

NATO and the Kosovo War. The 1999 Military Intervention from a Comparative Perspective

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The 1999 NATO Intervention from a Comparative Perspective: An Introduction

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Abstract: The special issue revisits the NATO intervention in the 1998–1999 Kosovo War by bringing together comparative perspectives from the war-affected states of the former Yugoslavia, on the one hand, and countries that supported or opposed NATO, on the other. The authors in this special issue look at the media-tization of the NATO intervention and its ambivalent legacies in and beyond the Yugoslav region. They provide insights into contested processes of mobilization for or against a military intervention in the Kosovo War, focusing on the case studies of Greece, Germany, and China. Moreover, they analyze the political legacies and mnemonic practices in the aftermath of this military intervention by highlighting the opposing narratives of memory politics in Kosovo and Serbia.

Keywords: NATO, intervention, Yugoslavia, memory, Kosovo

As we are writing this introduction, the world is debating how to stop the war in Ukraine. For many scholars who study the history of the Yugoslav wars or originate from the region, the images of a war in a neighbouring European country represent a terrifying case of *déjà-vu*. It has been just 30 years since the wars in former Yugoslavia started in Slovenia, only to move on to far more horrific conflict in Croatia and Bosnia. Little more than 20 years ago in 1998/99, bombs fell on Europe and hundreds of thousands of people fled their homes in Kosovo. The question of a global response to prevent human rights crimes such as those committed in besieged Sarajevo or in Srebrenica arose then just as it has today in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

By the time NATO launched its military intervention “Operation Allied Force” on 24 March 1999, the region had already experienced a decade of violent conflict

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in the former Yugoslavia as well as a previous intervention in Bosnia in 1995. Kosovo as a myth of Serbian nationalism, on the one hand, and as a battleground for opposing nationalist and territorial interests, on the other, had played a key role even before the beginning of the Yugoslav wars of succession (Bieber and Daskalovski 2003; Ejduš and Subotić 2014; Čolović 2016; Grandits, Pichler, and Fotiadis 2021). Although the conflict between the majority Albanian population of Kosovo and the Serbian government had been escalating since the early 1980s, it was not until the end of the 1990s that it turned into a war. With the assassination of one of the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, KLA), Adem Jashari, on 7 March 1998, the fighting between the KLA and the Serb forces intensified to such an extent that by the summer of 1998 already over 300,000 Kosovo Albanian civilians were fleeing ethnic “cleansing” and 2046 citizens had been killed in Kosovo, among them 1705 Albanians (Humanitarian Law Center 2011).

In the light of the preceding debate on the powerlessness of UN soldiers to prevent genocide in Srebrenica in July 1995, an international Kosovo task force led by the Austrian Wolfgang Petritsch was quickly established to help negotiate peace (Petritsch, Kaser, and Pichler 1999). After the failure of peace talks and the multiple violations of ceasefire agreements, NATO launched its intervention on 24 March 1999, targeting military objectives all over the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) until the Kumanovo peace treaty and the withdrawal of Serbian troops from Kosovo on 9 June 1999. Although the aim was to destroy military infrastructure in order to end the war, this infrastructure was often located close to civilian targets, or the definition of a military target was entirely questionable, as in the case of the Serbian news channel *Radio Televizija Srbija* (RTS). The use of cluster and uranium munitions in the NATO attacks came under enormous international criticism and ultimately led to the establishment of a Committee to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign Against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which evaluated five incidents alleged to have violated international humanitarian law—the attacks on a train passing Grdelica bridge, on a refugee convoy near Djakovica/Gjakova, on RTS, on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and on the village of Koriša/Korishë. In its final report to the prosecutor, issued on 13 June 2000, the Committee concluded that “if one accepts the figures in this compilation of approximately 495 civilians killed and 820 civilians wounded in documented instances, there is simply no evidence of the necessary crime base for charges of genocide or crimes against humanity” and thus no investigations need to be commenced (Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign 2000). This verdict was not only criticized for using unbalanced evidence but also for its controversial interpretation of legal concepts (Benvenuti 2001).

