

Magazine: Foreign Affairs
Issue: May/June 1999 (volume 78, number 3)
Title: Kosovo's Next Masters?
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KOSOVO'S NEXT MASTERS?

Chris Hedges

INSIDE THE KOSOVO LIBERATION ARMY

THE RUMBLES of yet another nationalist earthquake are shaking the former Yugoslavia. Rising from the fetid hovels of Pristina and the concrete-block family farms of rural Kosovo is the newest political and military force to beset the Balkans -- the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), known to Albanians as the Ushtria Clirimtare e Kosoves.

The emergence of this militant armed group, now numbering several thousand fighters, has dimmed hopes that even a compromise agreement with Belgrade could be successfully implemented. Emboldened by NATO's March bombing of the Serbian military, the KLA will wage a protracted guerrilla war in the Serbian province that could ignite a wider war in neighboring Macedonia and Albania, potentially even dragging in Greece and Bulgaria. The KLA is uncompromising in its quest for an independent Kosovo now and a Greater Albania later. And it has, to the consternation of Washington's would-be peacemakers, supplanted the ineffectual leadership of the moderate voice of Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority, Ibrahim Rugova.

The KLA is important out of all proportion to its size -- not merely because it will probably eventually get Kosovo to secede from Serbia, but because it now represents the aspirations of most Kosovar Albanians. To understand the current conflict in Kosovo and America's stakes in its resolution, one must understand the KLA, how it came into being, who leads it, what drives it, and why it now speaks for a majority of Kosovars. Even a truly vicious, Bosnia-like wave of atrocities by the Serbs in reprisal for NATO's attacks will only pour fuel on the separatist fire. The grim reality is that we had better get to know the KLA -- because it is not going to go away.

THE NEW RADICALS

KOSOVO'S ALBANIANS have grown increasingly embittered. By attempting to include the KLA in the peace process that began in February at the French chateau of Rambouillet, the Western alliance is working feverishly -- even as it bombs the Serbs -- to blunt the momentum toward a war of independence. The allies want NATO troops to separate the province's warring factions, although Belgrade is wary. The underlying idea behind creating a theoretically temporary, NATO-enforced military protectorate in Kosovo is to buy time for a three-year transition period in which ethnic Albanians will be allowed to elect a parliament and other governing bodies -- meeting enough of their aspirations, it is hoped, to keep Kosovo from seceding.

The good news is that the Western alliance's response to the Kosovo crisis, however ragged, shows that some lessons have been learned from the bumbling in Bosnia. The Europeans no longer talk about handling matters alone but demand the presence of the United States. Threats have been backed up by force. There is also a consensus that if some kind of a solution is not found soon, the fighting inside Kosovo -- an area the size of Connecticut -- will accelerate and make future intervention difficult, if not impossible. Even the Pentagon officials who fought like wildcats to keep U.S. forces out of Bosnia accept that some 4,000 U.S. troops will have to be deployed in Kosovo to make any peacekeeping force credible.

But, as in Bosnia, the West is wedded to a solution that might have worked earlier in the conflict but is now untenable. Serbian ethnic cleansing has taken on a somewhat different character in Kosovo than in Bosnia. In Kosovo, Serbian ethnic cleansing is to a large degree tactical, designed to deny the rebels succor from civilians and therefore aimed primarily at the inhabitants of KLA strongholds. But the Serb campaign has been more than brutal enough to make autonomy for Kosovo a nonstarter. The ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, who make up 90 percent of its 2 million inhabitants, cannot remain in Serbia after the horrific recent bloodshed, the displacement of a quarter of a million people, and the razing of scores of villages. They do not trust Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic or the Serbs -- and given Belgrade's bloody campaigns against ethnic minorities over the past decade and its habit of breaking agreements, who can blame them?

The Albanians have been radicalized, and their new voice is the KLA. Rugova, the old pacifist, is more a symbol of outmoded moderation than a leader. By ignoring the plight of the Kosovar Albanians for nearly a decade, the West lost much of its credibility before NATO began bombing. Many Albanians feel let down by the world and their own meek leaders. What is most striking, then, about the KLA insurrection is not that it occurred but that it took so long to occur.

