Body Count: War in Kosovo Was Cruel, Bitter, Savage; Genocide It Wasn't
By Daniel Pearl

TREPCA, Yugoslavia -- When the blanket-covered trucks rolled toward the mining complex near this northern Kosovo town in April, Bexhet Kurti didn't give them much thought. The Yugoslav army had a military base there, after all.

It was in July, after the fighting ended and Mr. Kurti returned to battle-scarred Trepca, that the young house painter started hearing the whispers. "Did you hear there are 700 bodies in the mine?" asked one acquaintance in the hilltop cafe above the mine-shaft tower. "No, not in the mine, but in the furnace" on the other side of the mountain, said another.

By late summer, stories about a Nazi-like body-disposal facility were so widespread that investigators sent a three-man French Gendarmerie team spelunking half a mile down the mine to search for bodies. They found none. Another team analyzed ashes in the furnace. They found no teeth or other signs of burnt bodies.

In Kosovo last spring, Yugoslav forces did heinous things. They expelled hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians, burning houses and committing summary executions. It may well be enough to justify the North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing campaign and the war crimes indictment of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

But other allegations -- indiscriminate mass murder, rape camps, crematoriums, mutilation of the dead -- haven't been borne out in the six months since NATO troops entered Kosovo. Ethnic-Albanian militants, humanitarian organizations, NATO and the news media fed off each other to give genocide rumors credibility. Now, a different picture is emerging.

Selective Terror

"Rwanda was a true genocide. Kosovo was ethnic cleansing light," says Emilio Perez Pujol, a Spanish pathologist who exhumed bodies after both conflicts. In his sector of western Kosovo, he says, the United Nations told him to expect as many as 2,000 victims. His team found 187 corpses, none of which showed evidence to confirm local accounts of mutilations.

Some human-rights researchers now say that most killings and burnings occurred in areas where the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army had been active, or in urban streets that backed into rural areas where KLA fighters could infiltrate. They say the Serbs were trying to clear out areas of KLA support, using selective terror, robberies and sporadic killings.

"We believed NATO was using the KLA as its invasion force," says retired Gen. Radovan Radinovic, a former chief strategist for the Yugoslav Army who advised military planners during the war with NATO. Gen. Radinovic says individuals may have committed abuses, while killing "thousands" of KLA guerrillas. (A successor organization to the KLA says it lost 2,400 dead over two years.)
Official Estimates

British and American officials still maintain that 10,000 or more ethnic-Albanian civilians died at Serb hands during the fighting in Kosovo. The U.N.'s International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has accused Serbs of covering up war crimes by moving bodies. It has begun its own military analysis of the Serb offensive.

But the number of bodies discovered so far is much lower -- 2,108 as of November, and not all of them necessarily war-crimes victims. While more than 300 reported grave sites remain to be investigated, the tribunal has checked the largest reported sites first, and found most to contain no more than five bodies, suggesting intimate acts of barbarity rather than mass murder.

The KLA helped form the West's wartime image of Kosovo. International human-rights groups say officials of the guerrilla force served on the Kosovo-based Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms, whose activists were often the first to interview refugees arriving in Macedonia. Journalists later cited the council's missing-persons list to support theories about how many people died in Kosovo, and the State Department this month echoed the council's recent estimate of 10,000 missing. But the number has to be taken on faith: Western investigators say the council won't share its list of missing persons.

Reports From the Field

Even more closely connected to the KLA was Radio Free Kosova, set up in January as outsiders were cut off from Kosovo hot spots. A former correspondent for the radio, Qemail Aliu, says he and five other journalists holed up with the KLA in the central Kosovo mountains, using satellite phones to take reports from KLA regional commanders. The radio broadcasts were just strong enough to reach the provincial capital, Pristina, where a correspondent translated the reports into English for the KLA's Kosova Press Internet site.