Carried out without a mandate from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the 78-day attack marked a paradigmatic shift in international politics. At the heart of the debate at the time was the question of whether it was legitimate to cause harm in order to prevent greater suffering: “We act to protect thousands of innocent people [...], we act to prevent a wider war” (Presidential Speeches – Bill Clinton Presidency, 24 March 1999: Statement on Kosovo). In the words of former US president Bill Clinton and other NATO leaders involved in the campaign, the bombing was justified as a “humanitarian intervention” and hence as an act to save people’s lives, even if this violated the principle of national sovereignty.

Thus, the term “humanitarian intervention” is critical for deciding the character of NATO’s intervention in Kosovo. It refers to the use of military force to “end massacre, atrocity, and extermination or to prevent the repetition of such events”, while protecting civilians under threat (Rodogno 2012, 2). It contradicts the principle of state sovereignty and non-intervention and therefore only applies when the state in question is unwilling or unable to prevent such mass atrocities. The dilemma of respecting state sovereignty, on the one hand, and the protection of universal human rights, on the other, did not, however, only emerge on the brink of the twenty-first century (Klose 2019, 15). While, in the public sphere, increased attention was already being paid to the suffering of other peoples in the eighteenth century, the concept and practice of humanitarian interventionism developed as a new form of international cooperation between the great powers throughout the nineteenth century (Bass 2008; Rodogno 2012; Klose 2019) and has continued to develop ever since.

From the 1970s onwards, what was called “new humanitarianism” developed with leaders such as French politician, activist, and founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) Bernard Kouchner, who championed the right to intervene on moral grounds (Chandler 2001) by rejecting the neutrality and impartiality of traditional organizations like the Red Cross. Instead, Kouchner and others demanded that military intervention stop atrocities and mass violations of human rights (Evans 2009; Fassin 2012). The claim that NATO’s “humanitarian intervention” in Kosovo was pioneering therefore needs to be considered in the framework of similar practices guiding interventionism in the nineteenth as well as throughout the twentieth century (Hehir 2008; Castan Pinos 2019; Gromes 2019; Hehir 2012; The PRIF Dataset on Humanitarian Military Interventions since 1945). Here it must be kept in mind that the attribute “humanitarian” is neither self-explanatory nor uncontested, as it has always meant “different things to different groups of people” (Rodogno 2016, 19). Nevertheless, the 1999 NATO intervention was an important factor in the incorporation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle into international law in 2005 and has therefore been extensively debated from a political and international law perspective. What remains underexposed in

these debates, however, is a comparative perspective on its ambivalent legacies in and beyond the Yugoslav region.

In addition, the Kosovo intervention was not the first time that NATO military force had been employed during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Already in summer 1992, media reports about an ongoing genocide in northwestern Bosnia were followed by public demands for military intervention (Gutman 1993). Instead, the UNSC established a commission to investigate the atrocities, which led to the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1993. The process of mobilizing support for military intervention in Bosnia was long and contested, competing with alternative discourses and political calculations (Hansen 2006).

It was only after the genocide in Srebrenica in July 1995 that NATO staged a military intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina, raising the question of a belated international response to or even a complicity in the crime (Abe 2019; Delpla et al. 2012; Gibbs 2009; Power 2010). In contrast, the prompt mobilization for a military intervention by NATO countries as a reaction to the atrocities in Kosovo was praised by many advocates as a triumph of a worldwide human rights movement and as a “humanitarian milestone” (Gromes 2019, 1; Ignatieff 2001). The moral ground for the intervention in Kosovo was captured by Václav Havel, then president of the Czech Republic, who addressed the Canadian parliament with the following words: “If one can say of any war that it is ethical, or that it is being waged for ethical reasons, then it is true of this war” (Senate of Canada, 29 April 1999). For Havel, the lack of economic and political interests of the NATO countries in the situation in Kosovo were the ultimate confirmation of the humanitarian character of the military intervention conducted with the aim of halting the atrocities in Kosovo.

