

2.6 The NATO bombing campaign: Operation Allied Force

Conceptual understanding

Key concepts

- Change
- Significance
- Perspective

Key question

- How did the international community respond to the crisis in Kosovo?

The Kosovo campaign was a just and necessary war. And I believe that Blair, of whom I have many criticisms, in this case showed real determination in conducting it.

— Margaret Thatcher, 2002

If we lose this war, NATO is ended.

— Ivo Daalder, 1999

The NATO bombing campaign against Serbia lasted for 77 days and was finally brought to a conclusion on 10 June 1999. The decision to use force was controversial: NATO launched an attack against a sovereign state attempting to quell a domestic insurgency. The legitimacy of NATO's action had been questioned from the start. Bear in mind that NATO was an organization founded after the Second World War to defend Europe against aggression that was thought might come from the Soviet Union. By taking sides in a domestic dispute, NATO was acting beyond its own supposedly neutral position. It had existed for years and had never, up until the short campaigns against Bosnian Serbs in 1994–95, used its military power. There had even been a joke circulating that suggested the acronym "NATO" stood for "No Action, Talk Only". Now NATO's actions proved this wrong.

NATO was going to use its considerable firepower against a sovereign state in defence of an ethnic group, and without the approval of the UN Security Council. In the years prior to the bombing campaign, a relatively small number of around 2,000 people had been killed in the violence in Kosovo. This was hardly genocide. Nor could the number of refugees driven from their homes by the conflict be called an overwhelming human tragedy, as we had seen in Rwanda, the Congo and other parts of the world. Fewer than 250,000 people had been displaced by the conflict in Kosovo up until that time. However, when all was said and done, NATO and the international community had tried to solve the problems emerging in the Balkans. There was a firm belief, even if to some it may have been unjustified, that the actions of Milošević over the last decade had shown him to be unscrupulous in his exercise of power. Diplomatic means had been tried, coercive pressure had been applied, and none of it seemed to work. Now it was the turn of force, plain and simple.



▲ General headquarters of the Yugoslav army in Belgrade, damaged during NATO bombing

In the air campaign, which lasted 77 days, approximately 38,000 missions were flown over "enemy" territory. Of these, one third were strike missions, where specific targets were hit. Extraordinarily, by the end, only two allied aircraft failed to return and there were no combat fatalities. It was a remarkable example of a precision campaign against an enemy that had used all means at its disposal, including hiding military hardware in hospital areas and schools, and moving troops under the cover of Red Cross convoys. Operation Allied Force was easily the largest combat operation in the history of NATO and the most sustained military operation in Europe since the Second World War. It was also probably the most successful example of strategic bombing in the history of warfare. In total, 14 allied nations contributed aircraft: the USA provided the lion's share of over 700 aircraft, while the rest of the allies supplied just over 300. Of the latter, the French and Italians provided the most, while Britain was the fourth largest contributor.

I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.

— Bill Clinton, 1999

Source skills

Source A

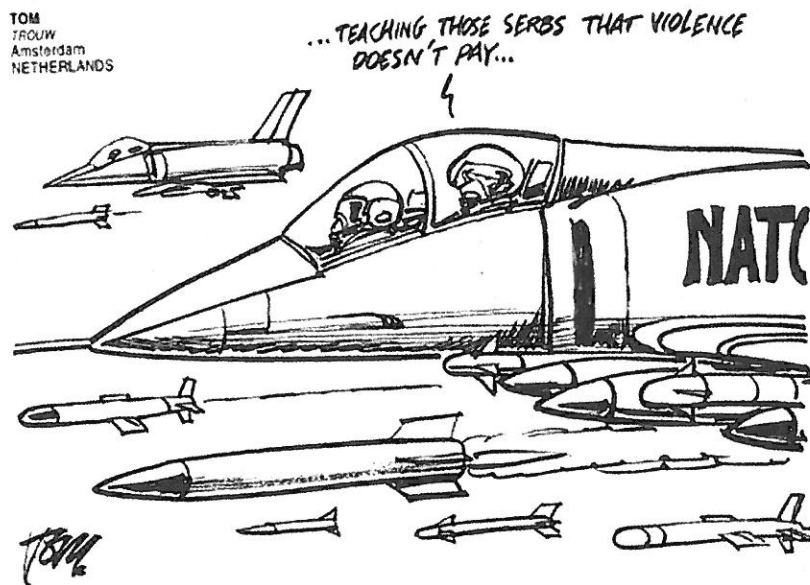
A British cartoon published in the UK newspaper, *The Times*, in 1998.