When the guerrilla encampment had electricity, Mr. Aliu watched NATO briefings on TV. "Many times we saw Jamie Shea talking about the number of people killed, and many times they were the numbers from Kosova Press," he says.

NATO says Mr. Shea, its spokesman, didn't get information directly from Kosova Press. But officials acknowledge that NATO's member governments had little independent information about what was happening on the ground. "We were all hamstrung," a NATO official says. As the war dragged on, he says, NATO saw a fatigued press corps drifting toward the contrarian story: civilians killed by NATO's bombs. NATO stepped up its claims about Serb "killing fields."

Human-rights groups fed the information chain directly. As human-rights researchers assembled in neighboring Macedonia and Albania to interview refugees, State Department officials handed them proposed survey forms, trying to get everybody to ask standard questions
about violence to aid war-crimes cases. Among the groups cooperating was Physicians for Human Rights, which had long been calling for a ground force to protect ethnic Albanians.

Kosovo was a "genocide to come," warned Holly Burkhalter, Washington director of Physicians for Human Rights, in a National Public Radio commentary in April. "I was wrong," she says now. "But if you wait until it's proved to you six ways to Sunday, you haven't prevented it, have you?"

Human-rights groups at least used some scientific rigor, asking refugees what they personally saw. The news media's standards were more mixed. Many journalists had experience in Bosnia, where the mass slaughter of an estimated 7,000 men from the "safe area" at Srebrenica in 1995 was a warning not to be too skeptical about reports of Serb atrocities. Bosnia yielded three Pulitzer Prizes for reporters who proved atrocities. When Kosovo was finally opened to the foreign press in June, "fixers" cruising through the lobby of Pristina's Grand Hotel offered to take correspondents to burial sites.

Incident at Ljubenic

An example of the mass-grave obsession is Ljubenic, a poor western-Kosovo village of 200-odd homes below the Cursed Mountains, which KLA fighters had used as a supply route. On the morning of April 1, Serb forces surrounded the town, villagers say, and three heavily armed militiamen walked up the village's main dirt road. They say the Serbs corralled village men at a crossroads, questioning them about weapons and the KLA. Two villagers who spoke up were shot. One of the Serbs then said, "The KLA killed my brother," and the Serbs started mowing down the men with machine guns, survivors say.

Eleven wounded men later staggered away in two groups, says survivor Sadik Jahmurataj, who adds that his group found a KLA hospital in the hills a day later. When a KLA commander asked how many were killed, "the others were in a panic and said '150 to 200.' I said, 'No, that can't be. One hundred at the most.'"

Over the next weeks, Mr. Jahmurataj and others told their stories to investigators from several human-rights groups. And after the war, returning villagers, who found 12 bodies scattered around Ljubenic, told Italian peacekeeping troops that 350 people were still missing from Ljubenic and the surrounding hamlets. One villager told of seeing worms coming from the ground in a field where the grass was unusually short.

On July 9, after getting an "operations report" from the Italians, Dutch Army Maj. Jan Joosten mentioned during a regular press briefing in Pristina that a suspected grave had been found, and there could be as many as 350 bodies. He says journalists started packing their bags for Ljubenic before he even finished. "Biggest grave site holds 350 victims," London's Independent newspaper proclaimed the next day. Concern Worldwide, a charity working in Ljubenic, claimed that three-fourths of families lost their main wage-earner.
In fact, investigators found no bodies in the field. It now appears that the number killed in Ljubenic was about 65. That is how many names are listed in KLA-printed memorial posters.

Plea for Remembrance

Mr. Jahmurataj, sitting on the lawn beside the Concern Worldwide tent, says villagers who weren't there distorted the story. When a U.N. van pulls up, Mr. Jahmurataj trots over to greet Alistair Graham, a war-crimes-tribunal official who had interviewed him in an Albanian refugee camp. Mr. Graham is just dropping off candy for children, but Mr. Jahmurataj pleads with him to continue the investigation.

"If other people exaggerated, that's bad," Mr. Jahmurataj says. "But everything I told you was exactly true." Mr. Graham says the tribunal will return in the spring.

