

Across this last weekend, the Western propaganda machine was working overtime, celebrating the latest NATO miracle: the transformation of Serbian Kosovo into Albanian Kosova. A shameless land grab by the United States, which used the Kosovo problem to install an enormous military base (Camp Bondsteel) on other people's strategically located land, is transformed by the power of the media into an edifying legend of "national liberation".

For the unhappy few who know the complicated truth about Kosovo, the words of Aldous Huxley seem most appropriate: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall drive you mad."

Concerning Kosovo, truth is like letters written in the sand as the tsunami of propaganda comes thundering in. The truth is available--for instance in George Szamuely's thoroughly informative piece last Friday here on CounterPunch. Fragments of the truth sometimes even show up in the mainstream media, mostly in letters from readers. But hopeless as it is to try to turn back the tide of officially endorsed legend, let me examine just one drop in this unstoppable sea of propaganda: a column by Roger Cohen entitled "Europe's new state", published in the Valentine's Day edition of the International Herald Tribune.

Cohen's op ed piece is fairly typical in the dismissive way it deals with Milosevic, Russia and the Serbs. Cohen writes: "Slobodan Milosevic, the late dictator, set Serbia's murderous nationalist tide in motion on April 24, 1987, when he went to Kosovo to declare that Serbian 'ancestors would be defiled' if ethnic Albanians had their way."

I don't know where Roger Cohen got that quotation, but it is not to be found in the speech Milosevic made that day in Kosovo. And certainly, Milosevic did not go to Kosovo to declare any such thing, but to consult with local Communist League officials in the town of Kosovo Polje about the province's serious economic and social problems. Aside from the province's chronic poverty, unemployment, and mismanagement of development funds contributed from the rest of Yugoslavia, the main social problem was the constant exodus of Serb and Montenegrin inhabitants under pressure from ethnic Albanians. At the time, this problem was reported in leading Western media.

For instance, as early as July 12, 1982, Marvine Howe reported to the New York Times that Serbs were leaving Kosovo by the tens of thousands because of discrimination and intimidation on the part of the ethnic Albanian majority: "The [Albanian] nationalists have a two-point platform," according to Beci Hoti, an executive secretary of the Communist Party of Kosovo, "first to establish what they call an ethnically clean Albanian republic and then the merger with Albania to form a greater Albania.

Mr Hoti, an Albanian, expressed concern voer political pressures that were forcing Serbs to

leave Kosovo. "What is important now," he said, "is to establish a climate of security and create confidence."

And seven months after Milosevic's visit to Kosovo, David Binder reported in the New York Times (November 1, 1987): Ethnic Albanians in the Government [of Kosovo] have manipulated public funds and regulations to take over land belonging to Serbs. Slavic Orthodox churches have been attacked, and flags have been torn down. Wells have been poisoned and crops burned. Slavic boys have been knifed, and some young ethnic Albanians have been told by their elders to rape Serbian girls.

The goal of the radical nationals among them, one said in an interview, is an "ethnic Albania that includes western Macedonia, southern Montenegro, part of southern Serbia, Kosovo and Albania itself."

As Slavs flee the protracted violence, Kosovo is becoming what ethnic Albanian nationalists have been demanding for years, and especially strongly since the bloody rioting by ethnic Albanians in Pristina in 1981--an "ethnically pure" Albanian region. This was in fact the first instance of "ethnic cleansing" in post-World War II Yugoslavia, as reported in The New York Times and other Western media, and the victims were the Serbs. The cult of "memory" has become a contemporary religion, but some memories are more equal than others. In the 1990s, the New York Times evidently forgot completely what it had said about Kosovo in the 1980s. Why? Perhaps because meanwhile, the Soviet bloc had collapsed and the unity of independent, non-aligned Yugoslavia was no longer in the strategic interest of the United States.

Back to Milosevic in Kosovo Polje on April 24, 1987. An incident occurred when local police (under an Albanian-dominated Communist League government) attacked Serbs who had gathered to protest lack of legal protection. Milosevic famously told them, spontaneously: "No one should beat you any more!" If this is "extreme nationalism", perhaps there should be more of it.

But nowhere do I find a trace of the statement attributed to Milosevic by Cohen. In his speech to local party delegates that followed, which is on the public record, Milosevic referred to the "regrettable incident" and promised an investigation. He went on to stress that "we should not allow the misfortunes of people to be exploited by nationalists, whom every honest person must combat. We must not divide people between Serbs and Albanians, but rather we should separate, on the one hand, decent people who struggle for brotherhood, unity and ethnic equality, and, on the other hand, counter-revolutionaries and nationalists."

I turn again to Aldous Huxley for comfort: "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored." But Huxley also said: "Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth. By simply not mentioning certain subjects... totalitarian propagandists have influenced opinion much more effectively than they could have by the most eloquent denunciations."

