



The response of the UN and the international community

Despite the outrage caused by news of the massacre, the events at Račak were, by the standards of recent conflicts, relatively insignificant. Compared to the massacre at My Lai in Vietnam in 1968, where more than 500 Vietnamese were killed, and what happened at Babi Yar in 1941, where nearly 34,000 died in a day, the killings at Račak were minor. Judged against what happened in Rwanda, it would hardly be noted. However, the Račak massacre began a process that led to Europe's biggest air campaign since the Second World War. It would also lead to threats of invasion that, in the end, brought about the downfall of Milošević and the end of Serbian rule in Kosovo.

The Rambouillet peace talks, February 1998

Pressure from many sources was brought to bear on the two sides to meet and talk in the days following Račak. In the same week, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright expressed her frustration with the lack of control the international community had over events in the Balkans.

We're just gerbils running on a wheel.

— Madeleine Albright, 1999

Meanwhile, the USA itself was gripped by the ongoing Lewinsky scandal in the White House, and articles of impeachment were served against President Clinton. In the Balkans, the State Department saw the need to promote regional stability and to preserve their own, and NATO's, credibility. Someone had to act.

Before the end of the month, Western leaders assembling in London demanded that representatives from Serbia and the Kosovar Albanians meet to discuss their issues. At the beginning of February, leaders from the two sides, together with representatives from the USA, France, Britain, Germany, Italy and Russia, met in the French château of Rambouillet on the edge of Paris. Outside the château, supporters of the Kosovar Albanians chanted slogans in support of the KLA and independence, which was not even on the table for discussion.



▲ The Château de Rambouillet

The reason they refused to agree to the peace package was that they were not willing to agree to the autonomy for Kosovo, or for that autonomy to be guaranteed by an international military presence.

— British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook.

Milan Milutinović, whose hardline approach alienated some of the Western leaders, represented the Serbs. The real decision-maker remained in Belgrade. The delegation of the Kosovar Albanians included Ibrahim Rugova and the elected head of the delegation, the 30-year-old Hashim Thaçi. A young radical, Thaçi was one of the founding fathers of the KLA, who himself had been declared a terrorist by the US government the year before. It was not going to be easy to persuade the two sides to agree or even to compromise.

Some critics of the whole process saw the West as looking for an excuse to deal with Serbia once and for all, and that the talks were nothing but a sham. Both sides at the meeting had concerns about the contents of the final draft of the Rambouillet Accords that was drawn up over the next three weeks. Initially, both sides refused to sign the document.

For the Serbs, this was still a domestic issue concerning a province within their own internationally recognized boundaries. What they were being asked to do through the Rambouillet Accords was to allow an international body, in this case NATO, almost complete access not only to Kosovo but to the rest of Yugoslavia, in order to see that the terms of the agreement were being met. It was tantamount to a surrender of sovereignty and the Serbs refused to sign. As well as this requirement, another key paragraph in the agreement stated that, after three years, an international conference would be convened to come up with a final settlement to the future of Kosovo.

The Kosovar representatives also had a number of issues with the final document, which did not promise a referendum on eventual independence, and would require the KLA to disarm before proceeding any further. Nevertheless, the Kosovars did not reject the document outright, and pressure was brought to bear on them to consult further with other representatives. Whereas Serbia was essentially being controlled by one man's policies, the Kosovar Albanian delegation was a much less cohesive group of people, made up of intellectuals, would-be politicians and radicals.

The representatives broke at the end of February and agreed to meet again on 15 March, following consultations with the other parties. When they returned, pressure had been put on both sides to sign the accords and, finally, the Albanians did so. The US government stated clearly that the Albanians had to sign. Behind the scenes, critics of the US government said that this pressure was brought to bear so that the Serbs could be blamed for the breakdown and moves towards military action could be undertaken. Richard Becker, head of an international action group based in New York, believed that the Rambouillet Accords were presented to Yugoslavia as an ultimatum, that there were, in fact, no negotiations at all and that it was a "take it or leave it" proposition: "*The Rambouillet Accord [document] was, in truth, a declaration of war disguised as a peace agreement*" (Becker). (For more on this, see www.globalresearch.ca/the-u-s-nato-military-intervention-in-kosovo/1666.)



▲ The Kosovar Albanians, President Elect Rugova (left) and KLA representative Hashim Thaçi sign the Rambouillet Accords, March 1999



US spokesman Richard Holbrooke visited Belgrade again early in March to warn Milošević that failure to sign the agreement would mean military action. Behind these events lay a definite burden of guilt, which was carried by a number of Western leaders, regarding what had happened in Rwanda in 1994 and in Srebrenica in 1995. On 18 March 1999, the Albanian, US and British delegations signed the Rambouillet Accords; the Serbian and Russian delegations refused to do so.

On 20 March the international monitors were pulled out of Kosovo in preparation for action. William Walker reported that as soon as they began to pull out, Yugoslav forces were waiting, ready to move into Kosovo. *“They wanted us out of the way as soon as possible”, he commented, “so they could start doing what they were going to do, and then did it”.*

On 21 March, Holbrooke once again visited Belgrade to warn of impending action. He recorded what he said to Milošević:

“If I leave here without an agreement today, bombing will start almost immediately ... and it will be swift, severe and sustained.” And I used those three words very carefully after consultations with the Pentagon. Milošević replied, “Yes, you’ll bomb us.”

— Richard Holbrooke, 1999

The talks had failed to produce a settlement of the disputes but they did provide the pretext for the next stage in the conflict. What happened next at Rambouillet was not, in the end, a peace conference with much margin for real diplomacy aimed at solving problems. Serbia would not accept a NATO force on its territory. The NATO organization, on its 50th anniversary, wanted to show that it was still relevant as an organization and could act. By acting through NATE, the Europeans and Americans bypassed the UN, and were thus also able to bypass the opposition from Russia and China. On 24 March 1999, Operation Allied Force was launched against Serbia.

Source skills

Source A

The text of the appendix for the Rambouillet Agreement.

Appendix B: “Status of Multi-National Military Implementation Force be granted freedom of movement throughout all Yugoslavia ... Article 8 of this Appendix reads: “NATO personnel shall enjoy, together with their vehicles, vessels, aircraft, and equipment, free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] including associated airspace and territorial waters. This shall include, but not be limited to, the right of bivouac, maneuver, billet, and utilization of any areas

or facilities as required for support, training, and operations.”

Source B

Response from the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, at its session on 23 March 1999.

The Serbian state delegation cannot be blamed for the failure of the talks in Rambouillet and Paris, as it had constantly been insisting on direct talks and consultations. The fault lies solely with the delegation of the separatist and terrorist movement and with all who had allowed them to behave in such a manner and sign a text which they had not wanted