Source B

A Dutch political cartoon from 1999.



First question, part b – 2 marks

What is the message of the cartoon in Source A?

Now answer the same question with reference to Source B.

First question, part a – 3 marks

Why might the cartoon in Source A be seen as ironic? Explain your reasoning.

Now answer the same question with reference to Source B and explain your reasoning.

Initially, the Western allies thought it would be a short campaign lasting only a few days, and after which Milošević would agree to terms. In Bosnia, that is what had happened, but it soon became clear that both sides had miscalculated. In a television address to the American people, President Clinton announced that the USA would not be putting troops on the ground. Some in the military thought this was a mistake as it showed the Serbs that, if they could survive the bombing, perhaps they could exploit the potential divisions within the Western alliance. Clinton's public statement indicated that the Western allies might face domestic pressure from those opposed to the use of force. It is also possible that the Serbs thought that the Russians, led by Boris Yeltsin, would come to their aid in some form or another.

Targeting the Serbs

You go after the head of the snake, put a dagger in the heart of the adversary, and you bring to bear all the force that you have at your command.

— US General Michael C Short, 2000

The air campaign had been devised by NATO commanders to hit Serbian targets hard and fast in a devastating display of firepower; it was designed to bring about a change of heart from the Serbian leadership. Over 1,000 targets had been identified throughout Yugoslavia, which included military installations and the security forces themselves, as well as facilities, factories and state infrastructure.

Thinking skills

Should all means necessary be employed to win a war? For the combat troops or pilots involved, and for the enemy targeted, what might be the impact of having restrictions on the selection of targets or the use of firepower? Explain your reasoning.

There were political constraints in fighting this campaign: dealing with an opponent militarily had to be balanced with the political ramifications of winning the war. Essentially, this meant it was a “consensus war” that had to be fought by a large number of countries, all of which had to agree to hit specific targets. Politicians demanded the power to approve or veto the potential strike targets of the allied aircraft. General Michael C Short, who directed NATO’s air operations against Serbia in 1999, said:

There were numerous occasions where airplanes were airborne, and the senior national representative would run in to me and say, “Our parliament won’t allow us to strike that target,” or, “Our authorities will not allow your airplanes, which took off from our soil, to strike that target.”

— Michael C Short, 2000

These considerations could and did lead to some frustration and probably prolonged the campaign.

After the war, General Short became a critic of NATO’s conduct with regard to how political requirements influenced target selection and other issues.

Why did NATO have to fight in this manner?

NATO needed to:

- be able take advantage of its massive air superiority
- avoid, at least if possible, putting ground troops into the area
- be seen to be minimizing the casualties in the combat zone
- avoid direct conflict between the Yugoslav military and NATO combatants.

Belgrade is a city of Europe, and you cannot launch a military campaign without the support and the understanding of the people that support the governments who take that decision.

— NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, 1999

How the war was fought

The superior weaponry of the NATO allies could immediately be seen in the first three days following the expiry of the 24 March deadline when hundreds of targets were hit. In total, 1,000 aircraft were involved. In addition, Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from aircraft, ships and submarines played a crucial role in the air campaign. An estimated 450 missiles were launched, destroying over 50% of key headquarters and power stations. Mostly launched from the sea, these missiles achieved a 90% success rate in hitting vital targets. Each missile cost approximately US\$1 million.

The opening days of the campaign saw the destruction of Serbia’s air defences and key military targets. After that, operations focused mainly on smaller targets on the ground and in Kosovo and Montenegro. As in most military campaigns, the opinions of the military commanders fighting the war were sometimes at odds not only with the politicians and diplomats conducting the war on another level but also, to lesser but important extent, with the civilian populations involved. We have seen how the role of the media played an increasingly important part in the conduct of war in Rwanda and in recent conflicts. In Yugoslavia,



the government in Belgrade was especially concerned that the public saw the war only through the lens of the government, and Serbia quickly portrayed itself as the innocent victim of NATO aggression, trying to maintain its own territorial integrity.

The position of the UN was difficult. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan supported the intervention in principle, even though the Western powers had not used the Security Council. However, the UN had identified the Kosovo crisis as a threat to international peace and security through its resolutions in 1998. NATO did not ask the UN for authorization to use force because of the opposition it would have received from the Russians and the Chinese, as well as their probable use of their respective vetoes. Annan agreed that there are times when the use of force may be legitimate in the pursuit of peace, but was critical of NATO taking unilateral action, arguing that the Security Council should have been involved in any decision to resort to the use of force.

