

"GOOD VERSUS EVIL" AFTER THE COLD WAR: KOSOVO AND THE MORALISATION OF WAR REPORTING

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Abstract

Focusing on coverage of the 1999 Kosovo conflict, this paper examines the trend towards framing contemporary wars and interventions in moral terms, and highlights the threat this poses to accurate and informative reporting. Kosovo represented the latest stage in a process of re-framing international relations in the post-Cold War era, and drew on three different news frames developed in earlier Western reporting of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, which portrayed the break-up of the country as a continuation of the Cold War, as the product of "ethnic" hatred, and as a repeat of the Holocaust. The significance of today's moralised framework is that the "moral imperative" to intervene can override all other considerations, including national sovereignty and international law. In practice the supposedly "universal" discourse of human rights and humanitarianism becomes an apology for an elitist division of the world into (morally) superior and inferior peoples and states. Journalists have played an important and active role in developing and disseminating influential interpretations of the post-Cold War world. The rhetoric of "Good versus Evil" deployed by Nato leaders in Kosovo drew on explanatory frameworks which liberal journalists, commentators and intellectuals had helped to elaborate during the Bosnian conflict.

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A striking and often remarked feature of the 1999 Nato air war against Yugoslavia was the high-flown rhetoric which accompanied it. Although by no means new, the tendency to present war as a moral enterprise was taken to extravagant lengths in the portrayal of the bombing as marking a new era of “ethical” foreign policy and “humanitarian” intervention. The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, for example, described the war in epic terms, insisting it was “more than just a military conflict.” Rather, it was: “a battle between good and evil; between civilisation and barbarity; between democracy and dictatorship” (*Sunday Telegraph*, 4 April 1999). Blair kept up a constant barrage of similarly bombastic statements throughout, and marked the end of the war with the stentorian declaration that: “Good has triumphed over evil. Justice has overcome barbarism. And the values of civilisation have prevailed.”

This paper examines the “moral” justifications for war set out by Nato politicians and officials, and points to the threat which moralism poses to accurate and informative reporting. My concern is as much with the moralism as with the media, seeking to explore how Kosovo represented the latest stage in a process of re-framing international relations in the post-Cold War era, and examining the content and significance of the new moralism, as well as highlighting the important role played by journalists in justifying interventions such as the Kosovo bombing.

The Dangers of Media Moralism

The writer and broadcaster Michael Ignatieff recognises that, at least potentially, the moralisation of war is a dangerous phenomenon:

[W]e need to reflect on the potential for self-righteous irrationality which lies hidden in abstractions like human rights. Those who supported the Kosovo war must face up to the unintended effects of moralizing the use of violence. For high-flown abstractions carry an inherent justification of everything done in their name. What is to prevent moral abstractions like human rights from inducing an absolutist frame of mind which, in defining all human rights violators as barbarians, legitimizes barbarism? ... Moral danger ... lies in failing to ask ourselves clearly enough whether our moral emotions are real, whether they authentically belong to us and accurately respond to a situation — an abuse, a crime, a catastrophe — as it really is (2000, 213-4).

To safeguard against this “moral danger,” Ignatieff proposes “devoted attention to what is real,” arguing that “a good citizen is a highly suspicious one” (2000, 214, 196). Ignatieff’s own vociferous support for the Kosovo bombing, however, suggests his search for moral authenticity is a poor defence against the danger of falling for simplistic and misleading fables spun for the TV cameras.

In selling the war to Western publics, Nato leaders made a number of claims which were repeated uncritically by the media, but which have since proved to be either highly dubious or demonstrably false. The official version of events goes something like this: Despite the deployment of an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) civilian monitoring mission, there was a massacre of around 40 civilians by Yugoslav forces at the village of Racak in January 1999. This led to intensified Western diplomatic efforts to bring peace to Kosovo, but the Serbs refused the reasonable peace deal on offer during the ensuing Rambouillet

talks, leaving Nato with no further diplomatic options. Bombing was therefore justified as an extreme but necessary measure to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and to avert genocide. Nato also later claimed that the bombing was designed to “halt” or “reverse” the humanitarian crisis that developed, and that a Serbian plan for genocide was implemented in Kosovo before and during the bombing.

These claims were crucial to justifying and legitimising the war, and were therefore voiced repeatedly by Nato leaders, spokespersons and journalists. The claim to have exhausted all diplomatic options was important in deflecting criticism that Nato had acted aggressively, and in pinning all blame for the ensuing death and damage on Serbia. The claims about genocide and a humanitarian disaster in Kosovo were important in circumventing the problem that — as an unprovoked attack on a sovereign state, launched without the authority of the United Nations Security Council — Nato bombing was illegal. The repetition of these claims, which allowed the bombing to be presented as a morally righteous act, was a striking illustration of the propaganda role played by the mainstream Western media.

The OSCE’s Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) was allegedly designed to monitor a ceasefire between Yugoslav forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Yet according to the Swedish Transnational Foundation (Oberg 1999), around 70 per cent of the supposedly civilian monitors actually had military backgrounds, and there were “consistent rumours” that some KVM monitors were Western spies. Almost a year after the bombing started the US Central Intelligence Agency admitted its agents had indeed been among the monitors in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, “developing ties with the KLA and giving American military training manuals and field advice on fighting the Yugoslav army and Serbian police” (*Sunday Times*, 12 March 2000). For its part, the KLA also admitted to “long-standing links with American and European intelligence organisations,” and it was revealed that two US military training companies, Military Professional Resources Inc. and Dyncorps, had been operating in Kosovo, just as they had in Croatia and Bosnia (*ibid.*). Along with other foreign powers, the United States secretly armed and trained the KLA (*Junge Welt*, 17 January 2000), despite, as recently as February 1998, publicly describing it as a “terrorist organisation.” The KLA’s strategy was to provoke Serb retaliation in order to encourage Nato airstrikes. As one Kosovo Albanian leader later revealed: “The more civilians were killed, the chances of international intervention became bigger, and the KLA of course realised that.”¹

