

KOSOVO AND THE FAILURE OF THE LEFT

by Sanjiv Gupta

Imagine coming across the following description of recent events in a certain place. In this account, the revolt of an oppressed people against its overlords is called a “civil war.” The armed insurgents are “terrorists” and “pawns of foreign governments.” The government of this country may have acted brutally, but it is fighting guerillas who do not accept its rule, so what do you expect?

State Department propaganda, justifying US support for a repressive regime? No, this is the language and tone of the US left’s stance towards the Kosovar Albanians’ revolt against their Serbian rulers. With few exceptions, the left has failed to recognize the scale of Serbian oppression in Kosovo and the legitimacy of the Albanians’ struggle for independence. Instead, by referring to the crisis as a “civil war,” it has implicitly accepted Serbia’s claim that Kosovo belongs to Serbia. By characterizing the KLA’s attacks on Serb policemen and other representatives of the Serbian government as provocations, the left has accepted the Serbs’ justification for their barbaric attacks on Albanian villages. (See Eric Lormand, “Additional Considerations,” *Agenda*, May/June 1999, p. 18. Also see the Kosovo pages at the *Z Magazine* website, <http://www.zmag.org>, for several examples of this.)

In this article I do not address directly the issue of the US/NATO bombing campaign that ended a few weeks ago. (See Tom O’Donnell, “On the Left’s Confusion Over US/NATO Intervention in Kosovo,” *Agenda*, May/June 1999, pp. 14-15, or online at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~twod/politics/kosovo>, for a thorough response to various left objections to the bombing.) Rather, I focus on the lack of awareness demonstrated by the left, by and large, to the extent of Serbian persecution of the Kosovar Albanians.

This failure of the left is accented by the horrifying discoveries NATO troops are making as they move through Kosovo. The evidence suggests a systematic pogrom by Serbian forces against the Albanians that was planned and organized at the highest levels of the Serbian government, and that began well before the bombing. But the evictions and massacres of the last two years, and especially of the last few months, are only the latest examples of Serbian brutalization of the Kosovar Albanians. From the Serbian annexation of Kosovo in 1912 to the present, the Albanians have lived under a regime whose vicious policies have virtually guaranteed an armed response.

This history has been largely ignored by the US left, which has refused to acknowledge the culpability of Serbian national-chauvinism. The left’s characterizations of the conflict in Kosovo have ranged from outright support for the Yugoslavian “workers’ federation” (!) to even-handed denunciation of both the Serbs and the Albanians. The Serbs have committed atrocities, many concede (especially now that the evidence is undeniable), but the Albanians are guilty of provoking the Serbs into their bloody reprisals. This position misses the main cause of the Kosovo crisis, namely the sustained Serbian assault on the cultural, religious, and linguistic identity of the Albanians, and the periodic attacks on their lives and property.

The left’s refusal to identify Serbia as the chief culprit in Kosovo places it in the same camp as the American and European officials who insisted (with some honorable exceptions) that all sides were equally guilty in the Bosnian war. Those distinguished gentlemen condemned more than 100,000 Bosnians to their deaths by blocking military action against the Serbs. Even Clinton, who conceded recently that he was mistaken in his earlier belief that all sides were equally to blame for the Balkan wars, understands the roots of the Kosovo crisis better than the left!

The obliviousness of the left on the Kosovo question is curiously reminiscent of US cold war propaganda regarding the Palestinian national liberation movement, to take just one example. Until the uprising (“intifada”) of a few years ago made it impossible to deny the repressive character of Israeli occupation, the US government and media refused to discuss the history of the Palestinian struggle. Instead they simply denounced Palestinian nationalism as a terrorist movement. It is easy enough to understand why they had to do this. Had they explained the historical context of Palestinian nationalism—namely the dispossession of an entire people—it would have been far more difficult to justify US support for the Israeli occupation, and to demonize the Palestinians as fanatical terrorists. After all, even the new Israeli Prime Minister admitted in a recent interview that if he had been born a Palestinian, he too would have become a “terrorist.”

