

Truth, the First Casualty

No issue in recent memory has engendered so much confusion and anguish on the left as the war in Kosovo.

Things are not as simple as they were during the Cold War. The conflicts that consume human lives today are largely civil wars fueled by ethnic hatred. Some conflicts cry out for direct intervention. In Rwanda, for just one example, the world sat by as Hutu nationalists slaughtered Tutsis by the hundreds of thousands.

The situation in the Balkans, however, is less clear cut. Many mistakes have been made. They begin with the decision by the West to sanction the break-up of Yugoslavia along ethnic lines, rather than seek an internal settlement. This was initiated in 1991, by Germany's recognition of Croatia, their World War II ally, as an independent state. In 1995, the world community stood by as Serbs massacred 7,000 Bosnian men in Zepa and Srebrenica, U.N.-declared safe zones. That same year, nothing was done when Croatia ethnically cleansed itself of an estimated 250,000 Serbs living in Krajina.

In Kosovo, NATO should have supported the non-violent resistance to Milosevic with the same enthusiasm it is now showing the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a terrorist force that has funded its operations through drug smuggling. (The KLA recently appointed Agim Ceku, one of the planners of the Croatian ethnic cleansing known as "Operation Storm," as its new military commander.)

Yes, there were negotiations, but the Ramboulet accord set conditions that NATO negotiators knew were impossible for Serbia to accept. Ramboulet would grant NATO the right to move troops freely in all of the "Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," not just Kosovo. Is it surprising that Milosevic rejected an agreement that would have, in effect, give NATO free reign throughout the entire country? "The economy of Kosovo shall function with free market principles," the accord further states. Did the United States expect Serbia, which has a mixed economy, simply to bow to orders from the outside to transform its economic system?

Understandably, the international community did not want to stand by and see the genocide committed by Serbs in Bosnia repeated. In the case of Bosnia, a military response was needed. But was it the right solution for Kosovo?

Rollie Keith, a field director with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), monitored the human rights situation in Kosovo prior to the bombings. "I did not witness, nor did I have knowledge of, any incidents of so-called 'ethnic cleansing' and there were certainly no occurrences of 'genocidal poli-

cies' while I was with the [OSCE] in Kosovo," he wrote recently. "What has transpired since the OSCE monitors were evacuated on March 20 ... obviously has resulted in human rights abuses and a very significant humanitarian disaster as some 600,000 Kosovar Albanians have fled or been expelled from the province. This did not occur, though, before March 20." He concludes: "I would attribute the humanitarian disaster directly or indirectly to the NATO air bombardment and the resulting anti-terrorist campaign."

Without doubt, Serb forces and paramilitaries have committed atrocities. But is the situation in Kosovo as apocalyptic as NATO spokesmen would lead us to believe? *The Los Angeles Times'* Paul Watson, one of the few journalists in Kosovo, recently reported that there were "hundreds of young men everywhere" in the town of Svetlje, now home to about 15,000 displaced ethnic Albanians. "By their own accounts," he writes, "the men are not living in a concentration camp, nor being forced to labor for the police or army, nor serving as human shields for Serbs. Instead, they are waiting with their families for permission to follow thousands who have risked going back home to nearby villages because they do not want to give up and leave Kosovo." He

We've tried bombing a civilian population back to the Stone Age before. It didn't work then. It will not work now. It's time to stop the war.

notes that their presence challenges "the black-and-white versions of what is happening."

The United States and its NATO allies had other options. They could have pursued a settlement through the United Nations with the Russians on their side. They could have offered to lift the economic sanctions against Serbia, in return for a greater presence of U.N. and OSCE monitors in Kosovo. But NATO chose not to negotiate, and the results have been disastrous.

The ground war already has started, albeit in secret. KLA military leaders told *The Guardian* that U.S. and British special forces have joined KLA troops in waging a guerrilla war—known by the code name "Picnic"—in Kosovo. Concurrently, NATO decided to broaden its bombing targets in Serbia in the hope that Serbian citizens will turn against Milosevic. NATO's destruction of power grids has left Belgrade and other cities without light and water. We've tried to bomb civilians back to the Stone Age before. It didn't work then. It will not work now. Cluster bombs are no substitute for diplomacy.

It's time to stop the war.