Kosovo would be easier to investigate if it had the huge killing fields some investigators were led to expect. Instead, the pattern is of scattered killings. Many cases defy simple explanation: two blanket-covered bodies pulled out of a farmer's yard in a village where nobody was missing; a body that a child discovered by chance along a river; a semiclad torture victim.

Human-rights groups didn’t give so much attention to the small killings. From Macedonia, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, Benjamin Ward, wrote a report about the slaying of two youths during a Serb-ordered exodus from the southeast-Kosovo village of Malisevo. Townspeople say Serb gunmen forced 20 or so young men to lie face-down in a field, fired a machine gun inches from their heads demanding information about KLA fighters, and killed two teenagers who trotted up the road from a nearby village. But Mr. Ward’s report never left his computer; he says "it wasn't compelling" when reports of bigger massacres arrived.

Serbs' Own Inquiries

Meanwhile, the Yugoslav government in Belgrade is pursuing its own investigations and war-crimes trials, which skeptics regard as either an effort to deflect blame from President Milosevic or a warning to disaffected Serbian reservists to stay in line lest they be accused.

In one trial, Serbian police reservist Boban Petkovic is accused of murdering four ethnic Albanians in the western-Kosovo village of Rija on May 9, and policeman Djordje Simic is charged as an accomplice. The prosecution's documents charge that Mr. Petkovic, during a battle with the KLA, saw an ethnic Albanian running toward the forest and being grabbed by a Yugoslav soldier.

"Petkovic, believing the man to be a captured terrorist, approached the prisoner, took a sidearm from Mr. Simic, and shot the man in the head," the documents charge. They say Mr. Petkovic later heard voices from a house, and, "believing they were terrorists, Petkovic took his machine gun and killed all three people inside." The prosecution says the victims were "obviously civilians."
Mr. Petkovic's defense is that he was in battle, and that the chronic stress from being under attack by KLA terrorists affected his judgment. Mr. Simic says his gun was used without his permission.

The Mine-Shaft Story

Though brutal, these incidents don't have the impact of accounts of Serbs rounding up Albanian men and dumping their corpses down a mine shaft. The world may owe that image to Halit Berani, head of a branch of the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms in the city of Mitrovica. Mr. Berani is a former actor with a Karl Marx beard who summarizes Serb war crimes by showing a photo of a baby with a smashed skull.

Mr. Berani spent the war moving from village to village with his manual typewriter, calling in reports to foreign radio services and diplomats with his daily allotment of three minutes on a KLA satellite phone. He says he heard from villagers near Trepca that trucks were rolling in full and rolling out empty, and that a strange smell was coming from the mine complex. He phoned in a report in early April suggesting that the mines had become a body-disposal site, and Deutsche Welle, a Germany-based radio service, carried the report in Albanian.

The story spread. In June, Kosova Press's Internet site quoted a U.S. embassy official in Athens as saying there are "witnesses and still photos" of trucks carrying bodies. Western journalists phoned the embassy, but a spokeswoman said she couldn't find the supposed source.

London's Observer ran a similar story, citing a KLA commander, a girl who got a call from an elderly resident, and a Kosovar who heard the story from refugees. A Pentagon spokesman, quizzed about Trepca at the time, said, "There have been several reports throughout the last 10 weeks of bodies being burned in former industrial sites in Kosovo." Some commentators stated the theory as fact.

When French troops took over the mines, they reported to the tribunal that they had found well-scrubbed vats and piles of clothing. Tribunal investigators weren't impressed: Clothes are found everywhere in trash-strewn Kosovo, and why would the Serbs clean vats but not burn clothes? After the fruitless search, "we don't see any need to do further investigation at this point," a tribunal official says.

Mr. Berani doesn't completely stand by his story. "I told everybody it was supposition, it was not confirmed information," he says. But he adds, "For the Serbs, everything is possible."

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