The KLA fighters are the province's new power brokers. Whatever political leadership emerges in Kosovo will come from the rebel ranks, and it will be militant, nationalist, uncompromising, and deeply suspicious of all outsiders. U.S. intelligence agencies, preoccupied with tracking militant Islamist groups and Iranian agents in Bosnia, were caught off guard by the Kosovo rebel force's emergence, strength, and popularity. Indeed, some diplomats argued as late as last year about whether the shadowy group really existed -- even as small armed bands roamed Drenica in central Kosovo.

The first KLA armed attack took place in May 1993 in Glogova«c, killing two Serb police officers and wounding five more. But the rebel group -- its membership largely drawn from a few clans in Kosovo and radicals in the Albanian diaspora -- was founded eight years ago. Most of its leadership has spent years in prison for separatist activity, many having been jailed earlier by Tito's communist government. Like all revolutionaries who have spent years underground or in jail, the KLA leaders are wary of the outside world and given to secrecy, paranoia, and appalling mendacity when they feel it serves their interests, which is most of the time.

The KLA splits down a bizarre ideological divide, with hints of fascism on one side and whiffs of communism on the other. The former faction is led by the sons and grandsons of rightist Albanian fighters -- either the heirs of those who fought in the World War II fascist militias and the Skanderbeg volunteer SS division raised by the

Nazis, or the descendants of the rightist Albanian *kacak* rebels who rose up against the Serbs 80 years ago. Although never much of a fighting force, the Skanderbeg division took part in the shameful roundup and deportation of the province's few hundred Jews during the Holocaust. The division's remnants fought Tito's Partisans at the end of the war, leaving thousands of ethnic Albanians dead. The decision by KLA commanders to dress their police in black fatigues and order their fighters to salute with a clenched fist to the forehead has led many to worry about these fascist antecedents. Following such criticism, the salute has been changed to the traditional open-palm salute common in the U.S. Army.

The second KLA faction, comprising most of the KLA leaders in exile, are old Stalinists who were once bankrolled by the xenophobic Enver Hoxha, the dictator of Albania who died in 1985. This group led a militant separatist movement that was really about integration with Hoxha's Albania. Most of these leaders were students at Pristina University after 1974, when Belgrade granted the province autonomy. Freed from Yugoslav oversight, the university imported thousands of textbooks from Albania, all carefully edited by Hoxha's Stalinist regime, along with at least a dozen militant Albanian professors. Along with its degree programs, Pristina University began to quietly school young Kosovar leaders in the art of revolution. Not only did a huge percentage of the KLA leadership come out of the university, but so, ominously, did the ethnic Albanian leadership in neighboring Macedonia.

The two KLA factions have little sympathy with or understanding of democratic institutions. Split bitterly between radical left and radical right, they are now arguing over whether to carry the fighting to the pockets of ethnic Albanians who live in western Macedonia and neighboring Montenegro. The only thing they agree on is the need to liberate Kosovo from Serbian rule. All else, menacingly, will be decided later. It is not said how.

Given these deep divisions, it is no accident that the KLA has failed to create a political organization or even a vague platform. "I do not think we have an ideology," Jakup Krasniqi, the KLA's mercurial spokesman, told the Albanian-language daily *Koha Ditore* on July 12, 1998. "And in fact we do not have time for such things even if we were interested in them, because we have our main job to do, which is the task of liberation."

TAKING UP ARMS

I FIRST STUMBLED into the KLA in February 1997, shortly after a police car was ambushed by armed "terrorists," as the Serbs called them. Three uniformed ethnic Albanians equipped with automatic weapons were killed in the firefight. I took a taxi that had seen better days to attend the wake for one of them. As I approached the village of Orlane, a few lean men in track suits were standing about 20 feet apart on either side of the dirt road. Several of the mourners proved hostile, lashing out at my translator as a "spy" for Rugova.

That day in Orlane, with its crude outhouses, simple wooden structures, and roaming flocks of goats and noisy chickens, offered a glimpse into an armed rebellion that was still a year away. The slain man, Zahir Pajaziti, 34, had studied English at

Pristina University before dropping out. He had never held a steady job and had been on the run for several months, appearing unannounced at night, armed and in uniform, to visit his family and then disappearing before dawn. He and his two companions had been stopped by police, who apparently were looking for them, and were killed inside their car. Mourners told of other small bands setting up roadblocks to collect "war taxes" and holding political meetings.