The American head of the OSCE mission, William Walker, was instrumental in hastening the build-up to war. His reaction to the killings in Racak on 15 January 1999 was one of “personal revulsion” at an “unspeakable atrocity,” a “massacre,” a “crime against humanity,” which he unhesitatingly blamed on the Yugoslav government. Yet Walker had reacted very differently to the killing of civilians when he was US ambassador to El Salvador a decade earlier. He had then felt able to say simply: “things like this happen,” dismissing the Salvadoran army’s murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in 1989 as a “management control problem.” It appears that Walker’s varying capacity for moral indignation may be conditioned by political expediency. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether the deaths in Racak did result from a massacre of civilians. Two French journalists, Renaud Girard and Christophe Chatelot, visited the scene and examined footage taken by an Associated Press TV crew on the day of the alleged massacre. Their

reports — carried prominently in the French press but ignored by the Anglo-American media — suggested the dead had been killed in a battle between Yugoslav security forces and the KLA (Johnstone 1999). The *Berliner Zeitung* (13 March 1999) also reported that senior European OSCE officials doubted Walker's version of events and wished to see him replaced as head of the mission.

The direct result of the orchestrated outcry over the Racak "massacre" was a series of Western-brokered talks at Rambouillet. Far from being a disinterested and helpful attempt at mediation, however, these "negotiations" were deliberately designed to fail, providing a pretext for bombing. The talks, between parties who were never allowed to meet, were set up as an ultimatum to Yugoslavia — either sign a pre-ordained "agreement" or face a Nato attack. Nevertheless, the Yugoslav delegation at Rambouillet actually accepted the political provisions for Kosovo's autonomy which the draft agreement initially involved, and although they objected to its implementation by a Nato force, they did suggest an alternative United Nations force. Since the leading Nato powers were entirely uninterested in negotiation, changes were made to the draft accord which made it increasingly difficult for Yugoslavia to accept. The political section was altered to leave Kosovo's future status as part of Serbia uncertain, a Nato implementation force was insisted on, and an Appendix was inserted giving Nato troops unimpeded access to the whole of Yugoslavia and immunity from local law. Journalists knew at the time that the talks were intended to fail (Kenney 1999), but did not report this. The BBC, in common with almost every other mainstream Western news organisation only "discovered" the real nature of the Rambouillet talks after the war was over, reporting a year too late that the negotiations had been "designed to fail" (BBC Online, 19 March 2000).² When it mattered, reporters maintained a wilful ignorance, representing the manufacture of a pretext for bombing as a genuine attempt at diplomacy (Hammond and Herman 2000). Of course, no subsequent apology for the earlier misreporting was offered by the BBC or anyone else.

Before the bombing started, no international agency had declared a "humanitarian disaster" in Kosovo. Indeed, Nato leaders explicitly justified bombing as a measure to prevent such a disaster. US State Department spokesman James Rubin explained to the BBC on 25 March 1999 that if Nato had not acted, "you would have had hundreds of thousands of people crossing the border." The following day, Blair told the nation: "fail to act now ... and we would have to deal with ... hundreds of thousands of refugees." As the refugees nevertheless did begin to flee, Nato denied any responsibility, instead portraying the mass exodus as the result of a premeditated Serbian plan for genocide. Right on cue, documents outlining just such a secret plan — "Operation Horseshoe" — were revealed by German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer on 6 April 1999. We were now supposed to believe that there had been a humanitarian disaster before the bombing, but everybody had simply forgotten to mention it and had instead promised to prevent it; and that Nato had known of a Serbian plan for genocide but had neglected to say anything about it until nearly two weeks into the air campaign.

The alleged existence of "Operation Horseshoe" did not explain why around 60 per cent of Kosovo's Serbs and Montenegrins — 100,000 people — fled during Nato's 78-day war.³ This did not matter, however, since these refugees were systematically ignored by Western journalists, in line with Nato's claim that "humani-

tarian" bombing could not possibly cause anyone to flee. The idea that genocide was underway also flew in the face of several earlier official assessments by the German government of the situation in Kosovo. On 12 January 1999, for example, a Foreign Ministry intelligence report stated: "explicit political persecution linked to Albanian ethnicity is not verifiable ... actions of the security forces [are] not directed against the Kosovo-Albanians as an ethnically defined group, but against the military opponent and its actual or alleged supporters."⁴ This, and other, similar reports were issued in response to requests for asylum by Kosovo Albanians, so their objectivity may be questionable. But the picture they reveal is borne out by KVM monitor Jacques Prod'homme, who said that "in the month leading up to the war, during which he moved freely throughout the Pec region, neither he nor his colleagues observed anything that could be described as systematic persecution, either collective or individual murders, burning of houses or deportations."⁵

Having covertly armed and trained the KLA, the Nato powers wished to present the fighting in Kosovo as a one-sided, "genocidal" aggression rather than a two-sided conflict. After the war, Blair explained:

*We were faced with a moral choice: to let this barbarism happen or to stop it. We chose the right course [T]he world now knows that we will not let racial genocide go on without challenge. We will not see the values of civilisation sacrificed without raising the hand of justice in their defence.*⁶

Yet there was no campaign of "racial genocide." According to retired brigadier-general Heinz Loquai, the German government faked the "Operation Horseshoe" plan. The supposed blueprint for genocide was fabricated, complete with an invented "codename" and maps drawn up by the German Defence Ministry (*Sunday Times*, 2 April 2000). Western politicians and spokespersons claimed 10,000, or even 100,000 or more, had been killed by Yugoslav security forces and paramilitaries. Yet the evidence so far published by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is of 2,108 bodies (a figure which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants, nor between Albanians and Serbs), and at around 25 "mass grave sites" examined by investigators, no bodies at all have been discovered. One team of Spanish pathologists sent to investigate the "killing fields" found 187 bodies instead of the thousands predicted. As they left Kosovo in August 1999 the Spanish team denounced Nato propaganda, and declared "we did not find one — not one — mass grave" (*El Pais*, 23 September 1999).