Last Tuesday in Geneva, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tried to convey to

journalists his grave concern about the way the United States was handling the Kosovo problem.

"We are speaking here about the subversion of all the foundations and principles of international law, which have been won and established as a basis of Europe's existence at huge effort, and at the cost of pain, sacrifice and bloodletting," he said.

"Nobody can offer a clear plan of action in the case of a chain reaction [of further declarations of unilateral independence]. It turns out that they [the United States and its NATO allies] are planning to act in a hit or miss fashion on an issue of paramount importance. This is simply inadmissible and irresponsible," the Russian diplomat said. "I sincerely fail to comprehend the principles guiding our American colleagues, and those Europeans who have taken up this position," he added.

Roger Cohen dismisses such considerations in five words: "the Russian bear will growl". Russia, he adds, "will scream. But it's backed the wrong horse." There are no issues here, no principles. Just growling and gambling."Milosevic rolled the dice of genocidal nationalism and lost", says Cohen.

This is not only a false statement, it is a grotesquely meaningless metaphor. Milosevic tried to suppress an armed secessionist movement, secretly but effectively supported by neighboring Albania, the United States and Germany, which deliberately provoked repression by murdering both Serbs and Albanians loyal to the government. Like the Americans in similar circumstances, Milosevic relied too heavily on military superiority rather than on political skill. But even the NATO-sponsored International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia in The Hague had to abandon any charges of "genocide" against Milosevic in Kosovo. For the simple reason that there was never a shred of evidence for such a charge.

Milosevic is no longer alive, and Russia is far away. But what about the Serbs who still live in the historic part of Serbia called Kosovo? Cohen takes care of that problem in a few words: "Some of the 120,000 Serbs in Kosovo may hit the road."

As Aldous Huxley pointed out, "The propagandist's purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human." Then you can tell them to "hit the road".

The "Unique" Case

Russia has warned that Kosovo independence will set a dangerous precedent, encouraging other ethnic minorities to follow the example of the Albanians and demand secession and an independent State. The United States has dismissed such concerns by flatly asserting that Kosovo is "unique". Well yes, Kosovo is a unique case, and is the only one recognized by the United States until the next "unique case" comes along. When legal criteria have been thrown out, we just have one "unique

case" after another.

The "uniqueness" claimed by the United States is a propaganda construction. It is based on the supposed "uniqueness" of Milosevic's repression of the armed secessionist movement, which was not unique at all. It was standard operating procedure throughout history and the world over, in such circumstances. Deplorable, no doubt, but not unique. It was minor indeed compared to the similar but endless and far bloodier anti-insurgency operations in Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Chechnya, not to mention Northern Ireland, Thailand, the Philippines. And unlike the counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which kill incomparably more civilians, it was carried out by the legal, democratically elected government of the country, rather than by a foreign power.

The propaganda "uniqueness" is an abstraction. Like every place on earth, Kosovo is indeed unique. But in ways that have nothing to do with the U.S. pretext for taking it over and turning it into a military outpost of empire. To know how a place is unique, you have to be interested in it.

I have not visited Kosovo since before the 1999 NATO war. On one occasion, in August 1997, I drove around the province in a failing Skoda, at my own expense, just looking. Driving in Kosovo was a bit risky, partly because of the number of dead dogs in the road, and mostly because of local drivers' habit of passing slower vehicles on hills and curves. In northern Kosovo, just outside the town of Zubin Potok, this habit produced one of its inevitable consequences: a head-on collision with serious casualties, which shut down the two-lane highway for hours while ambulances and police sorted things out.

Unable to proceed toward Pristina, I drove back to Zubin Potok to pass the time on the shaded terrace of a roadside restaurant. I was the only customer, and the lone waiter, a tall, handsome young man named Milomir, gladly accepted my invitation to sit down at my table and chat as I sipped glass after glass of delicious strawberry juice.

Milomir was happy to talk to someone familiar with the French city of Metz, which he had visited as a student and remembered fondly. He loved to read and travel, but in 1991 he got married and now had two small daughters to support. Job prospects were poor, even though he had been to university, so he had no choice but to stay in Zubin Potok. As for Europe, even if he could get a visa (impossible for Serbs anyway), he spoke no language more Western than his mother tongue, Serbo-Croatian. He had studied Russian (he loved the literature) and Albanian as his foreign languages. He learned Albanian in order to be able to communicate with the majority in Kosovo.

But such communication was difficult. Milomir was very much in favor of a bilingual society, and thought everyone in Kosovo should learn both Serbian and Albanian, but unfortunately this was not the case. The younger generation of

Albanians refused to speak Serbian and learned English instead.

