on, this cleansing going on – the

Kosovo and Iraq: Same bombs, different lies | 2

kind of ethnic cleansing we thought had disappeared after the second world war. You were seeing people there coming in trains, the cattle trains, with refugees once again.” (ITV, Jonathan Dimbleby programme, June 11, 2000)

President Clinton referred to “deliberate, systematic efforts at... genocide” in Kosovo. (Quoted, John Pilger, introduction, Phillip Knightley, First Casualty, Prion Books, 2000, p.xii)

In a speech in Illinois in April 1999, Blair alluded to Kosovo: “The principle of non-interference must be qualified in important respects – war crimes and acts of genocide can never be an internal matter.” (Blair, The Guardian, March 15, 2000)

This rhetoric depicting “genocide”, even a kind of Holocaust, in Kosovo certainly merits comparison with the claim that British bases in Cyprus were under threat from Iraqi WMD that could be launched within 45 minutes of an order being given.

So how did the keen and critical intellects of the ‘free press’ – backed up by vast research and investigative resources – respond? Did they scrutinise and challenge these extraordinary claims as they so patently failed to do with regard to the Iraqi WMD ‘threat’?

We can do 1389 – the media get In line

Reviewing UK media performance, British historian Mark Curtis writes of the Kosovo war: “The liberal press – notably the Guardian and Independent – backed the war to the hilt (while questioning the tactics used to wage it) and lent critical weight to the government’s arguments.” In so doing, the media “revealed how willingly deceived it is by government rhetoric on its moral motives.” (Curtis, Web of Deceit, Vintage, 2003, pp.134-5)

Thus, Jonathan Freedland wrote in the Guardian: “the prize is not turf or treasure but the frustration of a plan to empty a land of its people”. It was “a noble goal”. (Freedland, ‘No way to spin a war’, The Guardian, April 21, 1999)

A Guardian editorial described the war as nothing less than “a test for our generation”. (March 26, 1999)

The attack was intended to stop “something approaching genocide”, Timothy Garton Ash insisted. (Garton Ash, ‘Imagine no America’, The Guardian, September 19, 2002)

The Mirror referred to “Echoes of the Holocaust.” (Quoted, Pilger, op., cit, p.144)

The Sun urged us to “Clobba Slobba”.

The New Statesman’s John Lloyd wrote that the war showed “the most powerful states are willing to fight for human rights”. (July 5, 1999)

As British bombs rained on Serbia, a breathless Andrew Marr wrote articles in the Observer entitled: ‘Brave, bold, visionary. Whatever became of Blair the ultra-cautious cynic?’ (April 4, 1999)

‘Hail to the chief. Sorry, Bill, but this time we’re talking about Tony.’ (May 16, 1999)

Marr declared himself in awe of Blair’s “moral courage”, adding: “I am constantly

Kosovo and Iraq: Same bombs, different lies | 3

impressed, but also mildly alarmed, by his utter lack of cynicism.”

A subsequent BBC documentary on the alleged Serbian genocide, ‘Exposed’ (BBC2, January 27, 2002), was billed as a programme marking Holocaust Memorial Day, no less.

Thomas Friedman wrote in the New York Times: “Like it or not, we are at war with the Serbian nation (the Serbs certainly think so), and the stakes have to be very clear: Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverising you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too.” (Friedman, The New York Times, April 23, 1999)

A Nexis database search showed that in the two years 1998-1999 the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, Newsweek and Time used the term “genocide” 220 times to describe the actions of Serbia in Kosovo. In the ten years 1990-1999 the same media used the same word just 33 times to describe the actions of Indonesia in East Timor. Following Indonesia’s invasion in December 1975, some 200,000 East Timorese, or one-third of the population, are estimated to have been killed in one of history’s premier bloodbaths. The contrast is even more astonishing when we consider the number of people actually killed in Kosovo.

Pure invention – the Kosovo “genocide”

So how real was the Serbian genocide in Kosovo compared, say, to the threat of Iraqi WMD? And did this alleged mass abuse of human rights justify the 78 days of NATO bombing that claimed 500 Yugoslav civilian lives, causing an estimated \$100 billion in damage, striking hospitals, schools, major industrial plants, hotels, libraries, housing estates, theatres, museums, farms, mosques, trains, tractors, bridges and power stations?

In February 1999, one month before the start of NATO bombing, a report released by the German Foreign Office noted that “the often feared humanitarian catastrophe threatening the Albanian population has been averted”. In the larger cities “public life has since returned to relative normality.” (Quoted, Mark Curtis, op., cit, p.136)

Another German report, exactly one month before the bombing, refers to the CIA-backed Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) seeking independence for Kosovo from Serbia: “Events since February and March 1998 do not evidence a persecution program based on Albanian ethnicity. The measures taken by the [Serbian] armed forces are in the first instance directed towards combating the KLA and its supposed adherents and supporters.” (Ibid, p.136)

Following the war, NATO sources reported that 2,000 people had been killed in Kosovo on all sides in the year prior to bombing. George Robertson testified before the House of Commons that until mid-January 1999, “the Kosovo Liberation Army was responsible for more deaths in Kosovo than the Serbian authorities had been”. (Quoted, Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival*, Routledge, 2003, p.56)

Kosovo and Iraq: Same bombs, different lies | 4

This is supported by Nicholas Wheeler of the University of Wales who estimates that Serbs killed 500 Albanians before the NATO bombing, implying that 1,500 had been killed by the KLA. The KLA had openly declared that their strategy was to provoke Serbian forces into retaliatory action that would generate Western public support for NATO intervention.