Supporters of the bombing have tried to dismiss such revelations. The *Guardian's* Maggie O'Kane, for example, argues that "numbers talk cheapens life." Perhaps the true casualty figures are far lower than claimed at the time, she concedes, but "does it really matter?" (BBC Radio 4, 19 February 2000). It matters because it was Nato and its supporters who played a cynical numbers game. If, instead of wild claims about a new Holocaust, Nato had said its bombing would lead to the intensification of a local civil conflict, there would have been no grand moral cause for enthusiasts of Nato violence to rally around. If the Nato powers had announced in advance that they were illegally training and equipping a separatist guerrilla movement, infiltrating spies into a "civilian monitoring mission," contriving pretexts for bombing and designing shows of diplomacy which were programmed to break down, it seems unlikely that many would have welcomed this as upholding the "values of civilisation."

Michael Ignatieff is presumably no worse than anyone else at sifting truth from propaganda. It seems likely his ability to do so in this instance was impaired by precisely the moralising self-righteousness against which he warns. The moralistic framework within which the Kosovo bombing was placed inhibited a rational and accurate understanding of events. The conflict within Kosovo itself was distorted: the nature of the KLA and its relationship with Western powers was hidden from view, and the Serbs were presented as Nazis or barbarians, committing “genocide” or “medieval atrocities.” The role of the leading Nato countries in precipitating war was deliberately covered-up, and presented instead as disinterested mediation. In effect, Western journalists disregarded their supposed role of informing democratic debate, so that the decision for war was taken with almost no public discussion, and on the basis of a skewed and distorted picture of the causes of the conflict.

Since the rationale for bombing had been presented in moralistic terms, its conduct was also more easily misrepresented. Nato was said to be taking great care to avoid civilian casualties, and the widespread civilian destruction and death which it caused were explained away as a series of unfortunate “accidents.” The real nature of the Nato assault was thereby obscured: it actually relied on civilian terror, not military precision. Predictably, its military success was hugely exaggerated: a confidential US Air Force report leaked to *Newsweek* (15 May 2000) revealed that “the number of targets verifiably destroyed was a tiny fraction of those claimed” by Nato. At the same time, journalists found it almost impossible to contemplate the possibility that Nato strikes on non-military targets might be deliberate rather than “collateral damage.” Hailing the bombing as ushering in a new age of “ethical foreign policy” could not sit comfortably with the fact that Nato killed civilians. Therefore, although Nato’s bombings of ethnic-Albanian refugees attracted some negative publicity, there was only minimal and muted media criticism of strikes against passenger trains, buses, bridges, domestic heating plants, electricity stations, factories, television buildings, marketplaces, hospitals, homes and schools. In Ignatieff’s terms, barbarism was indeed legitimised by moralism.

Framing the Post-Cold War World

Western media coverage of Kosovo was an exercise in presenting the profoundly immoral as an ethical success. In many ways, this is no more than one would expect of the mainstream media in wartime: coverage of Kosovo conformed to a long and sorry history of propaganda service (Knightley 2000). But the moralisation of the conflict also reflected a new common sense about international relations in the post-Cold War era. Today, it seems that conflicts and interventions are placed into a ready-made moral framework, whereby the major Western powers are seen as a global force for Good against Evil. A full account of the development of this framework cannot be attempted here, but I do wish to outline how the moralised coverage of Kosovo drew on three different news frames, developed in earlier Western reporting of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, which portrayed the break-up of the country as a continuation of the Cold War, as the product of “ethnic” hatred, and as a repeat of the Nazi Holocaust.

The Cold War

Coverage of the break-up of Yugoslavia initially preserved the old Cold War news frame. As a 1991 critique of US coverage noted, much reporting “persisted in inaccurately forcing the Yugoslavian civil war into a black-and-white Cold War framework” (Kavran 1991). The *Los Angeles Times* (8 July 1991), for example, explained the secession of Croatia as “a battle between hard-line communists and free-market democrats.” A similar trend was evident in British coverage. The *Independent* (4 July 1991), for instance, explained that Serbia was one of the “last redoubts” of communism and totalitarianism, whereas Slovenia and Croatia, both “Westernised and prosperous,” represented “democracy.” This was also the light in which Croatian President Franjo Tuđman wished to present the conflict: “The struggle here is the same that has been going on in Eastern Europe for the past three years: democracy against communism” (*European*, 18 August 1991). It is not difficult to see the continuing appeal of this Cold War explanation, despite the fall of the Berlin Wall. It placed the break-up of Yugoslavia as part of a recent series of revolts against communism in Eastern Europe, invoking a well-established division between good guys and bad guys, and thereby legitimised and encouraged Western support for one side of the conflict.

During the Kosovo bombing there was an echo of the Cold War framework in the contrast drawn by Nato spokespersons between President Slobodan Milošević’s “totalitarian regime” and the freedoms enjoyed in the West. Justifying the bombing of Serbian broadcasting, for example, Blair said in a 10 May 1999 speech that: “We take freedom of speech and freedom of the press, for grantedThe Serb media is state-controlled. It is part and parcel of Milošević’s military machine.” Nato tried to insist that Serbia broadcast six hours a day of Western news, and Nato radio towers near the Yugoslav border transmitted programmes from the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Although Nato could use the notion of “totalitarianism versus democracy” in particular situations, however, the broader utility of the Cold War frame was strictly limited. This was not so much because it did not fit the facts — that Serbia has an elected government; that independent, oppositional media existed before the bombing, and to some extent continued to operate during it — since such facts were of no interest to most Western reporters, who were quite happy to denounce Yugoslav propaganda whilst acting as propagandists themselves. Rather, invoking memories of the Cold War did not serve the felt need to find a new *raison d’être* for Nato, to portray the bombing as opening a new “ethical” era of Western foreign policy, and to play down the rift with Russia which Kosovo opened up.

