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**Book Reviews**

**The Kosovo Liberation Army – The View from Belgrade**

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Terrorism in Kosovo and Metohija and Albania – White Book, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belgrade, September 1998

“Greater Albania” – Concepts and Possible Consequences (Institute of Geopolitical Studies, Kneza Mihaila 10/VIII. Belgrade, 1998) Editor Jovan.M.Canak

All governments produce propaganda and during wartime much more of it than in peacetime. The truth often gets lost in the fog of war. The profession of the ‘spin doctor’ was not invented by the Clinton administration, or ‘New Labour, however much media considerations often seem to dominate the priorities of modern governments.

It is fairly generally agreed that Yugoslav ineptness in dealing with the media was a major factor in forming international perceptions of the Croatian and Bosnian wars, and that in Bosnia, in particular, the American government worked closely with major broadcasting organizations such as Ted Turner’s CNN to form an anti-Serb climate. This is not anti-US prejudice, but can be easily substantiated by reading Richard Holbrooke’s often unintentionally revealing book about the pre-Dayton period ‘To End a War’ which was published in the USA last year. Another useful source is BBC correspondent Martin Bell’s book on the Bosnian war. Although by no means pro-Serb, Bell shows clearly how biased the general reporting of the siege of Sarajevo became, with Muslim infantry attacks on Serb ginnners being completely neglected.

The Zagreb government in Croatia, in contrast, had a much more advanced and sophisticated view of the likely role of the media in the war than the Milosevic government in Belgrade, which appeared thoroughly complacent and incompetent in this field for most of the 1991 to 1995 period. The Croats poured vast sums of money into the American and other foreign media and employed A TOP Washington lobbying firm, Ruder Finn, to work on their behalf. This policy produced rich dividends. Milosevic seems to have felt for much of the early period of conflict that Yugoslavia could rely on its traditional good image in the West and that PR was an unnecessary luxury. In the Croatian war, at least, this was not as foolish an assumption as it might seem now. Many British writers and journalists felt very uncomfortable with the emergence of the new Slovenia and Croatia, depending so heavily, as they did, on support from the newly reunited Germany and the neo-Hapsburg block to the north of Yugoslavia. One remembers the old 1991-2 vintage joke, told to me, I think by a ‘Guardian’ journalist of impeccable liberal credentials - Why did Slovenia want independence? – To become a suburb of Vienna.

When the full history of the ex-Yugoslav wars of succession is written this will be an interesting subject for historians to explore. But as a result of complacency and reliance on the benign (as they saw it) Titoist tradition the Belgrade case often went by default amongst intellectuals, practical relations with many uncommitted journalists plummeted to a disastrous low, with being driven into the anti-Serb camp and the whole notion of a 'Yugoslavia' which so recently had stood in high regard in the West changed irrevocably.

To judge from these publications, and the much improved Serb media arrangements in Kosovo, many lessons have been learned (On the latter, see my paper 'Reporting the Kosovo War – A Note' in 'Albania Life' magazine, No 63, Spring 1999). The Kosovo War goes to the heart of Serbian life and history, and whatever anyone in or around the Western media might think of current Belgrade policy, there is no doubt that a proper, professional statement and projection of it is very welcome.

Of these two booklets, 'White Book' is very much a 'government' publication and is a large collection of quotes from leading actors in the Kosovo conflict, starting with the time of the emergence of the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1996, and including essays on the nature of the terrorists threat the authors see the KLA as representing. There is an excellent map, which gives a comprehensive picture of the KLA border 'crossings' from northern Albania in Kosovo. It gives a picture of the predominantly 'Islamic' threat, but very little original or detailed information on why the KLA has become so important, and virtually nothing at all on who runs it and how it works.

As such, it is a much better guide to the current political psychology prevailing in Belgrade than to the KLA, and also shows, by implication, the very low level of accurate intelligence that was reaching the Milosevic regime in the key late – 1997 period when the KLA was emerging as a local political force in central Kosovo but was being dismissed as an invention of Serb secret service by supporters of Dr Ibrahim Rugova. This odd process was not confined to Belgrade. I remember writing up the May 1996 Decani shootings for the 'Wall Street Journal' and having to take a certain amount of flak afterwards from colleagues afterwards for 'boosting a few boys with shotguns into terrorists', and mistaking a criminal attack for a proto-terrorist movement. The prevailing wisdom in the West that the Kosovo Albanians would never turn to the use of military force was an orthodoxy written in tablets of stone in many editors' offices and it was not easy to convince them that a new force was in the region that was serious, with deep roots, and that it was likely that it would find considerable support in Kosovo.

Reading the 'White Book' it is difficult to feel that many Yugoslav diplomats and intelligence analysts must have had a similarly difficult task with the Milosevic government. Although well produced and helpful, it is suffused with the atmosphere of panic, essentially about a foreign invasion. The KLA is seen as a predominantly northern Albanian force, dependent on political support from Tirana, plus 'Islamic' money, and its roots within Kosovo are not acknowledged or explained.

This is not the case with “Greater Albania” Concepts and Possible Consequences, which is clearly designed to appeal to western peacekeepers and uncommitted intellectuals. It depends on a Samuel .H. Huntingdon view of the world, where the clash of civilisations is the decisive factor and plucky and misunderstood Serbia is resisting an Islamic threat, and thus deserves Western help and understanding. It is well written, as propaganda goes, and makes the usual good case that can be made about the Islamic ‘threat’ in the Balkans – that is, if the authors’ premises are accepted. There seems no reason why they should be. The claims about Islamic terrorism in Albania are very nebulous and have not so far been substantiated convincingly, particularly the US allegations in July 1998 that followers of Bin Laden were active in Albania. Kosovo Albanians have always been the most secular people among the Albanians, and when money is collected for the KLA in Germany or where ever it is money for a nationalist movement, not a religious organization. It is significant that countries with a reputation for sponsoring Islamic terrorism such as Libya and Iran have steered well clear of the conflict so far, although that could of course change over time.

The historical account given of the idea of ‘Greater Albania’ is partial in the extreme, and takes the views of extreme nationalists as typical of the Albanians as a whole. The same could be done in any Balkan country – the grievances left over from the end of the Ottoman, the Yugoslav periods, have left significant minorities everywhere with irredentist ambitions on neighbours’ territories. The booklet is strong on the World Warr II period, where a kind of ‘Greater Albania’ was set up by the fascist occupiers, but weak on many events since, with serious distortions of history, and the presentations of highly controversial views as though they are commonly accepted mainstream historical facts. It depends on fear, and the projection of inevitable conflict between NATO powers as a result of political change in the status of Kosovo. It leaves the feeling that propaganda is something best left to governments, when it can be seen for what it is, a necessary is unattractive adjunct to the military struggle.