

READY

US intervention in Kosovo



by Joel Schalit

FOR WAR

During the fall of 1998, the American government announced that it was threatening military intervention in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, where an ethnic Albanian guerrilla movement seeking independence from Serbia had been fighting since early spring. Initially rebel forces had made surprising advances, having seized over half of the territory from ill-prepared Serbian troops. But the Yugoslav army counterattacked, rolling back rebel gains with alarming intensity. Towns and villages were being raised to the ground. Several hundred thousand refugees were forced to leave their homes after having been targeted by heavy artillery. Civilians were starting to get slaughtered. It seemed like the early '90s was repeating itself all over again.

America wasn't eager to get directly involved in the fighting. It had its hands full already in Bosnia, where NATO was put in charge of rebuilding the country as part of the diplomatic settlement reached between the warring parties in Dayton, Ohio in 1995. At the time that America began to issue threats of intervention to the Serb leadership in Belgrade, elections were underway to constitute a multi-ethnic government under UN supervision. The last thing that NATO wanted to do was to de-stabilize its own three-year-old effort to rebuild the formerly multiethnic ex-Yugoslav republic with yet another war that would re-ignite tensions between Christians and Muslims again.

The straw that broke the camel's back was when the first evidence of a renewed campaign of "ethnic cleansing" had been uncovered in Kosovo. Twenty-one members of a Muslim Albanian clan were found horribly mutilated in the woods not far from their family compound. Unable to withstand international charges that the European Community was yet again unwilling to intercede before another quarter of a million Muslim civilians were murdered, NATO issued an attack warning, prepared its forces to strike Serbia. This threat of force won a temporary cease-fire agreement between the warring Yugoslav factions.

According to the terms of the ceasefire, federal troops and police forces deployed in Kosovo would be withdrawn and negotiations granting the primarily Muslim province political autonomy within what is left of the Yugoslavia would begin. The idea, as US diplomats explained, would be to restore the region to the status of a full province, which had been revoked by Belgrade in 1988, sparking not only the Kosovo independence movement, but also the gradual disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Under threat of massive NATO air strikes, Serbia reluctantly agreed to go along with it, as did the factional representatives of Kosovo's fledgling independence movement who saw it as an opportunity to regroup for the next stage of the conflict.

It hasn't taken long for the cease-fire to break down. Kosovo Liberation Army forces have moved into territory vacated by government troops and proceeded to attack the Serbian military again. In order to appear to be respecting the terms of the cease-fire agreement, the Yugoslav government is staging mass arrests of Muslims suspected of collusion with the rebels and civilians continue to be routinely shot and killed on counterinsurgency missions. Despite the fact that it may have fallen from the front page of impeachment-filled newspapers, the crisis in Kosovo is one that can still erupt at any moment.

I continue to watch this display of violent political theatre with nervous—albeit involved—amusement. Nothing put me more into political crisis than the civil war in the former Yugoslavia did during the early '90s. As a Jew, a large part of me identified with the religious nature of the conflict, and how much of it seemed to be a replaying of

traditionally Christian genocidal impulses towards non-Christian European citizens. Now that Eastern Europe's Jews were gone, who better to turn on than Muslims, a cultural minority demonized world-wide as the Western world's new enemy.

Part of me wanted very desperately for the Americans to intervene and save Bosnia's Muslim population precisely because I still naively hoped that something had been learned from our failure to prevent the Holocaust from happening. But I was also reluctant to put America in such a position, because time and time again, from the Second World War to the Gulf War, I knew all too well that America only deployed its forces abroad to serve its own selfish economic interests.

My personal problem was that as much as I wanted some knight in shining democratic armor to come and save the day, there were no obvious alternatives to the status quo. Anyone who'd intervene on behalf of Bosnia's Muslims would do so with another pretext in mind. I rejected this because it was not pure enough, because there had to be, to put it bluntly, a *final solution* that worked this time. Anything else would be simply repugnant. But I knew this wouldn't happen, so I resigned myself to trying to figure it out personally in order to decipher what it was that upset me most about the conflict.