The day that Operation Allied Force began, Annan issued this statement:

I speak to you at a grave moment for the international community. Throughout the last year, I have appealed on many occasions to the Yugoslav authorities and the Kosovo Albanians to seek peace over war, compromise over conflict. I deeply regret that, in spite of all the efforts made by the international community, the Yugoslav authorities have persisted in their rejection of a political settlement, which would have halted the bloodshed in Kosovo and secured an equitable peace for the population there. It is indeed tragic that diplomacy has failed, but there are times when the use of force may be legitimate in the pursuit of peace. In helping maintain international peace and security, Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter assigns an important role to regional organizations. But as Secretary-General, I have many times pointed out, not just in relation to Kosovo, that under the Charter the Security Council has primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security – and this is explicitly acknowledged in the North Atlantic Treaty. Therefore, the Council should be involved in any decision to resort to the use of force.

— Kofi Annan, 1999



▲ A Tomahawk cruise missile launched on 24 March 1999 from the USS Philippine Sea in the Adriatic Sea, in support of NATO Operation Allied Force

The air campaign continues

In the West, the images of refugees fleeing the fighting as Serbian troops moved in and began to “cleanse” areas of KLA resistance did not help the cause of the Serbian government. However, those images were rarely, if ever, seen within Serbia and Montenegro. The high percentage of support sorties (where targets are identified by accompanying aircraft, as opposed to strike sorties where aircraft use their weaponry) was a result of the special circumstances of the war and the aims established by NATO. These aims were first published in a 17-point statement, almost a month after the bombing campaign was underway. It is worth examining some of these points, which are given on the following page..

Javier Solana (1942 – present)

Javier Solana served as Secretary General of NATO from 1995 until the end of 1999. Born in Spain in 1942, he was a professor of Physics before entering politics and becoming a member of parliament, where he served for almost 20 years. He took the post in NATO and immediately had to confront the problems caused by the Bosnian war and NATO's intervention there. Solana is widely seen as being an effective leader of NATO during his period in office and after he stepped down he took up a role in the EU. He was knighted for his work in diplomacy by the King of Spain in 2010.

Source skills

Extract from NATO's Statement of Aims.

- Agree to the unconditional and safe return of all refugees and displaced persons, and unhindered access to them by humanitarian aid organizations; and
 - Provide credible assurance of his [Milošević's] willingness to work for the establishment of a political framework agreement based on the Rambouillet Accords.
- 6 NATO is prepared to suspend its airstrikes once Belgrade has unequivocally accepted the above-mentioned conditions and demonstrably begun to withdraw its forces from Kosovo according to a precise and rapid timetable.
 - 14 We reaffirm our support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all countries in the region.
 - 17 It is our aim to make stability in Southeast Europe a priority of our trans-Atlantic agenda. Our governments will cooperate ... in forging a better future for the region, one based upon democracy, justice, economic integration and security cooperation.