So it is clear why US propaganda regarding the Palestine question has been deliberately one-sided. But it is harder to understand the left’s studied ignorance of the history of Kosovo, and of the roots of the Albanian insurgency. Fortunately there are non-leftist sources who fill this gap. Noel Malcolm’s recent *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: NYU Press, 1998) describes Kosovo as “arguably the place with the worst human rights violations in Europe” (p. xxvii). Malcolm’s study establishes with scholarly rigor the central feature of Kosovo’s history in the 20th century, namely the responsibility of Serbian national-chauvinism for the tensions in Kosovo that exploded a few years ago.

Kosovo: a short history lesson

Malcolm places the blame for the ethnic conflict in Kosovo squarely in the lap of 19th century Serbian nationalism. This ideology “created a cult of the medieval battle of Kosovo as some sort of nationally-defining historical and spiritual event” (p. xxx). It became an irrelevant detail that both Albanians and Serbs probably fought as allies on *both* sides of that battle in 1389. Serbian nationalism also ignored the long history of relatively peaceful coexistence between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. There was a tradition of intermarriage between Slav and Albanian mountain clans, and folk religious practices evolved that combined Orthodox Christian, Catholic, and Islamic elements.

Certainly ethnic and religious prejudices existed in Kosovo before its annexation by Serbia in 1912. But, Malcolm writes, “between low-level prejudices on the one hand and military conflict, concentration camps and mass murder on the other, there lies a very long road ... it was the policies imposed by the Serbian and Montenegrin governments from the first moment of their conquest ... that created systematic hostility and hatred on a scale that the region had never seen before” (pp. xxviii-xxx).

For the Serbs, 1912 was a war of liberation which freed the captive Kosovar Serbs from Ottoman rule. The Albanian residents of Kosovo, however, who were already the majority in Kosovo, experienced it as a war of conquest. The character of Serbian rule in Kosovo is revealed in a 1913 memorandum written by the Serbian government to the Great Powers. This document justified the annexation of Kosovo on the following counts: (i) “the moral right of a more civilized people”; (ii) historic rights to areas which included Serbian Orthodox Church buildings; (iii) the existence of a Serb majority in Kosovo centuries ago.

The first of these was merely the age-old rationalization of the conqueror. The Serbian government realized that the others were thin justifications so long as the majority in Kosovo was ethnic Albanian. So it proceeded to try to change the demographics of the region in ways chillingly reminiscent of the ethnic cleansing campaigns of the last decade. Leon Trotsky, who was on the scene at the time, wrote that “[t]he Serbs in Old Serbia, in their national endeavour to correct ... ethnographical statistics that are not quite favourable to them, are engaged quite simply in systematic extermination of the Muslim population.” An international commission sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment concluded: “Houses and whole villages reduced to ashes, unarmed and innocent populations massacred...such were the means which were employed ... by the Serb-Montenegrin soldiery, with a view to the entire transformation of the ethnic character of regions inhabited exclusively by Albanians.” An estimated 25,000 Albanians were killed during this early phase of Serbian occupation.

Ever since then, Serbia has been trying to change the ethnic composition of Kosovo in favor of the Serbs. Now how do you change the demographics of a region? You can subtract from the numbers of the unwanted group by killing its members or forcing them to leave. And you can add to the numbers of the wanted group by giving its members incentives to settle in the area.

The Serbian government did both right from the start. When killing Albanians became too costly and messy, it resorted to all sorts of harassment designed to drive them out of Kosovo. Mayors’ offices in Albanian-inhabited towns displayed posters prohibiting the use of any language other than Serbian. After 1935, the government confiscated large

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amounts of land from Albanians under the rule that all land was state property unless the owner had a Yugoslav document to prove his ownership, something hardly ever issued to Albanians. It was official policy to leave Albanian families with only 0.4 hectares per family member. A Serbian policy document acknowledged: "This is below the minimum for subsistence. But that is and has been our aim: to make their life impossible, and in that way to force them to emigrate." The expropriated land, often supplemented with handsome allowances, was used to induce Serb colonists to settle in Kosovo. (Readers may draw their own comparisons with Israeli policies in Palestine.)