It came down to trying to figure out why it was that history always seemed to repeat itself. Somehow, if I could bust that problem open, I'd be able to see out to the other side, and perhaps get a sense that there are alternatives to feeling powerless and shameful. That's why watching the Serbs inaugurate yet another chapter of ethnic cleansing this summer against its last substantial Muslim population didn't make me search my soul the way that the war in Bosnia did. I'd already found a way to contend with it, in a manner that didn't just explain it away the way my political and academic friends did. But what it did do was make me recall precisely how I found a better way to deal with such vexing moral problems and still retain some sense of humanity in the process.

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It was July 1995 and I'd been working as a ship manager in the south of Spain for almost two months. Every time I went into town to buy groceries, I'd end up sitting through massive traffic jams. The problem was that I worked with Americans and Englishmen and despite the fact that we were in Spain, we stuck to a traditional North American 9 to 5 work schedule. While we were leaving work at five, everyone else was going back to work after their ritual afternoon *siesta*.

This time I decided to try something different. I left the dock at three, expecting to cruise down the road unimpeded. No such luck. As soon as I drove my beat up little Renault onto the highway, I got stuck again. This time, however, the reason for the congestion was different. As I looked out at the traffic descending the hill beneath me, I saw a line of olive green military trucks filled with ammunition, troops and .50 caliber Browning machine gun barrels poking out from underneath camouflage tarps that were supposed to have disguised them.

"What the hell is going on?" I thought to myself as a pair of charcoal gray and black USAF F-16s buzzed the ocean on my right. I knew from my Israeli army upbringing that it was rare for military convoys to use civilian roads unless there was some kind of large scale mobilization going on.

Once I arrived in Almunecar, I called the new captain that we'd just hired told him about what I saw.

"Oh, that makes sense," he said. "There's been all this military

transport chatter on marine radio today. It sounds like NATO is finally getting ready to ship out to Bosnia."

A week later, my girlfriend Cristina and I drove to Paris for a quick vacation. As soon as we crossed through French border control, we headed north for Lyons. Unlike the Spanish coastal highway, this road was relatively empty—that is until we looked in the opposite direction. Hundreds of tan, camouflaged French armored personnel carriers full of troops wearing combat-ready flack jackets were traveling south, heading for the port of Marseilles. They were followed by huge trailer trucks carrying Leopard main battle tanks sporting brand new, smooth bore 120 millimeter guns tied down to their chassis, sporting French military symbols on their turrets instead of traditional UN peacekeeping insignia. The absence of United Nations emblems meant this was a full fledged combat deployment.

Preparations for war had obviously begun. Armored cars would have been one thing. But heavy battlefield weapons like these meant something entirely different. Just by looking at the kind of gear these troops were towing around, I knew exactly what kind of situation the French army was preparing to get themselves into.

The last time I was in Paris, the war in Bosnia had just started to heat up. After an open air market in Sarajevo was bombed by the Serbs, my cousins and I ate dinner at my elder cousin Francis' suburban home watching French television repeatedly show footage of the blown-apart bodies of dead shoppers. All my elderly relatives could do was talk about the Nazis, and how they'd returned to Europe in the form of the Serbian Army.

It was difficult for me to stomach such comparisons because of how frequently persons of all political and ethnic stripes—Jews, right-wingers and leftists alike—use the designation of "Nazi" to describe anything that remotely resembles racism. I argued with my cousins about it at great length, telling them about how nationalism was being invoked in the place of Communism in order to compensate for the kind of identity crisis created by the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe.

"As much as leftists might object to this, myself included," I argued with my cousin Francis, "Fascism was linked to socialism. This is entirely different."

"Yes, I agree Joel," replied Francis, "But the genocide against the Muslims is the first time we've experienced anything like the Shoah in Europe since the war, so these comparisons, regardless of your scholarly hair-splitting, are entirely reasonable. Especially coming from the mouths of French Jews like myself who narrowly escaped the gas chambers."

