

“Ever Greater Serbia” by J.F.O. McAllister Washington
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Given the horrors visited upon Bosnia-Herzegovina, it is difficult to believe that the Yugoslav conflict could get much worse. But that is exactly what Western officials fear is likely to occur when Belgrade turns its attention to Kosovo, the predominantly Albanian province that is a disputed part of southern Serbia. A U.S. analyst says Serbian "ethnic cleansing" there is "inevitable"; a senior Administration official predicts the spark that ignites a bloody Kosovo war could come in "the next two or three months."

But this time, as in 1914, the conflagration could spread beyond Serbia. A Serb slaughter of Kosovars "is the point where the conflict will automatically trigger a wider Balkan war," says a U.S. official. It would almost certainly involve Albania and perhaps Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria and even Turkey. If two NATO members become embroiled, the alliance could also be dragged in. "It's our nightmare scenario," says a senior British diplomat.

For Kosovars, life is already a nightmare. They vastly outnumber the ethnic Serbs in the impoverished territory, 2 million to 200,000, but Serbs have the guns, control the government and run Kosovo as a brutal police state. The Albanian Human Rights Council reports an average of 190 beatings by police each month for the past year, often followed by jail sentences for "disturbing public order." It has also recorded 106 deaths and about 600 woundings of Kosovars by Serb security forces since Kosovars evicted from the provincial government by Serbs declared an independent republic in July 1990. Unemployment among ethnic Albanians is estimated at nearly 80% because Serb authorities have insisted upon mass firings -- more than 112,000 workers -- since the independence declaration. Kosovo's only university is closed to ethnic Albanians, and Albanian-language media have been stifled.

In the capital of Pristina, a dreary city of Stalinist-era high-rises scattered amid factory smokestacks and weed-infested lots, paramilitary units from Belgrade patrol the streets and carry out frequent identity checks. Hundreds of Yugoslav tanks are lined up at the large military base on the western edge of the city, a constant reminder of Serbian power. "Albanians are treated just like blacks in South Africa," says Avdush Bajgora, a 29-year-old doctor from Pristina. "It's complete apartheid."

One day recently, the doctor stashed some packages of medicine under the seat of his car, drove out of Pristina by back roads to avoid Serbian checkpoints and headed north toward the mountains. Every time he passed peasants sitting by the roadside he called out, "Any police up ahead?" If caught by Serb patrols, Bajgora feared, the medicine would be confiscated and he would be beaten and jailed. An hour later, he arrived in Dabishevc, an isolated hamlet without running water, paved roads, telephones or postal service, where no medical care has been available since Serbian authorities shut the only clinic two years ago. Alerted by the word-of-mouth network of the main Albanian political party, the Democratic League of Kosovo, 150 patients were waiting at the local school. With great ingenuity, Albanians have constructed an underground social network of schools, clinics and a welfare system fueled by contributions from Albanians abroad to replace what the Serbs have taken away. As she waited in line, Aisha Emini, 66, an illiterate

mother of seven, said, "Many times I weep in my bed at night because I see how our young people are treated. None of my sons has ever found work. I was never happy in my life, and now is the worst time of all. If I had a gun, I would fight the Serbs myself."

Any provocation -- perhaps the full-scale implementation of Serbia's announced plan to displace Kosovars from their homes so that 140,000 relocated Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia can be housed there -- could turn these festering Albanian resentments into open war. Serbs' feelings about the region are intense too. "Kosovo is the holiest place to an Orthodox Serb, more holy than Jerusalem," says Father Miroslav, a priest at Pristina's only Serbian Orthodox church. "We are ready to die to defend it."

The roots of the conflict go back centuries. In 1389 the Serbs were defeated just a few kilometers from present-day Pristina in a decisive battle with the Ottoman Turks, laying the foundation for 500 years of Turkish rule. Most Serbs in Kosovo moved north, to be replaced over the centuries by Albanians, who largely converted to Islam. But Serbs are still powerfully attached to this ancient heartland. In 1989 more than 1 million of them trekked to Pristina for the 600th anniversary of the battle, and Serbia's strongman, Slobodan Milosevic, began his ride to power in 1987 by whipping up Serb anxieties about the "repression" of their Kosovo brethren.