Ethnicity and Barbarism

Already in 1991, “ethnic” explanations were frequently adopted. Broadly speaking, these were of two types. On one hand, the border between Croatia and Serbia was viewed as the dividing line, not between democracy and communism, but, as Joan Phillips (1992) notes, “between Western civilisation and Eastern barbarism.” The *Daily Telegraph* (13 November 1991), for example, likened the shelling of Dubrovnik to “the barbarian hordes advancing on Rome.” To some extent, this perspective was a way of re-working the Cold War East-West division. Tuđman, for instance, in the same breath as he spoke of democrats versus communists, also

suggested that Serbs and Croats were “not just different peoples but different civilisations.” However, it was a significant reworking, since the division was cast as civilisational rather than political. Peter Brock (1993-94, 162-3) notes how, in US coverage, terms such as “Eastern,” “Byzantine” and “Orthodox” were often used pejoratively, to contrast Serbs with “Westernised” Croats. Exemplifying a similar trend in Britain, Peter Jenkins wrote in the *Independent* (12 November 1992) that:

There were two Europes for many centuries before the Cold War was thought of: Western Christendom, Catholic and baroque, and Eastern Orthodox Europe which, in the Balkans, merged into the Ottoman Empire and the world of Islam.

For their part, Croatian nationalists exaggerated or invented linguistic and other cultural differences between Serbs and Croats, hoping to use this notion of a deep-seated division between East and West to their advantage.

A second strand of “ethnic” explanation, however, viewed the conflict as a resurgence of ancient antagonisms which had been held in check by the Cold War. In this perspective, the whole region was sometimes seen as beyond the pale of civilisation. The *Daily Telegraph’s* Defence Editor, John Keegan (1993, xi), for example, wrote that:

The horrors of the war in Yugoslavia, as incomprehensible as they are revolting to the civilised mind, defy explanation in conventional military terms. The pattern of local hatreds they reveal are unfamiliar to anyone but the professional anthropologists who take the warfare of tribal and marginal peoples as their subject of study Most intelligent newspaper readers ... will be struck by the parallels to be drawn with the behaviour of pre-state peoples.

Here, “civilisation” excludes everyone in the Balkans, since all are party to pre-modern, “tribal” conflicts. “Ethnic” explanations are potentially ambiguous in their delineation of goodies and baddies. A local “Westernised” goodie may be adopted to the side of “civilisation” in opposition to a “barbaric” other, but sometimes everyone is tarred with the brush of “tribalism” in contrast to the modernity of the West.

More elaborated accounts of these two types of “ethnic” explanation can be found in the writings of Samuel Huntington, Robert Kaplan and others. Huntington divides the world along civilisational “fault lines,” one of which, unsurprisingly, he discovers running “almost exactly along the line now separating Croatia and Slovenia from the rest of Yugoslavia” (1993, 30). Again this is clearly an attempt to re-cast the Cold War division: Huntington argues that “the Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology as the most significant dividing line in Europe,” suggesting that those on the other side are “much less likely to develop stable democratic political systems” (1993, 30-31). Like Peter Jenkins, pitting “Western Christendom” against both “Eastern Orthodox Europe” and “the world of Islam,” Huntington finds that the people on the wrong side of the European tracks are “Orthodox and Muslim.” As Johnstone (2000, 155) notes, “an oddity of these ‘cultural divide’ projections is that they find the abyss between Eastern and Western Christianity far deeper and more unbridgeable than the difference between Christianity and Islam.” A probable reason for this is that, in trying to find a replacement for the Soviet threat, Huntington simply lumped Muslims along with

Serbs and Russians, since Islamic fundamentalism was an established propaganda enemy of the West. Such oddities began to look even more odd as, in Bosnia and Kosovo, the “dividing line” appeared to be between Orthodoxy and Islam, and Nato’s first-ever military engagements, in 1995 and 1999, were both rhetorically justified as being in defence of Muslims. The second strand of “ethnic” explanations described above encountered no such problem, since in this perspective it was “ethnicity” itself which was the source of conflict. Kaplan (1994), for example, drew on Huntington’s “clash of civilisations” thesis but developed it to describe a breakdown of civilisation itself, in “places where the Western Enlightenment has not penetrated”; places constantly threatened by “cultural and racial war”; places populated by “re-primitivized man.” Such places, of course, included the Balkans.

Ethnic explanations were again much in evidence in Kosovo. Sometimes, efforts were made to differentiate a “good” versus a “bad” ethnicity, as for example when the *Independent’s* Marcus Tanner (11 May 1999) asked “Do Albanians look like Serbs?”:

No The Serbs often have black or dark brown hair and are generally darker and more heavily built than Albanians. Their appearance is fairly typical of southern Slavs. By contrast, the Kosovars look Celtic to a British eye. They have curly hair, which is often blonde or rust coloured, and their skin tends to be very pale and covered in freckles. Their eyes are often green or blue and their build is much more slender than that of the Serbs. They have longer heads. It is not surprising that they look so different as they belong to different races that have very rarely intermarried.

The picture of slender, blond, light-skinned and blue-eyed Albanians versus swarthy Serbs was factually inaccurate (there are plenty of blond Serbs and dark Albanians), but was clearly not intended to inform: the point was to make Albanians more appealing to white British readers. As the *Telegraph’s* Tom Utley admitted: “It has been all the more painful to witness the suffering of the people of Kosovo because they look and live so much like us” (26 March 1999). The Serbs, meanwhile, were seen as less than human. In the *Telegraph*, Patrick Bishop suggested that “‘Serb’ is a synonym for ‘barbarian’” (26 March 1999), while Steve Crawshaw wrote in the *New Statesman* (31 May 1999) that “millions of Serbs” were “liars on a grand scale” who had “gone mad.” Even more bluntly, the *Sun* (14 April 1999) described the Serbs as “animals,” who were “an affront to humanity,” and urged that they be “shot like wild dogs.”

For other writers, the point was not so much that there were “good” and “bad” ethnic groups, but that everyone in Kosovo was barbaric. The *Sun* (25 March 1999), for example, provided a question-and-answer section on “the conflict that’s 600 years old.” Titled “What is the war for?” the article asked: “Where is Kosovo?”, “What are the different religious groups?”, “Why do they hate each other?” and, bizarrely, “Is this the same war that happened in Bosnia?” Similarly, the *Daily Mail* (25 March 1999) devoted a double-page spread to the “Timebomb with a 600-year fuse,” revealing that “Today’s troubles in Kosovo began in 1389,” and describing Kosovo as “a cauldron of ethnic and religious rivalry” and a “horrendously complicated tangle of ancient religious and ethnic hatreds.” Not to be outdone by the tabloids, a feature in the *Sunday Telegraph* (4 April 1999) presented the conflict as a latter-day Crusade by the Orthodox Church, whilst the *Times* wrote of a “1,000

year story written in blood" (29 March 1999). Such "explanations" mystified the conflict but served their main purpose of contrasting the Balkans with Western civilisation.