I remembered how many Americans were thinking the same thing when the first reports of "ethnic cleansing" started to surface in American newspapers in 1992, after the Yugoslav Federation had disintegrated, and Serbia and Croatia decided to carve up the weakest former republic, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Around that time, reports started to filter in about the existence of Serbian and Croatian concentration camps like Omarska, where Muslim civilians were slowly being starved to death; of pitched battles in major cities like Vukovar, where the entire focus of the fighting was the elimination of the Croat civilian population; and how soldiers on every side of the warring equation brutally raped female prisoners to prevent their enemies from biologically reproducing their own kind.

Every politician, statesman, journalist and scholar who wrote

about the conflict at the time was absolutely incredulous to the new lack of civility in the western world. "How could this be happening again in modern Europe?" they asked. Especially in a country like the former Yugoslavia, which had been the most politically progressive and multicultural Communist nation during the Cold War. It seemed like the clock had been turned back to 1939. Regardless of the kind of political system that had given birth to it, state-sanctioned racism and genocide was back in vogue.

Nothing could better confirm Europe's regression back to its old barbarous ways than what we saw on television the next morning as we sat and ate our breakfast in the motel dining room.

Exhausted from the previous day's 12-hour drive, Cristina and I drank pot after pot of coffee while we tried to read the daily leftist newspaper *Liberation*. We pulled apart hot croissants with our fingers, sipped fresh orange juice, softly kissed each other, and savored the idea that we were in love in France with a fresh wad of money in our pockets, and only bookstores and museums to visit for four whole days. Then the bartender turned on a wide-screen television set that spanned the length of the wall in front of us. On came *Pas de Comment*, a silent documentary news program.

The UN had just discovered mass graves containing thousands of Bosnian Muslim civilians after the town of Srebrenica had been overrun by Serb forces. Their mangled, bullet-ridden bodies were still very fresh—the blood on their clothing hadn't totally dried. The camera silently followed the trail of corpses through each hastily dug mass grave, moving in closely to capture all the gory, beheaded details, then withdrawing to look at the faces of the disgusted Dutch peacekeeping forces that had been allowed back into the area to inspect them.

All of the sudden I felt terribly queasy. It wasn't just the brutal garishness of the program that upset me. It was how the graphic, silent documentation of violence made me feel about myself at the time: a middle-class American graduate student, on vacation in Paris with his fashionably bald Quebecois girlfriend, in an affluent European city, engaging in extremely refined cultural activities like eating croissants, buying books and wandering museums. I don't think I have ever felt full of more self-loathing in my entire life than I did that first morning of my French vacation. My cousin Francis was right: Violence is violence, regardless of what it comes from. Being old enough to bear witness to genocide twice in his lifetime was the only justification he needed to connect the historical dots between Nazism and Serbian nationalism. I looked into my café au lait as it grew cold, thinking about how much my commitment to studying political theory made it impossible for me to just call a spade a spade—particularly when the horrifying evidence of history repeating itself was staring right at me. I got up and left the table.

After we packed our bags, Cristina and I got back on the highway and drove to the Latin Quarter. We had no idea where we were going to stay that night so we parked near the University of Paris' Sorbonne campus in hopes of finding a cheap bed and breakfast. Everywhere we turned, we saw flyers advertising meetings of academic and cultural action committees formed around the war in Bosnia. Some meetings were scheduled to discuss the sexual character of the war—one flyer even announced the formation of a committee that had been convened to discuss metapolitics of mass rape. Others were calling for public discussion of Europe's responsibility to intervene in

the conflict and put an end to the violence once and for all.

The odd man out was a well-posted placard advertising a public meeting to discuss recent events in Bosnia hosted by the Spartacist League. I was floored. It was a call for the working class to defend the socialist government of Yugoslavian Prime Minister Slobodan Milosevic against Western imperialist attempts to derail his attack on Islamic Fundamentalist encroachment in the Balkans.

The poster urged the international working class to volunteer in the struggle against the rising green tide of European Islam. It was sickening how one-dimensional it was. But it struck me how similar this opinion was to the way many European governments really felt about the lessons that Balkan nationalism was teaching Europe's burgeoning Islamic community: Don't develop political aspirations or you'll be really fucking sorry.