But it was hard to penetrate the group from the inside. Only in Switzerland, where there was less danger in speaking with a foreign reporter, did it prove possible to establish links with the organization. This proved easier than I expected, in large part because the KLA had then built close ties or melded with much of Rugova's League of Democratic Kosovo (LDK). It was no coincidence that once the rebellion erupted a year ago, local LDK leaders immediately picked up weapons and became commanders of village units. By the time of the uprising, Rugova had lost control of his own party.

Through the LDK, I arranged a meeting with a rebel commander in Geneva -- the first such meeting with the press. My interlocutor was nearly killed some months later when two men with ski masks arrived at his unmarked office in Geneva and pulled out pistols with silencers. The assistant who answered the bell, although shot in the stomach, managed to slam shut the security door, no doubt saving the official's life. The would-be assassins were never apprehended. The office has since been closed.

"We all feel a deep, deep sense of betrayal," the KLA man told me, echoing a sentiment that seemed to speak for most ethnic Albanians. "We mounted a peaceful, civilized protest to fight the totalitarian rule of Milosevic. We did not go down the road of nationalist hatred, always respecting Serbian churches and monasteries. The result is that we were ignored." The Dayton peace negotiations, which dealt with Bosnia but not Kosovo, "taught us a painful truth, [that] those that want freedom must fight for it. This is our sad duty."

The Albanians were spurred by the collapse of Tito's Yugoslavia. Croatia and Serbia, whose political ideology is often overtly racist, unleashed a war in the early 1990s largely against unarmed civilians to try to form ethnically "pure" enclaves and states. Militias stormed through minority communities in drunken frenzies, looting, burning, raping, and murdering. They set up detention centers, carried out mass executions, and ignored tepid international protests. But after Milosevic revoked Kosovo's autonomy in 1989, Rugova insisted on a very different road to independence, a Gandhi-like plan to withdraw from all state institutions and create a parallel government. His was to be a peaceful revolution and an example of civility and tolerance that would earn the backing of the Western democracies.

The former literature professor, with his glasses constantly sliding down his nose and a scarf loosely draped around his neck, has the distracted look of an aging Left Bank poet. Rugova is the self-styled president of Kosovo, although even his supporters in Tirana, the Albanian capital, do not recognize his "state." Remote and out of touch, he rarely leaves his small office in Pristina, even to attend a funeral a few blocks away.

Under Rugova's leadership, the ethnic Albanians set up their own schools, clinics, and a shadow administration that levied taxes, drawing on the resources of a diaspora of more than 600,000 ethnic Albanians in Europe and some 300,000 in Canada and the United States. The civil resistance lasted nearly a decade. Streams of delegations from Kosovo traveled to Scandinavian countries to take expenses-paid seminars in

nonviolence. But the protest, unsustainable in the long term and a victim of international indifference, collapsed.

Its death notice came after the 1995 Dayton agreement was swiftly followed by the European Union's recognition of Yugoslavia -- even though the EU had earlier demanded that Yugoslavia first resolve the Kosovo issue. Kosovar Albanians, with understandable rage, did not grasp why the Bosnian Serbs, responsible for some of the worst acts of genocide since World War II, were handed nearly half of Bosnia at Dayton. The recognition of Radovan Karadzic's gangster statelet, Republika Srpska, was the final insult. It shattered all hopes for peaceful change in Kosovo.

The situation in Kosovo, a mountain-ringed bowl long at the heart of the struggle for a Greater Albania, swiftly began to unravel. Money, especially the three percent levy on all earnings abroad, was diverted to the KLA's Homeland Calling fund. Albanian newspapers outside the province, such as the Zurich-based Voice of Kosovo, started to print *communiqués* from the rebel group and run ads calling for donations.

The young men who had sent home remittances from menial jobs in Europe to support their families began to be deported under a series of agreements signed between Belgrade and countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden. Burdened by close to a million refugees from Bosnia, these governments were unwilling to see the numbers swelled by a new influx from the Balkans. The fighting in Kosovo has ended the repatriations. A huge number of disenchanted and angry youth who saw no benefits from Rugova's rule and who, unlike their parents, did not speak Serbo-Croatian, began giving up on multiethnicity. The unemployment rate among ethnic Albanians is 70 percent, and this pressure, coupled with the highest birthrate in Europe (23.1 births per 1,000), has created a deep recruiting pool for the KLA. Seventy percent of the population is now under 30.

