

Serbia's anniversary is a timely reminder

Пише: Ian Bancroft
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Nato's intervention over Kosovo in 1999 was an important precursor to the invasion of Iraq four years later. Ten years on from Nato's bombardment of Serbia, while the physical, emotional and psychological scars linger over many facets of day-to-day life, the important lessons to be grasped remain obscured by an unshakable insistence that this was "the right thing to do"; an insistence that condemned those same actors to repeat the very same mistakes only a few years later. Ten years on, however, the doctrine of a "just war" – itself prone to ambiguity and manipulation – continues to obstruct key questions about the conduct of, and the alternatives to, such interventions, at the expense of diplomacy, mediation, multilateralism and, ultimately, the responsibility to protect.

Nato's intervention over Kosovo in 1999 represented a collective failure of both diplomatic will and conception. The terms of the Rambouillet Accords demonstrated a reluctance to achieve a negotiated peace settlement acceptable to all sides. As ex-secretary of state Henry Kissinger insisted, "the Rambouillet text, which called on Serbia to admit Nato troops throughout Yugoslavia, was a provocation, an excuse to start bombing". As with negotiations over Kosovo's final status, the prospects for compromise and constructive solutions were eroded by the collapsing distinction between international law and politics, based upon a discourse of uniqueness and resort to unilateralism in international affairs.

Though justified by apparently humanitarian considerations, Nato's bombing of Serbia succeeded only in escalating the Kosovo crisis into a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe. It is now widely acknowledged that the bulk of the ethnic cleansing and war crimes occurred after the start of Nato's campaign, with an OSCE inquiry highlighting "the patterns of the expulsions and the vast increase in lootings, killings, rape, kidnappings and pillage once the Nato air war began on March 24". Despite regular proclamations about Kosovo's supposed multi-ethnic character and minority rights provisions, the failure to first prevent, and then to facilitate the safe and sustainable return of, over 200,000 internally-displaced persons (IDPs) is testimony both to the shortcomings of the initial justifications for intervention and the international community's now almost decade-long mission to reconstruct Kosovo.

Indeed, though these much-vaunted humanitarian objectives were used to build widespread public support for Nato's intervention, Strobe Talbott, the former US deputy secretary of state, has written now how "it was Yugoslavia's resistance to the broader trends of political and economic reform – not the plight of the Kosovar Albanians – that best explains Nato's war". Placing outwardly humanitarian or security-related motives at the service of political and economic objectives has done much to undermine the emerging notion of the "responsibility to

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protect" by breeding scepticism about the ultimate goal of such intervention.

Pre-intervention portrayals of the conflict in Kosovo were not, however, a failure of intelligence, but an act of willing deceit; designed to reduce the conflict to terms that betrayed the complexity of a situation involving a previously designated terrorist organisation, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and a heavy-handed state security infrastructure which had been for decades contending with ethnically motivated war crimes in Kosovo. Detailed reports by Amnesty International suggesting that the death toll was in the hundreds did little to deter talk of an on-going genocide. The media and NGOs, meanwhile, did little to challenge Tony Blair's portrayal of the war as "a battle between good and evil; between civilisation and barbarity; between democracy and dictatorship". This tendency to portray conflicts in terms of such dichotomies serves only to inhibit both the conception and voicing of alternative solutions to inherently complicated issues, whose roots run much deeper into history than is often acknowledged.

In bypassing the United Nations, engaging in disingenuous negotiations that precluded diplomatic solutions and manipulating the public case for war, Nato's intervention over Kosovo in 1999 was an important precursor to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. As the region struggles to contend with the environmental and health legacies of cluster bombs and the use of depleted uranium, the 10th anniversary of Nato's bombing of Serbia must not pass in vain, but instead serve as a timely reminder of the need for dispassionate and neutral analysis of unfolding conflicts and their potential solutions; analysis that endeavours to explore the often tragic complexities of civil wars and the nuanced understandings that their transformation requires.

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