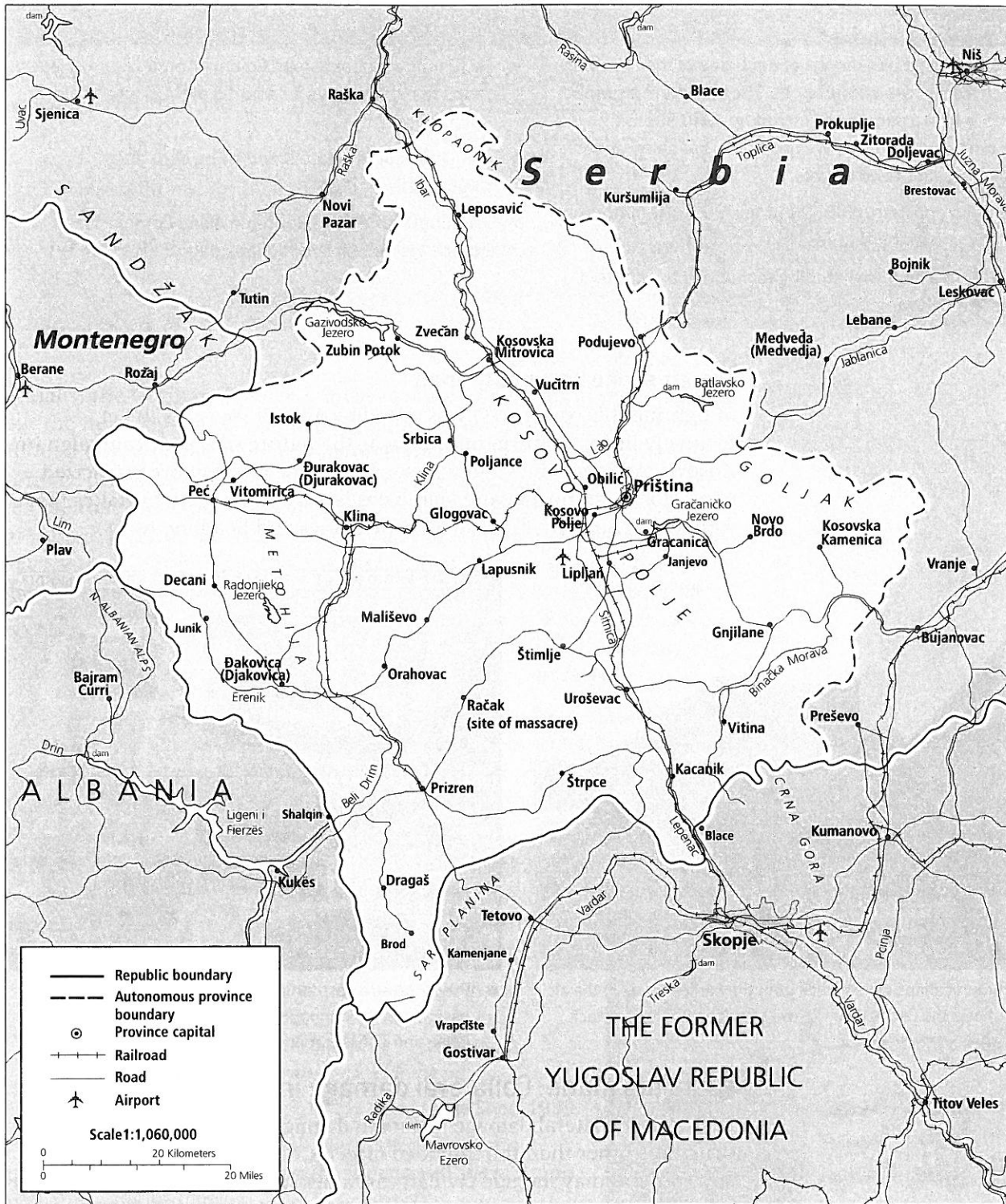
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/natopoints.htm>

It is clear, at least in some of the statements, that NATO had clarified its war aims and was determined to deal with the problems of the refugees as well as attempting to solve the wider regional issues.

Operation Allied Force was a remarkably successful air campaign and marked a turning point in aerial warfare for the 21st century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the primitive aircraft then in existence were used primarily for reconnaissance, to provide information for the artillery to range their guns and hit their targets. Once aircraft began to be armed with weapons that grew more sophisticated as technology developed, they were used in conjunction with other branches of the military in a more strategic manner. The most notable example of this is probably the use by the Nazi war machine in carrying out *blitzkrieg* ("lightning war") during

the Second World War. The weapons used in Operation Allied Force were guided by sophisticated global positioning satellite technology and so-called "smart" bombs, which could hit precise targets in a manner that avoided casualties. Long-range missions with the sophisticated B-2 stealth bomber were carried out from bases as far away as the USA. Flying halfway around the world to drop their 2,000-pound bombs and returning safely demonstrated the intensive use of modern precision-strike systems. Amazingly, only two aircraft were lost and no servicemen were killed on active service.

Pilots carrying out NATO operations reported some of the difficulties in fighting a consensus war where individual targets had to be identified. It was determined that flying and bombing would be from 15,000 feet, to avoid planes being put at excessive risk from surface-to-air missiles such as Stingers. Without troops on the ground to find the Serbs, support air spotters had to direct bombers to their targets. One pilot, Squadron Leader Christopher Huckstep of the Royal Air Force remembers one example:



▲ Kosovo

Found the target, (he said) happy with that. I can see the little tiny vehicles that we're talking about. And then just as I round out to set up for the attack, the American calls.... "Hold it!" or words to that effect. "There's a civilian bus has pulled up next to them."

— Christopher Huckstep, 2000