Kosovo has undergone a generational shift much like that in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip at the start of the intifada in 1987. The war of the Palestinian youth was as much directed against their parents' generation, which had been cowed by the Israeli military, as against the occupiers themselves. In Kosovo, young Albanians have bitterly repudiated not only Serb rule but also Rugova's older, urbane, and educated leadership. Pristina's elites, they say, have betrayed the Albanian cause.

On April 6, 1998, in the town of Jablanica, 30 miles north of Dakovica, I bumped into a group of surly KLA fighters, dressed in a motley collection of uniforms and equipped with an odd assortment of hunting rifles, pistols, automatic weapons, and hunting knives. The killings by Belgrade, along with the humiliation of ten years of abuse, had left them seething with resentment.

"This is our territory," said a gaunt, nervous rebel with a scraggly black beard and a chrome-plated pistol protruding from his belt. "We are through with these Albanian intellectuals in Pristina, with journalists, diplomats, and everyone else. No one saved our women and children from slaughter. Now it is up to us."

THE SERBS' RAJ

BELGRADE, blind to the looming rebellion, blithely continued to rule Kosovo like a colonial backwater. On several occasions, I saw two or three beefy Serb police officers,

who I suspect are often recruited by the pound, walloping young ethnic Albanians with their clubs in the center of Pristina. I once watched a cop shove a young boy of about ten, who held a small wooden tray of individual cigarettes for sale, onto the sidewalk. The cop laughed as the frightened child scrambled to rescue the cigarettes from the mud puddles. Many of the Serb police were sent to Kosovo as a demotion or a punishment for misbehavior. One of their favorite pastimes was to set up roadblocks and collect money from a long line of cars for invented traffic violations. Drivers that did not have money or did not pay had their documents seized.

All this, however, paled in comparison with the brutal treatment in Serb jails. People were beaten, tortured (usually while chained to radiators), and held incommunicado for days and weeks. Some simply vanished.

Bejram Shehi, 39, a laborer in Switzerland, came home last year to visit his family and was arrested by Serb police. They accused him of carrying in money for the KLA. He had a black hood pulled over his head, was handcuffed, and was then pushed through the back door of the police car onto the car floor.

"They joked that they were taking me to see the Kosovo Liberation Army," he said. "We drove for about an hour. I was taken out and brought to a basement, where I was stripped and handcuffed to a radiator. I stayed like this for five days. They beat me until I fainted, all the time asking about the Kosovo Liberation Army, who belonged to it, how it raised money abroad, and where it got its weapons."

On the fifth day he was forced to sign a confession. "I promised to collaborate with them, and they gave me the name of a police contact," he said, unfolding a small slip of white paper from his wallet with a Serbian name and phone number written in pencil.

The Serbs, meanwhile, lived as if Kosovo were the raj, with all civil and state jobs and a private police force to ensure their privileged status in the birthplace of modern Serb nationalism. Milošević, presiding over a decaying economy, clung to the millions of dollars a year in hard cash brought in by Kosovo's massive Trepça mine complex, valued at \$5 billion. The mine alone made him loath to give up the province to the ethnic Albanians; the ultranationalist bigotry he had ridden to power reinforced his obstinacy. Kosovo came to have the elements of a political time bomb, ticking louder and louder while the world looked the other way.

DEAD MEN WALKING

ON A RAINY AFTERNOON in April 1997, I stood with one of Rugova's top officials in front of the McDonald's in downtown Geneva. He told me that at six o'clock that evening, in the Buffet des Premieres Classes at the Geneva train station, I would find a man seated in a front booth with a copy of the Journal de Geneve. The paper, I was told, would be completely unfolded. I was to come alone. The conversation would take place in French.

This was my first encounter -- indeed the first interview by any reporter -- with a rebel commander. Although a few ethnic Albanian reporters had spoken to the Jasharis, the clan that made up much of the KLA at the start of the rebellion, none dared write about them or the KLA. This deeply angered the Jasharis and aided my efforts to reach them. I walked into the station and saw a lean man in his late thirties dressed in black jeans, a gray jacket, and a purple T-shirt. He looked up and motioned for me to follow

him out the door. We weaved quickly through the crowds outside the station until we came to another cafe, where he took a seat along the back wall facing the door. The rebel, who gave his nom de guerre as Alban, would within a year lead a group of a few hundred fighters over the border from northern Albania into Kosovo. The last I heard, he was commanding a large unit in the province.

