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The World

Today



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WE HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE

James Pettifer

There is an overwhelming sense of *deja vu* about the crisis in Kosovo. There are the same tough, ruthless Yugoslav security police, the villagers displaced from simple agricultural communities leaving behind burning houses, the same divisions in the international community, producing the same inaction. We have been here before, in Croatia, in Bosnia, and elsewhere. Diplomats go to see President Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia with good intentions, but little happens.

KOSOVO HAS BEEN a bone of contention between Serb and Albanian since the end of the Ottoman empire. It illustrates some of the deepest contradictions in the national identity of both countries. Ninety per cent of the people are of Albanian descent but it is almost entirely governed by Serbs. It is the site of the most important Orthodox religious institutions in Serbia, including the Patriarchate. After continual strife in the 1980s the province has been under martial law for the last eight years when its remaining autonomy under the 1974 Yugoslav constitution was removed.

Ethnic Albanians in the province have given their political support to the pacifist policies of Dr Ibrahim Rugova, but have seen little political progress as a result. In 1996 the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) emerged, a guerrilla group advocating armed struggle to drive the Serbs from power, and there have been regular clashes with the security forces since then. These have intensified in the last three months. A Serb assault on the KLA enclave of Drenica began in the first week of March.

'PACIFICATION WILL WORK'

So far, the numbers of Albanians killed in these new clashes is mercifully not very

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large, at least by Bosnian standards. In the early stages of this conflict, a key battle is being fought in the media, and many western policy dilemmas are most accurately reflected there. There is clearly a school of thought in some foreign ministries that the Serbian 'pacification' effort is likely to succeed, the cowed Albanians will return to a sort of life in Kosovo as second class citizens, and 'normality' will be restored.

There are large vested interests in maintaining this view. An important aspect of the Western public relations drive to maintain the Dayton process has been the message that the NATO military intervention against the Bosnian Serbs, and the Accords themselves, have somehow qualitatively changed for the better the wider political situation in the Balkans. The exclusive focus of Western liberal and human rights attention on Bosnia has inadvertently aided the spin doctors who have been able to create a 'success' brand image for Dayton. The regular killings in Kosovo – and the modest achievements of Dayton itself – have attracted little attention in the liberal press.

Conservative, mostly Moslem, Albanians living modest lives in Hardy-esque surroundings do not have the same cultural resonance for the liberal media, particularly in the US, as 'secular' Moslems from the Sarajevo elite. Mr Milosevic knows this very well. Certainly many Serbs will appreciate the point after watching the exodus from the Krajina in 1995

of similar rural communities, the largest single act of ethnic cleansing in the Yugoslav wars.

INTERESTS COINCIDE

Until recently, the tragedy of Kosovo has been media managed quite successfully, Serb and Western PR interests almost exactly coinciding. It has been difficult to have a rational discussion about Serbia's legitimate national interests post-Dayton, particularly in the US media. This has regrettably driven many decent and potentially reformist Serbs into the nationalist or Milosevic camps. They feel frightened for the future of their country under the unending anti-Serb media barrage, with its near-racist stereotypes.

This has produced a strong movement to the right in Serbia. Thanks to Dayton, there is a close analogy between post war Serbia, and Weimar Germany after the Versailles settlement. Both twenties Germany and nineties Serbia have been defeated in a major war, lost territory, suffered an economic blockade, have resentful refugees and an over-large military. In the case of Serbia, this is exemplified by the Milosevic controlled security police, now more numerous than the army.

In the complex perception of Balkan events, intelligence, in the widest sense, has had an important influence on policy. This is not to claim that there is an organised conspiracy against the truth, only that important public relations and intelligence interests have coincided in the defence of the status quo in the post-Dayton Balkans.

