

Serbian ethnic cleansing scare was a fake, says general

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***John Goetz, Berlin
and Tom Walker***

A REPORT purporting to show that Belgrade planned the systematic ethnic cleansing of Kosovo's entire Albanian population was faked, a German general has claimed.

The plan, known as Operation Horseshoe, was revealed by Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister, on April 6 last year, almost two weeks after Nato started bombing Serbia. German public opinion about the Luftwaffe's participation in the airstrikes was divided at the time.

Horseshoe - or "Potkova", as the Germans said it was known in Belgrade - became a staple of Nato briefings. It was presented as proof that President Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia had long planned the expulsion of Albanians. James Rubin, the American state department spokesman, cited it only last week to justify Nato's bombardment.

However, Heinz Loquai, a retired brigadier general, has claimed in a new book on the war that the plan was fabricated from run-of-the-mill Bulgarian intelligence reports.

Loquai, who now works for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), has accused Rudolf Scharping, the German defence minister, of obscuring the origins of Operation Horseshoe.

"The facts to support its existence are at best terribly meagre," he told The Sunday Times. "I have come to the conclusion that no such operation ever existed. The criticism of the war, which had grown into a fire that was almost out of control, was completely extinguished by Operation Horseshoe."

Scharping reported in his wartime diary that he had received the intelligence report on Horseshoe from Fischer. But according to Die Woche, the German news weekly, the report was a general analysis by a Bulgarian intelligence agency of Serbian behaviour in the war.

Loquai has claimed that the German defence ministry turned a vague report from Sofia into a "plan", and even coined the name Horseshoe. Die Woche has reported that maps broadcast around the world as proof of Nato's information were drawn up at the German defence headquarters in Hardthöhe.

The Bulgarian report concluded that the goal of the Serbian military was to destroy the Kosovo Liberation Army, and not to expel the entire Albanian population, as was later argued by Scharping and the Nato leadership. Loquai also pointed to a fundamental flaw in the German account: it named the operation Potkova, which is the Croatian word for horseshoe. The Serbian for horseshoe is Potkovica. "A state prosecutor would never think of going to trial with the amount of evidence available to the German defence ministry," said Loquai.

Nato sources rejected Loquai's claims, but admitted it was impossible to prove the origins of the Horseshoe story. "There's never any absolute certainty about these things," said one source. "But the idea that there was nothing pre-arranged is counter-intuitive.

"Look at the speed with which the Serbs moved. It was systematic. Until we get into Belgrade and start tearing the files apart, we will never be certain - and that's never going to happen."

In Belgrade, government sources said several Yugoslav army officers had dismissed Operation Horseshoe as part of Nato's propaganda war