He spoke quietly and without rancor. He said that, like most of the leadership, he had spent years in prison for separatist activity. "We have no Tito," he said. The KLA leadership, he told me, was divided between about 30 people, with no paramount leader. These men were drawn primarily from the 5,000 or so ethnic Albanians who had fought for the Muslim-Croat Federation in Bosnia against the Serbs.

Until the uprising in Kosovo last spring, the KLA had only a couple hundred members. The most prominent inside Kosovo was Adem Jashari, a gruff, taciturn peasant who, with his brother Hamza, had been on the run from Serb authorities for months. They were among the handful of militants who founded the KLA in 1991 before it mushroomed into a popular army, much like the Islamist resistance in Algeria. In the early days, they came closest to running the organization, and many of their lieutenants and relatives -- at least the ones that have survived -- now run the KLA.

I tried fruitlessly over three days to speak to the Jasharis, spending an afternoon pleading with Shaban, their 70-year-old father, to pass on a message. He refused. His sons were increasingly wanted men. Just a few weeks before, on November 28, 1997, uniformed KLA fighters had, for the first time, appeared before a large crowd. Before some 20,000 mourners at the funeral of a schoolteacher slain by the Serbs, two KLA leaders delivered a rousing call for liberation that was greeted with a roar of approval and thunderous chants of "KLA! KLA! KLA!"

The only way to arrange a trip to the Jasharis ran through Switzerland, something I did with some trepidation, since I was afraid that Serb security agents might intercept my communications. I made the request, however, and a few days after Ramadan ended I was called to Geneva and told that on February 17 I should be waiting outside the old religious school in Pristina at eight o'clock in the morning. I would be allowed to bring a photographer.

At the assigned hour, Wade Goddard, our photographer, and I stood in the cold as two young men, both in jeans and wearing combat boots, walked swiftly towards us. "Be here at three o'clock tomorrow, and make sure you are not followed," said one in broken English. In less than a minute, they had vanished.

We spent the next morning darting in and out of taxis and walking through back alleys to make sure we were not being tailed. A KLA official in Switzerland, in an insight into what has become a respectable intelligence network, had thoughtfully provided me with the name of the undercover cop who hung out in my small hotel in Pristina to report on my activities.

As we traveled the next day to Prekaz, the small town in central Kosovo that was the Jasharis' headquarters, the group's well-oiled underground network was evident. Men along the road signaled with their hands that the way was clear of Serb checkpoints. When we entered Prekaz, the driver honked the horn three times, and a group of about a dozen men emerged from a shed to watch us. We turned up into a field covered with a thin layer of snow and were stopped by a half-dozen heavily armed men in camouflage

uniforms. All wore on their shoulders the red-and-black KLA patch with the double-headed Albanian eagle.

We were escorted through the fields and along dirt roads. As our patrol walked over the thin layer of snow, I noticed that no one seemed to find the presence of the rebels unusual; even the children hardly gave us a glance. We reached a small stone farmhouse surrounded by a wooden fence. Inside, on cushions set on the floor along the wall, were Adem and Hamza Jashari. The room, filled with acrid cigarette smoke, was lit by a single kerosene lamp. Two burly bodyguards, clutching automatic weapons, stood by the door. The two dirt roads leading into the village had also been closed after we passed by bands of armed fighters.

This would be the first and last interview the Jasharis would give to a reporter. In three weeks, I would be standing over their bodies in a warehouse. Adem's neck had been slit, probably after he had died of multiple bullet wounds. Shaban, his elderly father with whom I had spent an afternoon, lay not far away. There were 51 corpses, 20 of them members of the Jashari clan, many of them shot in the head at close range. About two dozen of the victims were women and children, and some of the bodies were blackened by the flames that had engulfed their homes.

But that day, the encounter with the Jasharis offered a revealing look at the contrasts within the KLA. Adem, with his drooping bandito mustache and hostility, had none of Alban's polished charm. The fighters around him were suspicious peasants, prone to lash out at everyone, including Rugova, who was not part of their inner circle. They insisted that they would never flee from the village if it came under attack. Most, in fact, died in their homes, as have scores of other Kosovar Albanians who have yet to master the basic tenets of guerrilla warfare.