Serbs as "Nazis"

Throughout the 1990s, whenever Western reporting depicted Balkan goodies and baddies, it was always the Serbs who were wearing the black hats (or black hair) — whether because of being communist, Eastern, barbaric, or some far-fetched combination of the three. A third type of explanation, which developed strongly from the outbreak of the Bosnian war in 1992, drew a different historical parallel: the Second World War. Predictably, in this scenario the Serbs were again the baddies, this time by virtue of being "Nazis." This was the most significant news frame for depicting the Bosnian conflict in black-and-white, Good versus Evil terms. As Mick Hume (2000, 71) notes in discussing the "Nazification" of the Serbs in coverage of both Bosnia and Kosovo:

Modern societies do not, on the whole, believe in the devil himself. Even the established Western churches have had to revise their view of hell and damnation in our more secular times. What we do believe in, however, are Nazis, as the modern agents of hell on earth.

The significance of the "Nazi" framework is that it invokes moral absolutes in a way that resonates powerfully with contemporary sensibilities. The portrayal of the Serbs as Nazis during the Bosnian war, running "concentration camps" and committing "genocide," also obscured the reality of the conflict. As senior BBC correspondent John Simpson (1998, 444-5) subsequently wrote: "A climate was created in which it was very hard to understand what was really going on, because everything came to be seen through the filter of the Holocaust."

In moralising the Kosovo air war, this was again the most important interpretative framework. As Natasha Cica (forthcoming) comments, there is "no faster route to claiming the moral high ground than drawing an analogy with the Holocaust." Taking their cue from politicians' promiscuous talk of "genocide" in Kosovo, newspapers missed no opportunity to evoke "memories of the Holocaust" (*Daily Mail*, 29 March 1999). On the same day (1 April 1999) that the *Daily Mirror* reported "Nazi style terror ... a horrific echo of the wartime Holocaust," its tabloid rival, the *Sun*, proclaimed that "Serb cruelty has chilling echoes of the Holocaust." In a repeat performance of its coverage during the Bosnian war, when the *Mirror* had proclaimed Trnopolje camp to be "Belsen 1992," the paper now discovered the horror of the Trepča mines in Kosovo, said to contain the bodies of up to 700 ethnic Albanians murdered by Serbs. The *Mirror* suggested that the name of Trepča would "live alongside those of Belsen, Auschwitz and Treblinka," and become "etched in the memories of those whose loved ones met a bestial end in true Nazi Final Solution fashion" (18 June 1999). Predictably, the revelation, months later, that "absolutely no bodies" (Reuters, 13 October 1999) were found at Trepča attracted far less publicity. With their position on the moral high ground thus secured, Nato leaders could justify escalating the bombing of Serbia's civilian infrastructure, whilst denouncing their critics as "appeasers."

The "Nazi" framework offered very clearly delineated villains and victims. As Cica (forthcoming) writes: "The myth of Kosovo-as-Holocaust ... requires us to

view all these people through a moral prism that is distorted, simplistic and based at least in part on racial/ethnic stereotypes." Yet it should be noted that (although both were deployed during the Bosnian and Kosovo wars,) there is an implicit contradiction between the "Nazi" and "ethnic" frameworks. On one hand, Nato repeatedly struck a pose of anti-racism and multi-ethnic tolerance. The British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, for example, described the "conflict between the international community and Yugoslavia" as a battle between "two Europes competing for the soul of our continent." Yugoslavia represented "the race ideology that blighted our continent under the fascists," while Nato's vision of "the Modern Europe" was of "a continent in which the rights of all its citizens are respected, regardless of their ethnic identity" (*Guardian*, 5 May 1999). Similarly, in a 2 June 1999 speech Nato Secretary-General Javier Solana, using almost identical terminology, spoke of "a conflict between two visions of Europe": one a "Europe of nationalism, authoritarianism and xenophobia"; the other "a Europe of integration, democracy and ethnic pluralism." For good measure, Solana repeated the whole thing virtually word for word in another speech three weeks later. The association between the bombing and ethnic tolerance was clearly something Nato wished to emphasise strongly. Kosovo was a politically correct war. Yet on the other hand, although the enemy was condemned for alleged intolerance and racism, the "ethnic" explanations of the conflict employed by Western leaders, officials and reporters rested on precisely the sort of racist and elitist outlook of which the Serbs were accused. Indeed, Cica notes that: "The utilisation of anti-Slav stereotypes during the Kosovo crisis arguably evoked the use of similar stereotypes ... during the Nazi era," when the German media portrayed the Serbs as subhuman.

Some critics of the "ethnic" explanations employed in news coverage and elaborated by writers such as Kaplan have pointed out that in practice the term "ethnicity" is used in a way that implies an essentialist view of identity and difference. Tim Allen (1999, 31), for example, notes that "ethnicity" functions as a code-word for "race," arguing that perspectives which emphasise supposed "ethnic" differences, "tribal hatreds" or religious divisions, rest on racial thinking. The target of Allen's criticism is partly Western intellectuals and journalists who misrepresent the conflicts they purport to explain, and partly the "ethno-nationalist agendas" (ibid.: 32) of local politicians in the Balkans and elsewhere. Similarly, Ignatieff (1998, 37-38) argues the Yugoslav wars were not "ethnic" in the sense of resulting from primordial identities and differences, but rather in the sense that they resulted from a primordialist (mis-)understanding of ethnicity promulgated by nationalist politicians. This view is not dissimilar to that propounded by Cook, Solana, and other Nato leaders in 1999: that the enemy's essentialist, exclusivist and racist outlook must be combated by the multiculturalism and tolerance of Western Europe and the United States. Yet in the case of Kosovo this argument simply does not fit the facts: that "fascistic" Serbia is actually the most ethnically-diverse country of the region; that the professed multi-culturalism of Western societies, on show during the Kosovo refugee crisis, was not so evident in the mass expulsions and deportations of ethnic Albanian refugees from Nato countries in the year following the air war, accompanied, in Britain, by a media panic over "bogus asylum-seekers"; and that post-war Kosovo, supposed to become a beacon of multi-ethnic tolerance has turned out instead to be a bonfire of violence against ethnic minorities. The contradiction of accusing the Serbs of being racists whilst depicting them