These policies did in fact cause tens of thousands of Albanians to emigrate. And if they did not get the hint, there was always outright expulsion, as advocated in 1937 by a respected historian at Belgrade University, who wrote that "[a]t a time when Germany can expel tens of thousands of Jews...the shifting of a few hundred thousand Albanians will not lead to the outbreak of a world war."

Not surprisingly the Albanians rebelled against Serbian rule, sometimes with horrifying consequences. During the second World War, while Yugoslavia was occupied by the Italians and the Nazis, the Albanians killed as many as 25,000 Serbs and expelled as many as 40,000. Malcolm writes that "[t]he driving force [of Albanian collaboration] was not ideological sympathy with Fascism or Nazism, nor any interest in the wider war aims of the Axis powers, but simply the desire of many Albanians to seize the opportunity offered by the collapse of Yugoslavia ... to reverse the colonizing and Slavicizing policies of the previous two decades" (p. 296). This is of course not to justify what the Albanians did, but Malcolm is clear that it is the Serbian colonial policies that provoked such a ferocious response. (Malcolm does not gloss over the unsavory aspects of Kosovar Albanian history and culture. His account of the Albanian code governing the status of women, for example, is unsparing and unflattering. He also treats Albanian claims to Kosovo based on ancient history in the same way as he does similar Serb claims, i.e. as being largely irrelevant.)

After the war the population of Kosovo was 25% Serb, but Serbs held 70% of administrative positions and 50% of the factory jobs. This situation led Tito to remark in 1967 that "[o]ne cannot talk about equal rights when Serbs are given preference in the factories and Albanians are rejected although they have the same or better qualifications." The Serbian police even registered every Albanian who bought the official Albanian-language newspaper! These realities led to considerable unrest among the Albanians in 1968. In response, a constitutional amendment in that year gave Kosovo an almost-republic status. That meant the Albanians enjoyed a far greater degree of linguistic, cultural and educational freedom than they had ever enjoyed under Serbian rule until then; still, political power remained concentrated in Serb hands.

While there had always been Albanians in Kosovo who favored an independent nation or integration into Albania, the demand for independence acquired a true mass following only after Kosovo's autonomy was revoked in 1989 by Slobodan Milosevic. A state of emergency was declared in Kosovo, enforced by 25,000 police and troops. The Albanian language newspaper was suppressed, the Kosovo Academy of Arts and Sciences was closed, and more than 80,000 Albanians were expelled from their jobs. A new Serbian curriculum was imposed in schools that largely eliminated the teaching of Albanian literature and history. Strict physical segregation was introduced in schools, with separate class-

rooms and bathrooms for Albanian and Serb children (!).

Until then most Albanians wanted republic status for Kosovo within Yugoslavia rather than independence, and armed separatism was no more than a fringe movement. Milosevic, in using the Kosovo issue to transform himself into a champion of the Serbian nation, also radicalized the Albanian population. Even then it took years for the secessionist KLA to acquire a mass following. The Albanians first organized the Democratic League of Kosovo led by Ibrahim Rugova, which practiced nonviolent non-cooperation with the Serbian government. But Rugova's tactics proved useless against a Serbian regime determined to carry out the same kind of demographic re-engineering that had succeeded in Bosnia, and that had been tacitly accepted by the great powers in the Dayton Accords (which barely mentioned Kosovo). Serb nationalism with regard to Kosovo became increasingly virulent, with Serbs like the infamous Arkan, one of the butchers of the Bosnian war, stating that the Kosovar Albanians should be regarded as "tourists." The implications of such a characterization are obvious, and the Albanians concluded correctly that it was useless and futile to talk peace and nonviolence with a government whose only response was to spit in their faces.

This is the left?