As we spoke, we heard the low drone of a single-engine plane circling lazily overhead, no doubt taking infrared photographs of heat sources for the coming Serb assault. Nervous fighters in the courtyard peered up at the craft in the moonlight.

In another era the Jashari clan, which oversaw a large black-market smuggling network, would have faded away into local folklore. The Balkans are filled with small-time renegades who combine criminal activity with thin, separatist ideologies. Instead, by leveling Prekaz with 20 mm anti-aircraft cannons and killing more than 50 people, including many old people, women, and children, the Serbs made the Jasharis into martyrs. U.S. Special Envoy to the Balkans Robert Gelbard gave what many have interpreted as a green light to Belgrade to go after the rebel bands by announcing in Priyština on February 23, 1998, that the KLA "is without any question a terrorist group." He went on to add that the United States "condemns very strongly terrorist activities in Kosovo." Within two weeks Serb forces had turned Prekaz into a smoldering ruin, killed close to a hundred people, and ignited the uprising.

A few days after the Jashari compound was flattened with mortar and cannon shells, I wandered among the piles of brick and cement. In the ruins of one room lay a blackened book with a map that showed a Greater Albania that included Kosovo, parts of Serbia, much of Macedonia, and parts of present-day Greece and Montenegro. The map was drawn up on July 1, 1878, when the bajraktars, or clan chieftains, from the Turkish realms of the southwest Balkans founded the League for the Defense of the Albanian Nation. The book was a potent reminder of what the war was about -- especially since,

with most ethnic Albanians concentrated in homogeneous areas bordering Albania, the drive to extend Albania's borders remains feasible.

That drive is not only a wider threat to European stability but also to Albanian moderation. Kosovar Albanians in exile -- and even some who have gone back to fight -- express deep frustration at the provincialism of the leadership within Kosovo, but to little avail. Leaders of the KLA, especially those who have not lived abroad, are convinced that they have embarked on the century-long dream of a Greater Albania. Many KLA commanders tout themselves as "a liberation army for all Albanians" -- precisely what frightens the NATO alliance most.

THE NEXT BALKAN COUNTRY

BOTH THE SERBS and the ethnic Albanians are now confident that force of arms can solve the impasse. The Serbs have huge stockpiles of heavy weapons they have yet to unleash, and the KLA has a large reserve of volunteers and a porous border with Albania to smuggle in supplies and newly trained recruits. Neither side has much incentive to lay down its weapons, despite NATO's air strikes.

Settling in for a long fight, the KLA probably has 30,000 automatic weapons, made available at bargain prices after Albanian military arsenals were looted in the chaos after the spring 1997 economic meltdown. The rebels have made a concerted effort to acquire German antitank weapons, heavy machine guns, sniper rifles, and rocket-propelled grenades. Most important, by launching the current rebellion, taking on the Serbs, and drawing international attention to the conflict, the rebel group has done more in a year to further the cause of independence for Kosovo than Rugova was able to do over the preceding decade.

As long as Washington insists on adhering to the principle that all states in the former Yugoslavia be multiethnic, there is little hope of a resolution. And as long as Belgrade is permitted to station troops in Kosovo, which is part of the current agreement, neither NATO soldiers nor Kosovar Albanians will be safe. Building any kind of lasting peace or democratic institutions will be impossible.

The holes in a policy of advocating multiethnicity gape most glaringly in Croatia and Bosnia. Croatia has expelled most of the ethnic Serbs who once made up 12 percent of its population, and post-Dayton Bosnia is rigidly partitioned into little Croat, Serb, and Muslim parastates. Yet the diplomatic community insists on the fiction that the pieces can somehow be glued back together and periodically scolds Zagreb and Sarajevo for failing to comply.

Western diplomatic efforts designed to keep the Serbs and the ethnic Albanians in the same country mirror the fruitless peace efforts carried out during the first three years of the Bosnian war. The refusal to accept the creation of ethnically "pure" enclaves -- a decision that is strategically and morally understandable -- leaves diplomats paying homage to multiethnic institutions, however hollow, and lofty democratic ideals that nearly all Balkan leaders detest. Kosovo can remain a Serbian province and the two groups can live together, this reasoning goes, if only the ethnic Albanians are given a little more freedom. Given that between 1966 and 1989 an estimated 130,000 Serbs left

the province because of frequent harassment and discrimination by the Kosovar Albanian majority, this is at best naive.