as suspiciously dark and thick-set barbarians did not appear to worry Nato leaders. In a 13 May 1999 speech, for example, President Bill Clinton disparaged those who “justify looking away from this kind of slaughter ... by saying that these people are simply incapable of civilised behaviour,” yet in another speech ten days later he maintained that in the Balkans “people are still killing each other out of primitive urges.” Such clumsy inconsistencies are symptomatic of a broad continuity between proponents of “ethnic” explanations and their critics. As Ignatieff (2000, 213) admits:

While the language of the nation is particularistic — dividing human beings into us and them — human rights is universal. In theory, it will not lend itself to dividing human beings into higher and lower, superior and inferior, civilized and barbarian. Yet something very like a distinction between superior and inferior has been at work in the demonization of human rights violators.

The contradiction is more apparent than real. Some Western thinkers explain the superiority of the West in the coded racist vocabulary of “ethnicity,” while others prefer to frame the issue as one of moral superiority. The end result is similar: the West equals civilisation, and its enemies are barbarians.

The New Moralism

The Cold War provided a remarkably stable and enduring ideological frame for international relations. John Ruggie, a Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, suggests that having lost this “anchoring framework,” journalists are searching for new framing devices to fill the “schematic void” (Ruggie 1999). Yet this search has not taken place in a vacuum. The news frames discussed above were symptomatic of a broader recognition that the old Cold War framework needed to be reworked or replaced. Political leaders have been engaged on a similar quest, seeking new ways to interpret the world and to impose some order on it, both intellectually and by force. The following call for a new vision of global order seems particularly relevant to recent experience:

[M]ight we not now unite to impose civilised standards of behaviour on those who flout every measure of human decency? Are we not nearing a point in world history where civilised nations can in unison stand up to the most immoral and deadly excesses against humanity ... ?

[T]he world’s democracies must enforce stricter humanitarian standards of international conduct. What I propose is a humanitarian velvet glove backed by a steel fist of military force.

[T]here is an antidote to chaos, and a structure for humanitarian intervention already in place. Its name is NatoThe United Nations has voted that humanitarian assistance to civilian populations may be delivered through all necessary means. Nato has those means. It is the means.

The Serbs must be given an ultimatum to cease the shelling of civilian populations....They must be told not to threaten further the Yugoslav region of Kosovo....The consequence of ignoring the ultimatum is this: “sharply focused bombing” against Serbian military supplies and targets. To do less is silently to acquiesce to wholesale slaughter. Our multilateral organisations

must declare ethnic cleansing and the slaughter of civilians by military forces totally unacceptable. And we must be prepared to put weapons behind our words ...

Do not forget those who suffer under tyranny and violence. Do not abandon them to the evils of totalitarian rule or democratic neglect Your cause awaits.

This passage would not have been out of place in a speech by Bill Clinton or Tony Blair in 1999. It is, however, from a speech given by former US President Ronald Reagan to the Oxford University Union in 1992, earning him a standing ovation.⁷ It is quite a remarkable statement, since it anticipates important themes which were to be deployed in justifying the Kosovo bombing seven years later: an opposition between “civilised nations” and “immorality,” a “humanitarian” justification for military force, and a new role for Nato. Reagan’s central concern was that the end of the Cold War had “robbed much of the West of its uplifting, common purpose.” Whereas, in the past, he had been able confidently to portray the United States as the uncontested leader of the “Free World” against the common enemy of the “Evil Empire,” the fall of the Berlin Wall deprived Western foreign policy of its ideological coherence at the very moment of its triumph over communism. It was therefore perhaps with some relief that Reagan felt himself able to declare that “Evil still stalks the planet.”

The fact that it was Ronald Reagan, an arch-conservative, who articulated this vision of humanitarian militarism — even offering it as an inspiring “cause” around which people could rally — indicates that the supposedly new departure of “ethical foreign policy” trumpeted by Clinton and Blair in 1999 actually represented more of a continuity with the past than many supposed. Yet those who did rally to the cause of humanitarian interventionism over the 1990s were more often liberals and even left-wingers. As for Reagan, more recent liberal attempts to discover a new “common uplifting purpose” for the West have also largely been defined negatively. It seems that it is easier to point to instances of “Evil” than to elaborate a vision of what the West stands for that could represent “Good.” Thus Ignatieff (1998, 18) admits that:

In the twentieth century, the idea of human universality rests less on hope than on fear, less on optimism about the human capacity for good than on dread of human capacity for evil, less on a vision of man as maker of his history than of man the wolf toward his own kind.

Similarly, William Shawcross, in a recent work appropriately titled *Deliver Us From Evil*, takes it for granted that his readers will recognise “Evil” when he writes of a “malign and daunting” force, personified by “warlords” such as Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milošević (Shawcross 2000, 11-12). His own book, however, shows in some detail that — even if one were convinced by the fanciful notion that Saddam and Milošević are the embodiment of absolute Evil, rather than the brutal rulers of weak and impoverished states — the forces which supposedly represent “Good” are far more ambiguous. Surveying the state of the world at the start of 1999, Shawcross describes disastrous situations in Haiti and Angola, both supposedly success stories for UN intervention, and notes that many more crises and wars continued outside the fickle spotlight of Western attention (pp. 22-23). Though

trying hard to maintain an optimistic tone, Shawcross (p. 376) concludes that:

In a more religious time it was only God whom we asked to deliver us from evil. Now we call upon our own man-made institutions for such deliverance. That is sometimes to ask for miracles.