David Gibbs challenged the NATO countries’ alleged lack of interests, arguing that the intervention was based on traditional considerations of national interests in both economic and geostrategic terms (Gibbs 2009, 31). Another point of criticism was the selectivity and the double standards of the intervening parties when it came to reacting to a developing humanitarian crisis (Chomsky 1999; Fisk 1999). This concerns both the question of moral responsibility for other human rights crimes committed at the same time—such as against the Kurds in Turkey or against the Chechens in Russia, both in 1999—and the more general question of using weapons to enforce peace. The altogether overwhelming support of the NATO states (Buckley and Cummings 2001) and of “Western” intellectuals for the Kosovo intervention was criticized by Edward Said as a “treason of intellectuals” (Said 2000, 341). This criticism was reflected not least in the Serbian discourse (Blagojević 2003), with intellectuals pointing out that the whole of Serbian society was against the bombing, but for very different reasons (Satjukow 2020, 167). The

opposition critical of Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, in particular, questioned the intervention, claiming it was an immediate setback for democracy, whose impact continues to be felt to this day (Dragović-Soso 2013; Satjukow 2019). In Kosovo, the intervention is viewed quite differently: From the Kosovo Albanian perspective, a positive reading of the 1999 NATO bombing dominated the public discourse at the time (Buckley 2000), as it does today (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Ströhle 2010), emphasizing NATO's role in supporting Kosovo on its way to independence. The tribute paid to the military alliance is not least reflected in Kosovo's appreciation of Bill Clinton, with, for example, the dedication of a monument and the naming of a street after the former US president.

At the heart of the controversial debates briefly outlined here is the question of the legitimacy of NATO's intervention in the Kosovo War, and thus whether it can be considered "successful" in terms of the criterion of humanitarian reasons to "prevent a wider war" (Presidential Speeches – Bill Clinton Presidency, 24 March 1999: Statement on Kosovo) and to "protect civilians under threat" (Rodogno 2012, 2). As we do not know how the war would have developed without NATO's intervention, we can only consider what happened when the intervention started: With the withdrawal of international organizations from Kosovo and the FRY prior to the beginning of the air raids, the civilians were left with no protection from large-scale ethnic "cleansing". The FRY reacted to the bombing with the declaration of war on 25 March, mobilizing the Yugoslav army for the defence of Yugoslavia against NATO (Odluka Vlade Republike Srbija, 25 March 1999). At the same time, Serbian paramilitary troops who had already been active in the Bosnian War, such as Arkan's "tigers", were calling for the "defence of Kosovo" (Flottau 1999). As a result of these intertwined war scenarios, 758 Yugoslav citizens were killed by NATO, about 7000 Albanian civilians were murdered by the Yugoslav army and Serbian paramilitary troops, and more than 800,000 people fled Kosovo (Human Rights Watch 2000; Humanitarian Law Center 2011). There was further damage to the environment and infrastructure with long-term consequences, such as health impacts from the use of depleted uranium munitions and the destruction of chemical plants, both caused by NATO (Amnesty International 2000; Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign 2000).

"Operation Allied Force" ended on 9 June 1999 when Serbia withdrew all its troops from Kosovo following the Kumanovo peace agreement. Nevertheless, neither the intervention nor the conflict was over with the adoption of UN Resolution 1244, establishing a United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), and the arrival of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) in June 1999. Acts of revenge from Albanians against Kosovo Serbs and a mass exodus of Serbs from Kosovo to Serbia followed in the summer of 1999 (Human Rights Watch 1999). To this day, KFOR remains on the ground for protection. Kosovo unilaterally

declared independence in February 2008 and has in the meantime been recognized by 97 of the 193 United Nations member states. Bilateral negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia on the future status of Kosovo, mediated by the EU, are still ongoing. Especially in the light of the current events in Ukraine, as Florian Bieber points out in his editorial to this special issue, it is important to bear in mind the significance of the Kosovo War and the contested legacy of NATO's intervention, with its long-term consequences for and beyond the Yugoslav region.