The peace agreement for which NATO went to war proposes to deploy some 30,000 NATO troops and allow ethnic Albanian police to take over security functions in Albanian-majority areas. The plan would gradually cede local police control to the KLA, which would probably comprise most of the force. But Serbia would keep troops in the province and handle security along the borders -- especially the border with Albania, where the KLA has set up logistics bases and smuggling routes for weapons and fighters. The plan also calls for a phased disarming of the KLA.

Such a deal would be hard enough to implement under Rugova, but it would be harder still to implement under a rebel command that has spent the last three years preparing for war. The KLA is wildly unlikely to hand over its guns, especially given Milosevic's pattern of ignoring formal agreements. The latent nationalism among most Serbs, coupled with the disturbing belief that they were the real victims in Yugoslavia's wars, is aroused by each Western attack. Belgrade knows that NATO has no desire to become the air wing of the KLA. Anything much short of all-out war on Yugoslavia only consolidates Milosevic's grip on power and allows him to unleash his forces in Kosovo.

The West's blundering peace initiative has reminded the KLA not to rely too much on NATO. The alliance was palpably reluctant to move against the Serbs, although they have flagrantly violated the agreement made last October to cease hostilities in Kosovo. Ignoring the October pact, NATO bombed to get Belgrade to sign on to the Rambouillet deal -- a shift not lost on the Kosovar Albanians. Milosevic, for his part, has driven NATO crazy since the Kosovo crisis began. Chris Hill, the current U.S. Kosovo mediator, has carried out fruitless shuttle diplomacy since last spring; on his latest trip to Belgrade, Milosevic did not even meet with him. Put bluntly, the Serb leaders stiffed the United States. The KLA is correctly distrustful of Western intentions and resolve.

That distrust led to the decision by the KLA not to sign the Rambouillet agreement in the first round of talks last February -- which, in turn, let the alliance off the moral hook. Kosovar intransigence gave the West the excuse it was looking for not to implement the October agreement and deepened the already wide rifts within the alliance.

If the West's peace push eventually dies, as now appears likely, the KLA leaders will swiftly become utterly disenchanted with the West and -- as if they were not already implacable enough -- turn to Islamic radicals ready to back another battle by Muslims against Orthodox Christians. There are already signs that contacts have been established. The Serbs, whose information is admittedly often unreliable, say that Islamic charities in the Persian Gulf are giving millions to the KLA. U.S. officials say they have detected ties to Islamist organizations and suspect that some money has been forwarded to the KLA. I saw bearded mujahideen, who did not look Albanian, wandering around the staging areas in northern Albania, a hint that there may be some truth to these assertions.

The Serbs also contend that the KLA has about 1,000 foreign mercenaries from Albania, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Croatia, as well as British and German instructors. Most of the mercenaries are probably Albanian nationals, especially former Albanian army officers, police officers, and members of the state security services.

The KLA is clearly preparing for a long slog. It has tried to recruit ethnic Albanian veterans in Croatia, who formed two battalions in Croatia's war against the

Serbs. In early February, Yugoslav officials said that they had seized \$500,000 worth of weapons, ammunition, and uniforms for the KLA that were smuggled in from Croatia in a truck. Zagreb has been warned by senior NATO officials to stay out of the conflict, but Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's government can hardly be displeased to see Belgrade mired in another disaster. There are rebel training camps now in Albania -- apparently in Ljabinot, near Tirana -- as well as ones I saw in Tropoja (near the Yugoslav border), Kuks, and Bajram Curi.

Were the conflagration to result in the deployment of peacekeeping NATO ground forces -- a proposition that should not be taken lightly -- it would have risks that were not faced in Bosnia. Kosovo, unlike Cyprus and Bosnia, has no fixed lines dividing the antagonists. The province's battle lines resemble the constantly shifting sands of Central America's 1980s guerrilla wars: a stretch of road that is safe in the morning can be deadly in the afternoon. Because this is an insurrection rather than a war between armies, rebels can be farmers one day and combatants the next. They will be impossible to define. To muddy the waters further, the KLA is poorly led, with no central command and little discipline. Many villages have formed ad hoc militias that, while they identify themselves as KLA, act independently. I found that KLA commanders often spent as much time trying to find out what these militias were doing -- closing down unauthorized roadblocks and curbing excesses by local warlords -- as they did fighting the Serbs. Part of the problem facing any peacekeeping force will be defining who belongs to the KLA and who does not. The Serb soldiers and special police, in uniform and headquartered in barracks, will prove far easier to monitor, if not always control. But the overall picture is one of chaos.