Sounding a similar note, David Rieff (1999, 3) observes that “Christian missionary (and imperial) habits of thought ... find their much broader echo in the secular human rights movement of the past 30 years.” Yet he cannot but be disappointed with the “achievements” of this movement, acknowledging that:

From Somalia to Rwanda, Cambodia to Haiti, and Congo to Bosnia...the failure rate of these interventions spawned by the categorical imperatives of human rights and humanitarianism in altering the situation on the ground in any enduring way approaches 100 percent (p. 3).

Though Shawcross and Rieff illustrate the way that humanitarian intervention has become established as a new secular religion, their comments also indicate that even its apostles are troubled by small crises of faith when confronted with the abject failure of crusading interventions.

A rational response to the string of disastrous failures discussed by Rieff and Shawcross might be to abandon the idea that contemporary Western foreign policy is a global force for Good. Instead, however, the response of liberal advocates of interventionism is simply to call for more violence. Several commentators are troubled by a perceived squeamishness on the part of Western leaders, afraid to see their own military personnel killed in actions abroad. Shawcross (2000, 374), for example, is centrally concerned with “an uncomfortable paradox:”

We want more to be put right, but we are prepared to sacrifice less...Western television audiences want to stop seeing children dying on their screens, but many political leaders believe we do not want our own soldiers (our own children) to be put at risk to rescue them. That could change if political leaders ... were prepared to argue that intervention cannot be cost free.

Similarly, Ignatieff (2000, 163) sees Kosovo as the “paradigm of [a] paradoxical form of warfare,” whereby “precision violence is now at the disposal of a risk-averse culture, unconvinced by the language of military sacrifice.” To resolve the paradox, he advises that: “we need to stay away from such fables of self-righteous invulnerability. Only then can we get our hands dirty. Only then can we do what is right” (p. 215). Rather than viewing war as a “surgical scalpel,” we should acknowledge that it is a “bloodstained sword,” and should resolve that “when the sword is raised, it must be used to strike decisively” (pp. 215, 213). Mary Kaldor (2000, 61) is another who is critical of the attempt, in Kosovo, “to wage war without risking casualties.” Instead, Kaldor urges a “readiness to die for humanity,” though she generously adds that this dying should not take place “in an unlimited way.” Meanwhile, Rieff (1999, 10) bemoans the “limited” and “hesitant” character of Nato’s 1999 air war, and advocates the “recolonization of part of the world” under a system of “liberal imperialism.”

Though Rieff is unusually explicit, his advocacy of imperialism simply follows through the logic of an increasingly commonplace argument: that universal ideas of humanitarianism and human rights may override the system of international

law based on the premise of state sovereignty. As former UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar put it in 1991:

We are clearly witnessing what is probably an irresistible shift in public attitudes toward the belief that the defense of the oppressed in the name of morality should prevail over frontiers and legal documents (Quoted in Rieff 1999, 1).

The results of this shift were illustrated by a series of decisions in June 2000, a year after the end the Kosovo war. The British parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee decided that while Nato's Kosovo bombing may have been of "dubious legality," it was nevertheless "justified on moral grounds" (*New York Times*, 7 June 2000). A similar logic meant that while Yugoslav leaders were indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, lending judicial approval to Nato bombing, the ICTY decided, also in June 2000, that the killing of civilians by Nato could not be judged a war crime.⁸ The same month, the US State Department sought to include a blanket exemption for all American military personnel from prosecution by the UN's proposed International Criminal Court. David Scheffer, the State Department's ambassador at large for war crimes, complained that it would be "a very inhibiting risk to put on the table every time you decide whether or not to intervene" (Associated Press, 11 June 2000). The significance of today's moralised framework is that the alleged moral imperative to intervene can override all other considerations, including national sovereignty and international law. Yet such a vision of international "order" undermines its own claim to legitimacy. A "universalism" which views international law as applicable only to enemies of the powerful is a false universalism. As noted above, the supposedly "universal" discourse of human rights and humanitarianism in practice becomes an apology for an elitist division of the world into (morally) superior and inferior peoples and states.

Conclusion: The Role of Journalists

Arguably, the news media — particularly television — are inherently prone to adopting simplified frameworks and shorthand explanations. When faced with criticism of their work, journalists often point to practical limitations — such as lack of time, or limited audience interest — which preclude a more nuanced presentation of events. Veteran BBC correspondent Kate Adie, for example, said of reporting Bosnia that if she offered complex explanations she would "lose out with the viewers": "It's not that viewers are simplistic — it's just than in understanding any complex problem people wish to look for what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad" (*Guardian*, 18 January 1993). Similarly, Jean Seaton (1999, 267) argues that journalists resort to clichés because they are "under pressure from deadlines and narrow news values, in highly involved situations which they have little time to understand, and constrained by audiences with very short attention spans." No doubt lack of time, pressure of deadlines and a low opinion of their audience encourage reporters to adopt simplified interpretative frameworks, thereby rendering complex situations easily comprehensible, and giving stories clearly discernable contours. However, to focus on such practical factors is to underestimate the extent to which many journalists actually agree with the black-

and-white moralism which frames contemporary conflicts. Contrary to what Adie suggests, it was not so much TV viewers as journalists themselves who looked for a simplistic moral framework in both Bosnia and Kosovo.