Western intelligence has a particularly strong stake in this status quo. For many years, their assessments appear to have been that Serbian power will always prevail in Kosovo. Therefore it is important, to the proponents of this outlook, that Kosovo is stabilised quickly and that the current crisis disappears from the front pages. If it does not, the value and intellectual integrity of their past views is likely to be called into question by politicians.

A serious crisis and western failure in Kosovo directly affects the future of Dayton



Kosovo Albanians are sprayed by police water cannon during a demonstration on 2 March

Photograph from AP/Srdjan Ilic

and Bosnia. There are intimate links between what is required to keep the 'peace process' going in Bosnia, and what is required to keep Kosovo 'stable'. Many private doubts about post-Dayton policies in European foreign ministries have been suppressed. It is paramount to keep the US onside, since Washington's real-time satellite intelligence is central to the physical security of NATO and pro-NATO politicians in Bosnia. Without this capacity it is quite possible that Mrs Biljana Plavsic, President of Republika Srpska, and other Bosnian Serb moderates would not be alive today.

Intelligence inspired 'spin' has, in important ways, affected the security perceptions that underlie policy. Thus in the United States, there seems to have been a very strong emphasis on the 'Islamic' nature of the Albanian guerrilla organisation. This was precisely reflected in the language used by diplomats and the media in the first week of the crisis.

CARTE BLANCHE

The central breakdown of peace occurred after the disastrous Pristina press conference of Mr Robert Gelbard, the US Balkan emissary, in February. He characterised the KLA as 'terrorists', while failing to clearly condemn what virtually all Albanians see as continuing Yugoslav state terror. Thus, however unintentionally, a *carte blanche* was given for Milosevic's 'anti-terrorist operations' of recent weeks. Albanian anger with Mr Gel-

bard has been based on an understandable desire to avoid the stereotyping that so handicapped the Bosnian Moslems in the international media and diplomatic community.

At a practical level, there are very strong arguments that this Kosovo 'stabilisation' will not succeed, whatever the media and diplomats do. The Kosovo Albanians have been radicalised over the last two years, and large supplies of light weapons are available. Some of these have arrived as overspill from last year's crisis in Albania itself.

The old status quo has decisively ended, and Serb 'pacification' will probably only be a Pyrrhic victory, even in public order terms. While a military victory against the Serbs in an orthodox war is clearly unlikely, there is no reason why the Albanians cannot make the province anarchic and ungovernable in the next phase of their struggle. The economic value of Kosovo to Serbia is likely to disappear in this process. A major factor behind the current Serb police operation, which Mr Milosevic must have realised would be a public relations disaster for his government, was the fear of sabotage of important Kosovo industrial installations.

ROOTED IN DAYTON

So the Kosovo political crisis is deeply rooted in the limitations of the Dayton settlement, from which Kosovo was excluded in a deal with Mr Milosevic. Yet under Dayton, the armed struggle – or aggression, as many

would see it – of the Bosnian Serbs has been rewarded, at least to some degree. The reality of Dayton has been grossly distorted for the benefit of US public opinion.

Kosovo Albanians have seen that the international community only really moves when there is a threat of force by an oppressed people. Since Dayton, President Milosevic has been able to trade 'tranquillity' in Bosnia against his freedom to act in Kosovo. This had led to the policy crisis exemplified in Mr Gelbard's Pristina visit. This process of short term deal making has now decisively been shown to be a threat to peace itself, with the collapse of any principled Western position in support of the Kosovo Albanians. Urgent intervention and the restoration of a real role for the United Nations in the Balkans is required.

This may at first seem like a reversion to the pre-Dayton period, and in some eyes, defeatism. But NATO military force, however justifiable in 1995, has not provided the basis for a security policy capable of solving the Balkan conflicts where the genuine consent of leaders and peoples of small countries is required for a lasting peace.

The achievements of Dayton have been grossly overestimated by media, security and political interests. The United States needs to be reminded that a renewed UN Balkan mandate is needed in its own interests, as only the UN can provide Washington with an exit strategy from Bosnia. 🌐