Far from averting a humanitarian crisis, it is clear that NATO bombing caused a massive escalation of killings and expulsions. The flood of refugees from Kosovo, for example, began immediately after NATO launched its attack. Prior to the bombing, and for the following two days, the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported no data on refugees. On March 27, three days into the bombing, UNHCR reported that 4,000 had fled Kosovo to the neighbouring countries of Albania and Macedonia. By April 5, the New York Times reported “more than 350,000 have left Kosovo since March 24”.

A study by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) records “a pattern of expulsions and the vast increase in lootings, killings, rape, kidnappings and pillage once the NATO air war began on March 24” and that “the most visible change in the events was after NATO launched its first air strikes”. (Curtis, *op.*, cit, p.137, our emphasis)

A House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee investigating the war concluded: “It is likely that the NATO bombing did cause a change in the character of the assault upon the Kosovo Albanians. What had been an anti-insurgency campaign – albeit a brutal and counter-productive one – became a mass, organised campaign to kill Kosovo Albanians or drive them from the country.” (Ibid, pp.137-8)

The media response was to exactly reverse cause and effect suggesting that bombing was justified as a way of halting the flood of refugees it had in fact created. Philip Hammond of South Bank University comments: “the refugee crisis became NATO’s strongest propaganda weapon, though logically it should have been viewed as a damning indictment of the bombing. The hundreds of thousands of Serbs who fled the bombing were therefore determinedly ignored by British journalists”. (Hammond and Herman, *op.*, cit, p.127)

Robert Hayden of the University of Pittsburgh reported that the casualties among Serb civilians in the first three weeks of the war were higher than all of the casualties on both sides in Kosovo in the three months that led up to the war. And yet, Hayden points out, “those three months were supposed to be a humanitarian catastrophe”. (Quoted, Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism*, Pluto Press, 1999, p.20)

Hammond indicates the awesome scale of the truth buried by the media: “We may never know the true number of people killed. But it seems reasonable to conclude that while people died in clashes between the KLA and Yugoslav forces... the picture painted by Nato – of a systematic campaign of Nazi-style genocide carried out by Serbs – was pure invention.” (Hammond and Herman, *op.*, cit, p.129)

Kosovo and Iraq: Same bombs, different lies | 5

In other words, the US-UK assault on Serbia, like the assault on Iraq, was made possible by audacious government manipulation of a public denied access to the truth by an incompetent and structurally corrupt media. Journalists, indeed, were so utterly fooled by government propaganda that they proudly proclaimed their role in supporting the “humanitarian intervention”.

Responding to Alastair Campbell’s accusation of press cynicism over the Kosovo intervention (another familiar theme from the 2003 Iraq war), Channel Four correspondent Alex Thomson wrote: “If you want to know why the public supported the war, thank a journalist, not the present government’s propagandist-in-chief.” (Quoted, Charles Glass, ‘Hacks versus flacks’, Z Magazine, August 1, 1999)

The Guardian’s Maggie O’Kane wrote: “But Campbell should acknowledge that it was the press reporting of the Bosnian war and the Kosovar refugee crisis that gave his boss the public support and sympathy he needed to fight the good fight against Milosevic.” (Ibid)

John Simpson of the BBC joined the fray: “Why did British, American, German, and French public opinion stay rock-solid for the bombing, in spite of Nato’s mistakes? Because they knew the war was right. Who gave them the information? The media.” (Ibid)

So much for ‘neutral and ‘objective’ reporting. As a result, Blair is now able to use the lie of Kosovo to justify more recent killing. In a speech earlier this month, Blair said of the Iraq war: “The real point is that those who disagree with the war, disagree fundamentally with the judgement that led to war. What is more, their alternative judgement is both entirely rational and arguable. Kosovo, with ethnic cleansing of ethnic Albanians, was not a hard decision for most people; nor was Afghanistan after the shock of September 11; nor was Sierra Leone.” (Tony Blair’s speech’, The Guardian, March 5, 2004)

Kosovo was “not a hard decision for most people” because awkward facts pointing to something other than a “battle between good and evil” were kept well out of sight.

Postscript – a silver lining

We are eager to avoid the impression that the alliance of state violence and media servility always results in tragedy, death and disaster – sometimes there are happy endings.

While covering the Kosovo crisis, CNN’s leading foreign correspondent, Christiane Amanpour, married James Rubin, chief public relations official of the US State Department. Amanpour had announced that her future husband’s war was for “the first time... a war fought for human rights”. And, after all, “only a fraction of 1 percent of the bombs went astray”. (Quoted, Hammond and Herman, op., cit, p.113)

The BBC’s defence correspondent, Mark Laity, may not have found love during his coverage of NATO’s slaughter, but he did subsequently accept the post of press secretary to

Kosovo and Iraq: Same bombs, different lies | 6

the NATO Secretary General, George Robertson, who had also moved on from his position as British Defence Secretary.