It made sense. Anti-Islamic violence throughout France was on the rise. Supporters of National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen had just murdered a North African immigrant several weeks before a rally celebrating recent National Front electoral advances. The French government had recently passed a policy forbidding Muslim women from wearing their ritual headscarves in public schools. The German government was resisting granting citizenship to German-born Turkish Muslim children of first-generation guest workers, while neo-Nazi activists were busy beating up German Muslims in the name of combating Islamic fundamentalism.

The French Spartacist posters we saw pasted on the walls of Paris that day basically stated the same thing: Stop Muslim growth in Europe.

Due to my dyslexic errors in calculating the exchange rate, our money didn't go very far. After our third day in town, wandering around, spending more time taking photographs

of anti-Islamic graffiti on the walls of Paris than looking at Louis the XIV-era paintings in the Louvre, we decided to make a mad dash back to Spain. This time we decided to take a different route, driving from Paris to the Atlantic coast, and then crossing through Pays Basque straight across the country in a 24-hour marathon drive. By midnight, we had arrived at the border—it looked terribly empty. Spanish passport and custom controls were vacant. Toll barriers were raised. We could have driven straight through, but I decided not to. The whole idea of crossing a border that didn't really exist was foreign to me.

"I don't know, Joel," Cristina said in protest. "It could be that the Spanish authorities are a bit more lax about such things than the French are."

I didn't believe it. After all, the French border police had subjected us to an identity check when we crossed into Perpignan from Catalonia. "It just seems too weird," I replied. "Here we are, on a continent exploding with all kinds of new distinctions—ethnic, religious, cultural, political—but we can travel into another country without even passing through immigration. I just don't understand it. And I don't want to get in trouble. Let's just crash here and get a fresh start in the morning."

We spent the night in the car, in a deserted parking lot adjacent to a filling station. The next morning, I was woken up by the sound of a convoy of French military vehicles that had stopped for coffee, perhaps en route to another departure point for Bosnia. I scratched my eyes and looked out at them as soldiers jumped out of the creaky metal hulls of their camouflaged armored vehicles while Cristina still slept. I decided to place a collect call to my father in Tel Aviv.

"Dad, you wouldn't believe what's going on here," I told him. "Ever since we left Spain, there's been an amazing amount of military traffic on all the roads and highways we've been travelling on. It seems like Europe's finally on the brink of going to war again."

"Yes child," my father said. "I understand that NATO is getting ready to strike the Serbs, but there's been no formal declaration of hostilities yet."

"I dunno Dad," I answered, "the whole thing just doesn't make any sense to me. There's so much anti-Islamic sentiment here. I just can't seem to understand why NATO would be mobilizing to defend Bosnian Muslims."

Elie quietly laughed and answered, "Look Yoel, if you only knew how concerned the Allies are about Iran becoming directly involved in Bosnia, you'd stick your neck out for these people too. Just yesterday, some Israeli friends of mine told me that the Americans had seized several Iranian naval vessels in Croatia. They were full of Mujahedeen and military equipment destined for use by the Muslim Army. That's why NATO is mobilizing: Not because they feel obligated to defend the rights of Europe's token Islamic community, they just don't want Iran to get a foothold in Europe."



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I hung up the phone, stunned at how simple it all really was. He was right. Europe hadn't really changed all that much. It was just looking after its own perceived interests, just like it always had. The only difference were the kind of explanations we all resorted to in order to figure out why history was repeating itself again. Never one to totally leave my studies behind, I recalled Marx's famous statement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* about how the first time history repeats itself it's a tragedy, but the second time it's a total farce. That, I realized, was the real difference. All of the sudden, the idea of crossing the border without having to show a passport to anyone seemed like the most radical thing I could possibly ever do.

As we cruised freely through the abandoned border station, we could see an empty highway stretching out for miles before us. No tanks, no armored personnel carriers, no fighter-bombers flying overhead. Just the way it always should be. Empty. Sensing the irony of the situation, I sipped my first cup of coffee of the day, gunned the accelerator and began the final leg of our journey home. For a moment it felt like I was experiencing something that hadn't happened before. ☺