The articles in this special issue were presented during the workshop “20 Years after the NATO Intervention in Yugoslavia: Local, Regional and Global Aspects of ‘Humanitarian interventions’”, held at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig in May 2019. The authors bring a variety of perspectives to engage with the multiple strategies employed to deal with the intervention and its consequences—from the opposing interpretations of the NATO intervention in Kosovo and Serbia (Jelena Jovanović, Werner Distler, Kathleen Zeidler, and Elisa Satjukow) and the ambivalent effects in neighbouring Greece (Ruža Fotiadis) to the political threshold moment for NATO member Germany (Robing Hering and Bernhard Stahl) and the establishment of a narrative of “shared victimhood” by intervention opponent China (Yuguang Zhou). The articles are thus linked to two major issues in the research on the NATO intervention in the Kosovo war—mediatization and memory politics.

The Mediatization of the 1999 NATO Intervention

Humanitarian interventions critically rely on the media portrayal of mass atrocities, hence representing what Hoskins and O’Loughlin call the “mediatization of war”, that is the inability to detach the effects of media from the warfare itself. Media “are becoming part of the practices of warfare to the point that the conduct of war cannot be understood unless one carefully accounts for the role of media in it” (Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010, 6).

The Yugoslav wars in general and the Kosovo intervention in particular were seen as a crucial juncture for several scholarly debates about the nexus between media and politics, identifying a new role for the global media and also for global solidarities. The relationship between the mass media and the portrayal of atrocities and compassion for the suffering of others was seen as an important factor in political mobilization (Boltanski 1999; Sontag 2004; Zelizer 2010).

The Swedish media scholar Birgitta Höijer argued that the emerging “global discourses of compassion” in the Kosovo War were “situated at the intersection between politics, humanitarian organizations, the media and the audience/citizens” (Höijer 2004, 514). Thus, on the one hand, the successful mobilization of

the public behind military intervention in the Kosovo War has often been quoted as an exemplary case of the “CNN effect” (Bahador 2007; Ignatieff 2001; Robinson 2005). On the other, it has been contrasted with cases of “compassion fatigue” during the war in Bosnia (Moeller 1999, 260).

At the same time, critics pointed out the manipulation and the propagandistic nature of media reporting on all sides of the war (Blagojević 2003; Wolfgram 2008), confirming the congruences between the dominant media discourses and foreign policy among the NATO states (Western 2005) as well as among non-NATO countries like Russia and China (Mendeloff 2008; Wang 2012). Three studies in this special issue address the complex relations between media discourses, public support for victims of human rights abuses, and state policies, revealing a whole variety of responses and alliances which emerged around the NATO intervention.

Yuguang Zhou focuses on the media discourse on the NATO intervention in the most important Chinese newspaper and official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, the *People’s Daily*. His analysis provides insights into the construction of distant suffering, which aligned with the narrative of illegal aggression against a sovereign country that was dominant in the Serbian media. Zhou shows that the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on 7 May 1999 and especially the killing of three Chinese journalists, explained by NATO officials as an unfortunate accident, played into a dominant nationalist narrative of a century of humiliation in China (Wang 2012). The subsequent waves of protest against the intervention brought forth the perception of shared victimhood between Serbia and China. Emerging from this critical moment, the two countries have continued to foster close relations to this day.

Ruža Fotiadis analyzes the discourse on Greek–Serbian relations in the Greek and Serbian media. Analogous to Zhou, she shows that the NATO bombing was a decisive moment in a long-established narrative of Orthodox brotherhood, which had been challenged by Greece’s fulfilment of its obligations to NATO, on the one hand, and strong public condemnation of the intervention, on the other. The dynamics between perceived “friends” and “enemies” in this conflict were complex, revealing long-lasting or newly emerging antagonisms and solidarities. By showing how historical and cultural references, personal relations, and alliances among different actors were mobilized through the media, Fotiadis points to the central meaning of the NATO intervention in the ambivalent relationship between Greece and Serbia.

Robin Hering and *Bernhard Stahl* focus in their article on the mediatization of the war in the public discourses of a NATO member state, Germany. With its participation in the military intervention in FRY, Germany ended half a century of non-interventionist foreign policy. This constituted a severe moment of crisis, followed by media outrage and public protests, almost culminating in the collapse

of the governing coalition of the German social democrats and the Greens. Hering and Stahl compare media accounts, parliamentary debates, as well as debates within the Catholic and Protestant churches regarding different wars and humanitarian crises worldwide since 1990. With their broad quantitative dataset, they show that the dominant German policy model when it comes to mass atrocities has been to keep silent about them, and that the Kosovo case was thus a significant outlier.