Thus, it is notable that when journalists did attempt longer, background pieces, seeking to explain and contextualise the Kosovo conflict, they still conformed to simplistic black-and-white interpretations, and failed to question or challenge official explanations of the war. The BBC's main evening bulletin on 26 March 1999, for example, featured two background reports. The first — supposed to explain the events in this “notoriously unstable region” which had “convinced Nato it had to act” — pinned the blame for the conflict on Slobodan Milošević and held him solely responsible for the break-up of Yugoslavia over the 1990s. The second report continued the theme, explaining that: “Nato didn't want to get drawn into this war. That's why the Rambouillet peace talks dragged on for so long in the hope President Milošević would give way and not force the alliance to bomb him into submission.” To make quite sure viewers got the message that Nato had been forced into bombing by the villainy of Milošević, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme, *Panorama*, devoted an entire edition to analysing “The Mind of Milošević” three days later. On 19 April 1999 *Panorama* questioned Nato's decision to rule out a ground invasion of Serbia, and the 28 April programme focussed on Serb atrocities and the fictitious “Operation Horseshoe,” urging ICTY Chief Prosecutor Louise Arbour to indict Milošević for war crimes. In other words, even when reporters were not constrained by news deadlines or short bulletins, there was still an extremely close correspondence between journalistic efforts at explanation and the official justifications for war offered by Nato representatives.⁹ As in previous conflicts, journalists reproduced official spin, their selection and interpretation of newsworthy “facts” reinforced by powerful structural and institutional constraints, such as reliance on official sources, rooted in the political economy of the media industries (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

Yet in covering the Balkans in the 1990s, many reporters and commentators were more than mere mouthpieces for official propaganda, playing an important and active role in developing and disseminating key ideas about the Yugoslav wars. Indeed, the rhetoric of “Good versus Evil” deployed by Nato leaders in Kosovo drew directly on interpretative frameworks which liberal journalists, commentators and intellectuals had helped to elaborate during the Bosnian conflict. Reflecting on their experience in reporting from Bosnia, a number of high-profile British and American reporters advocated a more partisan, engaged and “moral” style of reporting. Most prominently, former BBC correspondent Martin Bell proposed a “journalism of attachment” which “cares as well as knows” and does not “stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor” (Bell 1998, 16). Similarly, CNN's Christiane Amanpour argued that “objectivity must go hand in hand with morality”:

Once you treat all sides the same in a case such as Bosnia, you are drawing a moral equivalence between victim and aggressor. And from here it is a short step to being neutral. And from there it's an even shorter step to becoming an accessory to all manners of evil (quoted in Hume 1997, 6).

During the Bosnian war, it was morally-minded journalists who did most to promote comparisons between Serbs and Nazis. As Nik Gowing (1997, 25-26) notes:

“there is more evidence than many media personnel care to admit that journalists embarked on crusades and became partial,” siding with the Bosnian Muslim government and demonising the Serbs.

In Bosnia, crusading journalists saw themselves as critics of Western governments, aiming to spur politicians into action by arousing public outrage. Yet the effect of the partisan style of moralising journalism was to lend legitimacy to the idea that the West was — at least potentially — a force for Good against the Evil reporters thought they had discovered in the Balkans. Stephen Ward (1998, 124) objects that “a journalism of attachment that thinks it knows the answers is [not] what we need in a pluralistic society with few common standards,” yet it is surely the absence of common standards which helps to drive the search for moral absolutes. As Reagan’s comments indicate, Western journalists seeking new ways of explaining the post-Cold War world were effectively responding to the propaganda needs of their governments. As David Binder, veteran Balkans correspondent for the *New York Times*, notes, US policy throughout the 1990s was ruled by “a simplistic dogma that blames one nation, the Serbs, as the origin of evil in the Balkans”:

*Portraying the Serbs as such is an unwritten doctrine adopted by the State Department at the beginning of the Yugoslav conflicts and continued today, a doctrine endorsed and spread by the mainstream media, human rights groups and even some religious communities.*¹⁰

It was therefore with some justification that the *Guardian*’s Maggie O’Kane complained of the criticisms which Blair’s spokesman, Alasdair Campbell, levelled at media coverage of Kosovo: “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 Milošević” (quoted in Glass, 1999). Quite reasonably, O’Kane wanted some credit for having made bombing the Serbs into the grand ethical crusade which Nato claimed to be leading. After all, it was she and many of her colleagues who, long before Blair was even elected, had fulminated that “something must be done” by the West in Yugoslavia. Ward’s (1998, 124) critique of this style of journalism turned out to be prophetic:

The moralizing, attached journalist may get it wrong, with harmful consequencesI fear that an unfettered journalism of attachment...would devolve into unsubstantiated journalism where biases parade as moral principles....Without the critical perspective of objectivity, journalists, as eager “participants,” may fall into the dogmatism that they have the one truth or the uniquely right moral standard. That road leads to disaster.

Disaster is precisely where it led for the people of Yugoslavia in 1999.

Notes:

1. *Moral Combat: Nato at War*, BBC2, 12 March 2000.
2. See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/europe/newsid_682000/682877.stm.
3. David Binder, *The Ironic Justice of Kosovo*, MSNBC News, 17 March 2000 [<http://www.msnbc.com/news/382058.asp#BODY>]. As Binder notes, this means that a greater proportion of Serbs and Montenegrins than ethnic Albanians fled Kosovo during the bombing.

4. This and other similar German government documents are posted at <http://www.emperors-clothes.com/>.
5. Eric Rouleau, French Diplomacy Adrift in Kosovo, *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 1999. Post-war assessments issued by the US State Department, the ICTY, and the OSCE all corroborate Prod'homme's statement. See Noam Chomsky, "In Retrospect," *Z Magazine*, April/May 2000 [<http://www.zmag.org>].
6. Tony Blair, A New Beginning for Kosovo, 10 June 1999 [<http://www.number10.gov.uk>].
7. Ronald Reagan, Better Tomorrows as a Noble Vision Approaches Fruition, *Sunday Times*, 6 December 1992.
8. Final Report to the Prosecutor by the Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign Against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 13 June 2000 [<http://www.un.org/icty/pressreal/nato061300.htm>].
9. The pattern in US coverage was similar. See Ackerman and Naureckas 2000.
10. David Binder, The Ironic Justice of Kosovo, MSNBC News, 17 March 2000 [<http://www.msnbc.com/news/382058.asp#BODY>]. Binder points out that this is "a doctrine also embraced by Dr. Bernard Kouchner, the head of the UN Mission in Kosovo. Kouchner declared unabashedly before Albanians in Gnjilane last December that 'Kosovo does not belong to anyone except the Kosovars', meaning ethnic Albanians. 'I feel very close to the Albanian people,' he said, adding later, 'I love all peoples but some more than others and that is the case with you.'"

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