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The hoax that started a war

How the U.S., NATO and the western media were conned in Kosovo

By PETER WORTHINGTON - Toronto Sun

Back in March, 1999, what tipped the scales for then U.S. president Bill Clinton to launch an air war against Serbia, were reports of a massacre of 45 Albanian civilians by Serb security forces at the village of Racak, some 30 km from Pristina in southern Kosovo.

Clinton told the world on March 19, 1999: "We should remember what happened in Racak ... innocent men, women and children were taken from their homes to a gully, forced to kneel in the dirt and sprayed with gunfire." Photos circled the world. NATO bombing began March 24, and lasted 78 days.

White House press secretary Joe Lockhart said of Racak: "A strong message will be brought to President (Slobodan) Milosevic about bringing those to justice who should be punished for this ... "

U.S. Foreign Secretary Madeleine Albright, eager to make war against then-Yugoslavia and speaking on CBS' Face the Nation, cited Racak where, she said, there were "dozens of people with their throats slit." She called this the "galvanizing incident" that meant peace talks at Rambouillet were pointless, "humanitarian bombing" the only recourse.

Germany's Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, told the newspaper Berliner Zeitung that the Racak massacre "became the turning point for me" and war was the only answer.

Canada's then foreign minister, Lloyd Axworthy, called the massacre "a disgusting victimization of civilians."

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported the dead had fingernails torn out - evidence of torture.

On Jan. 16, the day after the actual massacre, William Walker, the veteran American diplomat who headed peace verifiers for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), was taken by Kosovo Liberation Army members to Racak to see the bodies in the ditch. He declared that the dead "obviously were executed where they lay."

His OSCE report spoke of "arbitrary arrests, killings and mutilations of unarmed civilians" at Racak.

GROUND TROOPS

Canada's Louise Arbour, then special prosecutor for the war crimes tribunal, (hand-picked for the job by Albright) was prevented by Serb authorities from visiting Racak. She vowed retribution for the massacre, urging that "international troops on the ground" were the only way to effect arrests.

When Milosevic was indicted as a war criminal, the massacre at Racak was cited as evidence. The London Times wrote that victims had their eyes gouged out, heads smashed in, faces blown away at close range, all "farmers, workers, villagers, aged 12-74, men, women, children."

Serbian and Belorussian forensic people investigated, but were suspect, so the European Union authorized a forensic team from Finland, headed by Helena Ranta, a dental pathologist, to investigate. The Finnish report was not made public.

Ranta gave a press conference at which she was vague, admitting there was no evidence of mutilation or torture, and that Yugoslav authorities had co-operated. But she also called the killings "a crime against humanity," widely interpreted to mean Racak was indeed a cold-blooded massacre.

It has since turned out, through subsequent investigations by German, French and American correspondents and by human rights and peace groups, including the anti-war International Action Centre and the Liberty Foundation, that the Racak massacre seems an enormous, albeit effective, hoax perpetrated by the Kosovo Liberation Army to persuade the U.S. and NATO to attack the Serbs. The goal was independence for Kosovo, possibly leading to the dream of a Greater Albania.

We now have a far better idea of what really happened at Racak - a pre-crisis town of 2,000 and a stronghold of KLA agitation. By January, 1999, most of its population had fled to a nearby town, Stimlje, leaving perhaps 400 people behind. When four Serbian policemen were ambushed and murdered in two separate incidents in a week, Serb security forces surrounded Racak and attacked. The Serbs tipped off foreign journalists who came to see. Fighting was savage and brief, not only in town but in the countryside.

Journalists found Racak had few people actually living there.

Some 20 bodies were counted. Serbs and journalists left at dusk. The next day, Jan. 16, the KLA was again in control.

During the night, it seems that all the KLA killed fighting in the area - 45 of them - were dumped in a gully at Racak and journalists and the OSCE investigators invited to see what was described as the "massacre" of unarmed civilians.

Military insignia and/or badges had been removed from clothing, military gear replaced by civilian clothing. No weapons were in sight. The hoax was on. William Walker was first on the scene and believed what he saw and was told. The international press relayed his outrage to the world.

Forensic evidence showed - as the Finnish team has since confirmed - that most of the 45 Racak dead had been shot at long range, not execution-style. Corpses tested positive with residue of gunpowder on their hands, indicating they had been firing weapons. No ammunition or shell casings were found near the bodies, where they had supposedly been massacred, nor were there pools of blood.

BODIES MOVED

Pathologists also found the 45 dead men had all been shot in different parts of the body, from different directions, indicating a battle somewhere else, the dead dumped together for effect.

Until recently, no one was interested in the truth. "Whether or not it's a massacre, nobody wants to know any more," wrote Austria's Die Welt newspaper. Autopsy findings were delayed while the thirst for war echoed in the halls of allied power.

The German newspaper Berliner Zeitung got access to the Finnish forensic findings, and sent a team of reporters to investigate and concluded: "In all probability, there was no Racak massacre at all ... "

French journalist Renaud Girard of Le Figaro was in Racak and was puzzled that reports failed to mention it was a "fortified village with a lot of trenches" - a KLA stronghold. Although he wrote an initial massacre story, he later had doubts: "I felt something was wrong."

Christophe Chatelet of Le Monde was in Racak the day of the Serb attack, and found one dead and four wounded when he left at dusk. The next day the KLA showed bodies from a massacre that hadn't been there before. "I can't solve that mystery," he said. (At the time, KLA commander-in-chief Hashim Thaci told the BBC: "We had a key unit in the region and had a fierce fight. Regrettably, we had many casualties, but so did the Serbs.")

Further investigation shows that two TV journalists for Associated Press and two teams of OSCE observers also saw the fight for Racak from a hill, entered when Serb security forces did and left when they left. The AP crew filmed a deserted village. It was overnight that the KLA returned and gathered their dead from the fighting. Next day, Walker told the world

how adults and children had been "executed," some as they tried to flee. CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour, wife of U.S. State Department spokesman James Rubin, showed little skepticism in reporting on the "massacre of civilians."

CHECK THE NET

(For those who want to check further, enter "Racak massacre" on Google or Yahoo on the Internet and see what you get.)

It changes nothing, but Racak should make people wary of government propaganda about areas where they have little knowledge, but strong feelings. Remember the emotions generated about "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo?

At the end of World War II, the population of Kosovo was 50-50 Serb and Albanian. By 1999 it was 90% Albanian. Today, it's close to 96%. Over 50 years, who's been "ethnically cleansed"? Today, Albanians in Macedonia are using arguments similar to those used against Serbs in Kosovo - prejudice, being frozen from jobs, discriminated against. Rarely mentioned are maps produced in Albania that show not only Kosovo, but parts of Macedonia and Montenegro as part of "Greater Albania."

It doesn't take an Einstein to realize that the U.S., NATO and western media have been conned and manipulated into supporting an aggressive exercise in nation-building that is not likely to be resolved peaceably. NATO's beleaguered soldiers are innocents caught in a Balkan quagmire, thanks to a blundering, myopic, vainglorious political leader.