Turning towards the political consequences and media representations in the Yugoslav region, *Werner Distler* investigates different strategies in using a language of securitization, adopted by political actors in Kosovo and Serbia, as well as internationally. Drawing on critical securitization theory, he provides a comparative analysis of speech acts by politicians on different occasions, such as commemorations. He shows how the threat or promise of external intervention has been deeply inscribed in the process of state-building in the region. Distler's contribution thus serves as a bridge to the second focus of the special issue, in which authors illustrate how the intervention and its memory have been mediated as a part of memory politics.

Memory Politics Concerning the 1999 NATO Intervention

The long-lasting and contested legacies of the 1999 NATO intervention are reflected in the memory politics of Kosovo and Serbia. Orli Fridman and Kristina Rácz started the process of examining “the receiving end” of this military intervention in a previous thematic issue of this journal (Fridman and Rácz 2016). Approaching the topic using the theoretical framework of social memory studies, they elucidated the construction of memory politics in Serbia, in official commemorations and hegemonic narratives, on the one hand, and in fragmented, alternative memory communities and their bottom-up mnemonic activism, on the other. Kosovo and Serbia remain a focus of our special issue, this time through a comparative perspective on their respective mnemonic politics. In Serbia, the NATO bombing is remembered as an illegal aggression against a sovereign state, while silencing any discussion of Serbian war crimes against Kosovo Albanians. In Kosovo, the bombings largely met with approval and have gone hand in hand with the mnemonic heroization of the KLA (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006). As in other postwar societies, in Kosovo and Serbia, remembrance remains “ethnically exclusive and mutually contested” (Baliqi 2018, 11), leaving little space for alternative memorialization and oppositional voices (Visoka 2016). The

contributions to our special issue broaden our understanding of memory construction on the receiving end of the intervention.

Elisa Satjukow focuses on how the date of 24 March was established by the Milošević regime as the anniversary of the NATO bombing. Revisiting the gradual change in Serbian memory politics from 1999 until today, she defines three phases: First, the “Making of 24 March” (1999–2000) by Slobodan Milošević launched a hegemonic narrative of Serbian martyrdom; second, a “Long Period of Ambiguity” (2001–2014), which started with the newly elected democratic government after the overthrow of Milošević, has seen a policy of reconciliation being pursued without, however, questioning the unilateral memory in relation to the war in Kosovo; and third, the “Return of 24 March” with Aleksandar Vučić’s rise to power, reviving the 1999 NATO intervention as a collective trauma discourse.

Kathleen Zeidler analyzes the battle for recognition and acknowledgment of marginalized voices within the Kosovo Albanian memory discourse. Focusing on practices of silencing survivors of sexual violence in Kosovo, she follows different domestic and international actors, such as human rights organizations, to shed light on how narratives about sexual violence during the Kosovo War and the NATO intervention have evolved. She argues that the protests against the exclusion of victims of sexual violence from a new law adopted in 2012, which defined what constitutes a “legitimate” victim of the war, marked an important shift in memory politics. However, despite the increasingly successful efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other societal actors to make the crime of sexual violence visible in the public discourse, survivors have still not been fully recognized, while the post-interventionist, male-dominated heroic narrative about the Kosovo War persists.

Despite the similarities in the power relations between hegemonic and marginalized memory narratives, the dynamics between what is remembered and what is forgotten differ considerably in Kosovo and Serbia, as *Jelena Jovanović* points out. In her article, she focuses on the Battle of Košare/Koshare, fought between the FR Yugoslavia and the KLA (supported by NATO and the Albanian army) between 9 April and 10 June 1999 in the Albanian Alps near the Yugoslav–Albanian border. In Kosovo, this battle was transformed into a *lieu de memoire* right after the end of the war, whereas in Serbia it remained silenced for almost a decade. Only after the shift in memory politics from 2015, when Aleksandar Vučić came to power, has it occupied a central role in state memory politics. A monument was erected to the Košare soldiers, and the event entered the history books. Thus, as Jovanović shows, totally opposing memories of the same event are narrated in Kosovo and Serbia.

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