The town of Zubin Potok was located near the dam on the Ibar River built in the late 1970s to create hydraulic power. Coming from Novi Pazar, I had driven along the 35-kilometer-long artificial lake created by the dam, looking in vain for a nice place to stop. It seemed that there must have been villages along the Ibar River before the dam was built, and I asked Milomir about this. Yes, he said, the artificial lake had flooded a score of old villages, of ethnically mixed, but mostly Serb population. The Albanian Communist authorities in Pristina had resettled the Serbs outside of Kosovo, around the town of Kraljevo. There were about 10,000 of them.

This was a minor example of the administrative measures taken to decrease the Serb population during the period, before Milosevic, when Albanians were running the province through the local Communist League.

Milomir was not complaining, but simply answering my questions. He did not go too often (by bus--he had no car) to the nearest large city, Mitrovica, because he was afraid of being beaten by Albanians. This was just a fact of life, at a time when (according to Western media) Albanians in Kosovo were being terrorized by Serbian repression.

While we were chatting, a friend of his came along and the conversation turned to politics. There was a presidential campaign underway. The two young men wanted to know which candidate I thought would be best for Serbia in the eyes of the world. Milomir was tending toward Vuk Draskovic, and his friend was for Vojislav Kostunica. Neither would dream of voting for either Milosevic or Seselj, the nationalist leader of the Radical Party.

Zubin Potok Today

I have no idea what has become of Milomir, his wife, his two daughters, or his friend. Zubin Potok is the western-most municipality in the heavily Serb-populated north of Kosovo. From the internet I learn that the population of Zubin Potok municipality (including surrounding villages) has nearly doubled since I passed through. It now comes to approximately 14,900, including about 3,000 internally displaced Serbs (from other areas of Kosovo where the Albanian majority has driven them out), 220 Serbian refugees from Croatia and 800 Albanians. The local assembly is overwhelmingly dominated by Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, but includes two Kosovo Albanian representatives.

Up until now, schools, hospitals, and other public services, as well as the local economy, have continued to function thanks mainly to subsidies from Belgrade. The Albanian declaration of Kosovo independence will create a crisis by demanding an end to such vital subsidies--which, however, an "independent Kosovo" is unable to replace. Moreover, bands of Albanian nationalists are declaring that Zubin Potok "is Albanian" and must be "liberated from the Serbs". They can be seen on You Tube, using the Statue of Liberty as their symbol, and threatening

Serbs in Albanian rap.

The European Union is moving in to provide law and order. But the "order" they claim to be protecting is the one defined by the Albanian nationalists. What does that mean to people like Milomir and his little family?

For Roger Cohen, the answer is easy: "hit the road!" Serbia, by the way, already has the largest number of refugees in Europe, victims of "ethnic cleansing" in Croatia and Kosovo. And Serbs cannot get visas or refugee status in Western Europe. They have been labeled the "bad guys". Only their enemies can be "victims".

Before and After

Kosovo before the NATO war and occupation was, nevertheless, a multiethnic society. The accusation of "apartheid" was simply Albanian propaganda, as the Albanian nationalist leaders chose to use that heavily-charged term to describe their own boycott of Serbs and Serb institutions. Every police action against an Albanian, for whatever reason, whether for suspicion of armed rebellion or for ordinary crime, was described as a "human rights violation" by the Albanian human rights network financed by the United States government.

It was an extraordinary situation that the Serbian and Yugoslav governments allowed an illegal separatist "government of Kosovo", headed by Ibrahim Rugova, to hold shop in the center of Pristina, regularly receiving foreign journalists and regaling them with tales of how oppressed they were by the horrid Serbs.

But the laws were the same for all citizens, there were Albanians in local government and in the police, and if there were cases of police brutality (in what country are there no cases of police brutality?), the Albanians at least had nothing to fear from their Serb neighbors.

Even then, it was the Serbs who were afraid of the Albanians. Only outside Kosovo could anyone seriously believe that it was the Albanians who were under threat of "ethnic cleansing" (much less "genocide"). Such a project was simply, obviously, out of the question. It was the Serbs who were afraid, who spoke of sending their children to safety if they had the means, or who spoke bravely of remaining "no matter what".

Later, in March 1999, when NATO began to bomb Kosovo, Albanians fled by the hundreds of thousands, and their temporary flight from the war theater was presented as the justification for the bombing that caused it. The press did not bother to report on the Serbs and others who also fled the bombing at that time.

In Kosovo, in 1987, in Pristina and Pec, I observed a peculiar sort of group behavior that reminds me only of school playgrounds in Maryland in my childhood. A gang of kids get together and by various signs, body language, and a minimum of words, convey to some outsiders that they are excluded and despised. I have seen Albanians act in this way toward stray Serbs, especially old women. This variety of "mobbing" was not violent in 1987, but turned so after NATO occupied the territory. It was encouraged by the official NATO stamp of

approval of Albanian hatred for Serbs, delivered by bombs in the spring of 1999.