In Bosnia, by contrast, the front lines had changed little by late 1992, and the war often resembled World War I clashes on the western front, albeit on a much smaller scale. During the war, I used to watch ferocious Muslim night assaults from the twisting trench systems around the Jewish cemetery in Sarajevo, complete with luminous flares and the deep-throated rattle of heavy machine guns. Hundreds of people were wounded or killed in this trench warfare, but the trenches themselves moved little.

Even after this spring's NATO air strikes and ruthless Serbian attacks, Kosovo's combatants may still have vigor to spare. In Bosnia, on the other hand, conditions were much riper for peacemaking, at least by the fall of 1995. The Bosnian Serbs, battered by two weeks of heavy NATO bombing, were a spent and broken force. The long arm of the United States managed to rein in the Muslims, largely by silencing Croatian artillery units that had been instrumental in the joint Croat-Muslim advance. The Muslims had suffered enough, the Bosnian Serbs were on the ropes, and the Croats had gotten everything they wanted out of the war with the exception of the Serb-held enclave of Eastern Slavonia, which was handed back to them two years later.

Kosovo has not yet been granted the dubious blessing of such exhaustion. The Serbs appear to believe that the problem requires not negotiation but more force. Morale among the Serbs is low, and there are steady reports of desertions. The heavily mechanized Serb patrols stick to the blacktop roads while the KLA controls a network of back dirt roads that often skirt police checkpoints. Reporters that bounce along them in armored jeeps have aptly nicknamed them the Ho Chi Minh Trail. With their patrols and land mines, the Serbs have had no more luck sealing the borders than the Germans had in stomping out Tito's Partisans in World War II -- or (*mutatis mutandis*) the Americans had

with the original Ho Chi Minh Trail. Just as in the last war, Belgrade's decision to scorch villages is only flooding the rebels with recruits.

The animosities have been carved deep. Although this is not a war about "ancient ethnic hatreds," there is nevertheless a long history of antagonism between the Serbs and the Kosovar Albanians. The competing national myths -- with the Serbs claiming Kosovo as the birthplace of medieval Serbia and the Albanians claiming they are descended from the ancient Illyrians -- are trotted out by each group to bludgeon the other.

Fed on nationalist mythology and emboldened by their initial successes, the KLA's leaders are in no mood to settle. The leadership still appears to rely, at least for its public face, on the radicals in the diaspora, including Jashar Salihu, the head of the Homeland Calling fund, and Pleurat Sejdiu, the KLA's London representative. But the group's chief appears to be the university-educated Hashim Thaci, the head of the political directorate, whose nom de guerre is "Snake." Like many in the leadership, he was a student activist in Priÿstina before leaving to study in Albania and raise money in Europe for the independence movement. When Thaci unexpectedly snarled the Rambouillet talks, Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright learned the extent of KLA militancy the hard way.

At this late stage in the game, a NATO deployment -- if Milosevic can somehow be bombed into accepting it -- will over the short term save lives, just as it did in Bosnia. But it will not bring back the autonomy that Tito, the last of the Habsburgs, oversaw with such skill. With its citizens carrying Croatian passports and voting in national elections, the Croat-controlled part of Bosnia is already a de facto part of Croatia. The Bosnian Serbs are slowly grafting themselves onto Serbia. It is best to accept the unpalatable and acknowledge that the successor states to Yugoslavia are moral and political dwarfs.

In Kosovo, the stationing of international troops may prevent all-out fighting and provide the breathing space to negotiate a workable solution. But given the deep rifts between the sides, the latter is hardly likely. The international community would then face the stark choice between remaining in Kosovo for a long time or pulling out after the proposed three-year period, with the likelihood that those on both sides of the divide would again pick up their guns. In the end, it will come to this: Led by the KLA, Kosovo will separate from Serbia, whether by negotiations or by violence.

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