The empirical record of Serbian rule documented by Malcolm invalidates Serbia's claims to Kosovo. A government that treats its own citizens this way has lost its right to govern them. The Albanians were perfectly justified in concluding that only in their own nation would they be permanently rid of Serbian oppression. The left should understand the social content of their struggle, namely their legitimate desire for national liberation, instead of describing it legalistically as a "civil war."

In light of Kosovo's history, what are we to make of the left's unwillingness to grasp the roots of the conflict? Of the view, for example, that by starting an armed rebellion, it was the Albanians who provoked the Serbs into retaliating? Surely the far greater provocation was the systematic persecution of the Albanians by the Serbs throughout this century, and most recently during the last few years. Just like the Palestinians, the Albanians were practically goaded into revolting. By focusing only on the beginning of the armed uprising, the left has artificially truncated the history of Kosovo and forgotten the true nature of Serbian rule.

As an analogy, imagine someone saying that Israeli rule in the occupied territories—often enforced by collective punishment, torture and so on—may have been brutal, but it was Palestinian "terrorism" that provoked the Israelis into their repressive policies. In fact we do not have to imagine such a statement, since this was the mantra, until quite recently, of the US propaganda machine. The left's correct response to this was to point out that such apologetics for Israeli oppression ignored the main cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely Israel's wholesale assault on the rights of an entire people. But the left has chosen not to apply the same logic to Kosovo, and has decided instead to repeat Serbian apologetics. Let us be clear about this: those who make the argument that the Serbs were provoked by the Albanians are effectively mouthpieces for Serbian national-chauvinism.

At best we have the vapid proclamations from some sections of the left that both sides are guilty. But is there *any* conflict in which this is not true? In particular, has there been any struggle against national or ethnic oppression, especially

any armed struggle, that has been fought completely cleanly? Is it the left's job to identify nominees for sainthood or to understand why people can be driven beyond nonviolent resistance? The seeming even-handedness from some quarters of the left objectively amounts to supporting the main culprits. In situations where the balance of blame tilts so clearly to one side, it is a crime to profess neutrality, however well-intentioned one may be. To do so is to implicitly sanction the actions of the aggressor.

So why has the left failed to recognize the legitimacy of the Kosovar Albanians' fight for independence? Has it become so entrenched in its own version of cold war dogma that it automatically rejects any movement supported by the US? In my view, the implicit logic of the left goes something like this. The US is supporting the Albanians against the Serbs. The US is never on the right side; therefore the Albanian revolt cannot be legitimate. At best, both Serbs and Albanians are equally responsible for the crisis, and the US is unfairly taking the side of the Albanians in a "civil war." This reasoning completely denies the possibility that the Albanian struggle is justified; instead it takes the US involvement as *prima facie* evidence that it is not. (Of course this is not to say that the US motives in supporting the Albanians have anything to do with the legitimacy of their insurgency. That is a separate issue and is not the point of this article.)

Whatever the reason, the left has failed to understand the mass basis of insurgent movements like the KLA; indeed it has not even tried to do so. Instead it has focused on the connections of the KLA to drug dealers, its possible links to foreign intelligence agencies, and so on. But such things have little to do with the basic legitimacy of the Albanians' revolt. Most leftists opposed particular acts of terrorism by Palestinian groups, for example, but did not deny the justice of the Palestinian struggle as a whole. However, the left seems to be incapable of applying this logic to the case of Kosovo.

By failing to defend the right of the Kosovar Albanians to fight back against a predatory government, by going so far as to blame them for provoking the Serbs, the left has shown itself to be little better than the liberals who blamed Malcolm X for "inciting violence" thirty years ago. *This* left could learn something from Malcolm's response:

"How are you going to incite people who are living in slums and ghettos? It's the city structure that incites.... Don't ever accuse a black man for voicing his resentment and dissatisfaction over the criminal condition of his people as being responsible for inciting the situation. You have to indict the society that allows these things to exist." (George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks*, New York: Grove Press, p. 191.)

A left that has forgotten this elementary lesson is not worth the name. ☑