Joel Bleifuss

Russia's King Lear

By Fred Weir
Moscow

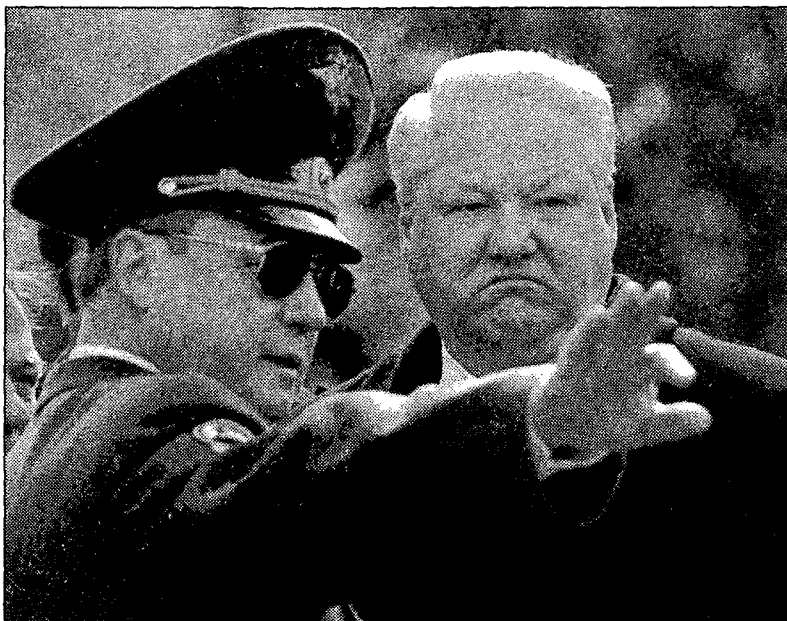
Boris Yeltsin is the problem, not the solution. Funny how long it has taken for that realization to dawn, even among some Russians. "Many people used to think some larger principles were being fought out on the Russian political stage, like the struggle for democratic reform against the legacy of Communism," says Viktor Levashov, a political scientist with the Institute of Social and Political Studies, an academic think tank in Moscow. "Now it's obvious that Yeltsin stands for nothing but the perpetuation of his own power. The battles he is fighting are against shadows in his own mind, but his blows land on the whole country."

Russia was thrown into uproar in early May when Yeltsin suddenly fired his prime minister of nine months, Yevgeny Primakov. Citing a lack of long-term economic strategy for the sacking, Yeltsin replaced him with Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin, who blandly announced he would follow the economic course set by his predecessor. The real reason for Primakov's departure seems to be that he was a compromise candidate in the first place, who enjoyed the trust of the Duma and was beginning to look all too presidential in the performance of his duties. "Yeltsin cannot share power," Levashov says. "He cannot stand seeing anyone get too close to his chair, and that is the main reason we have a system of permanent shake-up."

But Yeltsin's luck—and his genius for political combat—held out. By firing Primakov, he canceled the gains made by the opposition-led Duma last fall when, amid economic crash and political breakdown, the Kremlin was forced to consult with Parliament and

accept a prime minister not entirely of its own choosing.

Then Yeltsin walked away from a bungled attempt by the Duma's leftist majority to impeach him. The five charges against Yeltsin included weighty matters such as his responsibility for the bombardment of parliament in 1993 and the bloody two-year war in Chechnya. But the Kremlin managed



New Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin now guards President Boris Yeltsin.

to talk—some say buy—enough independents and ultra-nationalists into boycotting the vote, heading off the constitutionally required two-thirds majority. Whipped and bedraggled, fearing dissolution by the triumphant president, the Duma endorsed Stepashin a few days later.

The 47-year-old Stepashin, who has spent his entire career as a policeman, even allowed himself a joke at the Duma's expense: "All those who voted for me may lower their hands and step away from the wall," he quipped.

What was it all for? "No one in contemporary Russia can compete with Yeltsin in terms of strength and will to power," says Valery Fyodorov of the Center for Political Trends. "Unfortunately he only gathers his

personal forces to combat a perceived threat to himself, never for constructive purposes. And his greatest political victories have disastrous effects for the country."

Critics say each turn of the screw has not only boosted Yeltsin's personal power but reaffirmed and strengthened the autocratic character of the Russian state. The sweeping democratic experiments of the Gorbachev era have been reduced to political theatrics in a Duma that has no real power. As authority was concentrated at the top, early post-Soviet visions of creating a middle-class market society through

mass privatization and economic stimulation gave way to a narrow oligarchy of Kremlin-connected plutocrats.

One of Yeltsin's reasons for dispensing with the popular and wily Primakov may have been that the prime minister—at the Duma's urging—was encouraging the public prosecutor to investigate the criminal activities of big tycoons, such as Boris Berezovsky, and even to probe corruption within the Kremlin itself.

Some fear that Yeltsin is now preparing to rewrite the rules again,

since the current Constitution—authored by Yeltsin after he forcibly disbanded Parliament in 1993—stipulates that he must leave office when his second term ends in June 2000.

The pretext for this could be the creation of a new state. For more than two years, Yeltsin has been promoting the federation of Russia with its Slavic neighbor Belarus, a marriage that now looks close to completion. "Yeltsin will under no circumstances relinquish power voluntarily," says Anton Surikov, a former aide in Primakov's government. "Attempts to unite Russia and Belarus before the presidential elections in 2000 should be watched closely. I believe there will be an attempt to keep Yeltsin in the Kremlin for a third term as president of a Russia-Belarus union." ■