Of course, there must have been Serbs who hated Albanians. But in my limited, chance experience, what struck me was the absence of hatred for Albanians among Serbs I met. Fear, yes, but not hatred. A great deal of perplexity. Sister Fotina at the Gračanica monastery had a very Christian explanation. We tried to help the Albanians care for their many children, she said, and yet they turn against us. This must be God's way of punishing us for turning away from Christianity during the time of Communism, she concluded. She blamed her fellow Serbs more than the Albanians.

The divine punishment has not been confined to Christians, however. In the southernmost corner of Kosovo live an ancient population called Gorani (meaning mountain people), who converted to Islam under the Ottoman Empire, like most of the Albanians. But their language is Serbian, and this is unacceptable to the Albanians. Estimates vary, but it is agreed that at least two thirds of the Gorani have left since NATO "liberation". Pressure and intimidation have taken various forms. Albanians have moved into the temporarily vacant homes of Gorani who went to Austria and Germany to earn money for their retirement. The NATO-protected Albanian authorities have found ways to deprive Gorani children of schooling in the Serbian language. In the main Gorani town of Dragash, an Albanian mob attacked the health center and caused health workers to flee. Then, last January 5, a powerful explosion destroyed the bank in Dragash. It was the only Serbian bank still allowed to operate in the south of Kosovo, and served mainly to transfer the pensions that allowed local Gorani to survive.

As usual, the crime went unpunished.

David Binder, who used to report on Yugoslavia for the New York Times, before he was excluded for knowing too much, reported last November * on a long investigation of conditions in Kosovo commissioned by the German Bundeswehr. The existence of this report is proof that the Western governments, while publicly claiming that Kosovo is "ready for independence", know quite well that this is not true. Among other things, Binder reports:

The institute authors, Mathias Jopp and Sammi Sandawi, spent six months interviewing 70 experts and mining current literature on Kosovo in preparing the study. In their analysis the political unrest and guerrilla fighting of the 1990s led to basic changes which they call a "turnabout in Kosovo-Albanian social structures." The result is a "civil war society in which those inclined to violence, ill-educated and easily influenced people could make huge social leaps in a rapidly constructed soldateska."

"It is a Mafia society" based on "capture of the state" by criminal elements.

In the authors' definition, Kosovan organized crime "consists of multimillion- Euro organizations with guerrilla experience and espionage expertise." They quote a German intelligence service report of "closest ties between leading political decision makers and the dominant criminal class" and name Ramush Haradinaj, Hashim Thaci and Xhavit Haliti as compromised leaders who are "internally protected by parliamentary immunity and abroad by international law."

They scornfully quote the UNMIK chief from 2004-2006, Soeren Jessen Petersen, calling Haradinaj "a close and personal friend." The study sharply criticizes the United States for "abetting the escape of criminals" in Kosovo as well as "preventing European investigators from working."

It notes "secret CIA detention centers" at Camp Bondsteel and assails American military training for Kosovo (Albanian) police by DynCorp, authorized by the Pentagon.

In an aside, it quotes one unidentified official as saying of the American who is deputy chief of UNMIK, "The main task of Steve Schook is to get drunk once a week with Ramush Haradinaj."

Who Goes and Who Stays

Schook has been fired by UNMIK, but UNMIK, the nominally United Nations mission, is being taken over arbitrarily by the European Union. The EU "mission" is a sort of colonial government which, alongside NATO, plans to govern the ungovernable Albanian territory. However, already movements of armed Albanian patriots are planning their next "war of liberation" against the Europeans.

So, after the Serbs, the Roma, the Gorani, will the Europeans have to "hit the road"? Only the Americans seem sure of staying. Enconced in their gigantic "Camp Bondsteel", they control the strategic routes from Serbia to Greece, and incidentally offer the mass of unemployed Kosovo Albanians their best-paying employment opportunities, notably by taking menial and dangerous jobs serving U.S. forces in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The reality of this shameless land-grab is available to all. I have written about it, Binder has written about it, Szamuely has written about it, many Germans have written about it. The Russians, the Greeks, the Rumanians, the Slovaks and many others know about it. But in the Brave New World Order, it does not exist. People don't know.

I leave the last word to Aldous Huxley: "Most ignorance is vincible ignorance. We don't know because we don't want to know."

(* The Binder story can be found at <http://www.balkanalysis.com/>)

Diana Johnstone is the author of Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusion (Monthly Review Press.) She can be reached at diana.josto@yahoo.fr

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