Hundreds of thousands of Serbs decamped from the province during Josip Broz Tito's reign. Serbs say Albanians drove them away by intimidation; Albanians say the Serbs left for greener pastures, since Kosovo is Yugoslavia's least developed region. But there is no serious disagreement that Serbs loathe Kosovars, divided as they are by language, culture and religion. At the bar of a small restaurant in Kosovo Polje, a Serbian suburb of Pristina, a woman drinking slivovitz and beer beneath a portrait of Milosevic shouts, "Why shouldn't we kill all the Albanians? Kosovo is ours, and the Albanians have no place here!"

The dominant view among Western analysts is that Milosevic still has his hands full with Bosnia, and will avoid extending the war to Kosovo until his current charm offensive to secure diplomatic recognition of Serbia's gains in Bosnia has stalled. "But we have continually underestimated the savagery of this war," says a Western diplomat. "Kosovo is the one unifying issue he's got." If economic sanctions and international isolation make Serbs restive about Milosevic's rule, he could find a Kosovo clash very useful to prevent a coup by more radical Serbs who would consider peace a betrayal. The U.S. has received reports in the past few weeks that Serbs are moving heavy guns to Kosovo and conducting military exercises there.

With remarkably few exceptions, Kosovars have been willing to follow their leaders' policy of nonviolence and passive resistance. In May they evaded attempts by Serbs to block unauthorized elections, but their new assembly has been barred from meeting. The President of the unrecognized Independent ! Republic of Kosovo, Democratic League leader Ibrahim Rugova, says, "We hold meetings every week with local representatives" despite repeated Serb arrests of Albanian activists.

Far from the Muslim fanatic portrayed in Serbian propaganda, Rugova, 47, seems an unlikely nationalist leader. A Paris-educated Ph.D. in linguistics, he explains, "I opted for nonviolence because there has been

too much violence in the Balkans. But since the war in Slovenia and Bosnia, Serbian ideology is one of brute force. Nonviolence may become absurd in these circumstances." The Kosovars harbor the dangerous conviction that the U.S. and Europe will help them win independence from Serbia -- the same conviction once held by moderates in Bosnia. But because Kosovo has never been an independent republic and is technically part of Serbia, Western governments will have even more difficulty mustering a case for backing the Kosovars against Belgrade.

For more likely help, Kosovars must look instead to their ethnic brethren in Albania and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, where an estimated 30% or more of the population is Albanian, and possibly to fellow Muslims in Iran, Turkey and elsewhere. That inevitably raises the threat of a wider war. Serbian forces are not expected to respect international borders if Albania gives sanctuary to Kosovar fighters. Macedonia, now led by moderates in a delicate coalition that seeks full recognition of its own independence despite bitter Greek opposition, could feel compelled to intervene on behalf of the Kosovars lest their own Albanians secede. Either outcome could tempt the Greeks to intervene militarily. They are already destabilizing the Macedonian government by choking off its oil imports, idling tractors and trucks during the crucial harvest period and leaving grapes and apples to rot.

According to U.S. officials, Greece has informally agreed with Serbia to divide Macedonia. The republic is setting up frontier posts and rudimentary defense facilities along its border with Serbia to blunt the spread of hostilities from the north. In the south, Greece has held military exercises meant to send threatening signals. An incursion into Macedonia could provoke the Bulgarians, who recognize Macedonian independence but also have their own territorial claims. Even Turkey, which sympathizes with the Kosovars, could get involved -- on the side opposite Greece. This would throw southern Europe and NATO into serious disarray. "But no one is even looking at this problem," says a worried U.S. official.

So far, the Geneva conference on Yugoslavia plans to establish a Kosovo working group, and international monitors are to be sent to the region. "But if the monitors find abuses, where's the fire brigade?" asks a Washington-based diplomat. Absent a credible threat of force, there is no reason to believe Milosevic will be deterred from expanding his vision of a Greater Serbia to Kosovo. So the military planners whose fear of a quagmire has kept American, British and French combat forces out of Bosnia may soon be facing even worse choices posed by a general Balkan war.