



Stefan Troebst. *Conflict in Kosovo: Failure of Prevention? An Analytical Documentation, 1989-1998*. Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, 1998. xii + 107 pp. No price available (paper), ISBN 978-3-88242-301-3.

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Liberalism Meets Ethnic Cleansing: Preventive Diplomacy in Kosovo

Stefan Troebst's *Conflict in Kosovo: Failure of Prevention?* makes for frustrating reading, and only in part because recent events have sufficiently answered the question asked in the title. Kosovo is indeed a study in failure. It might have taken the international community forty-two months of prevarication and obfuscation until it finally managed to end the vicious violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but an uneasy and imperfect peace was finally reached at Dayton in 1995 and still holds today. In present-day Kosovo, by contrast, not even the outline of such a limited success can be detected. There is not much doubt that at the end of the current Serbian campaign of "ethnic cleansing" Kosovo will be a de facto Western protectorate. But how such a protectorate will be established, how violent the insertion of NATO troops into Yugoslavia will be, and above all, whether any ethnic Albanians will be left in Kosovo when NATO troops finally do arrive is impossible to predict. It is safe to assume that at least some of the displacement will be definitive. Increasing reports of horrific human rights violations indicate that NATO is prepared to add military defeat to political failure, at least if we accept NATO's explanation that military action was taken for humanitarian reasons, in order to prevent precisely the kind of large-scale abuse that we are currently witnessing. Kosovo might well be the first humanitarian war that the West actually fights, and loses. With Slobodan Milosevic's final solution to the Albanian question firmly underway, the West's Balkans policy does not look too impressive.

The apportionment of blame, however, is a rather unhelpful exercise unless it serves to suggest better policies and

ways how similar crises might be better handled in the future. This seems to be one of the motivations behind the compilation of *Conflict in Kosovo*. In this regard, present failure in Kosovo is particularly bitter. In the case of Bosnia, the novelty of post-cold war international relations and the relative immaturity of some of the multilateral bodies involved in conflict resolution in the Balkans—particularly the European Community and the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe—served as a halfway acceptable excuse for Western failure if not inaction. And while the sole remaining superpower and a newly unified Europe might have committed many blunders, at least they eventually managed to put an end to open warfare and to reverse some of the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia.

But that is an incomplete interpretation of what happened in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995. Kosovo today exposes everything that was wrong with the West's past action and inaction in the region. Those who cared to probe deeper than the U.S. State department version found disturbing lessons to be learned, and some, including President Milosevic, were cynical enough to base strategies on those lessons. The main lessons of the war in Bosnia and its conclusion at Dayton were roughly as follows: violence is the best instrument to achieve political goals and to establish long-term control over disputed territories; the great powers will not stop violence even of the most egregious kind if intervention carries the risk of allied casualties; and, for similar reasons, the results of "ethnic cleansing" will not be reversed if reversing them requires a credible and durable Western com-

mitment.[1]

In other words, the war in Bosnia and the peace of Dayton exposed a fundamental reluctance of present-day liberal democracies to fight a committed enemy. The tragedy of Kosovo is that these lessons were learned by the Serbs and disregarded by everybody else.

In that sense, *Conflict in Kosovo* is very much in the liberal tradition. It compiles and comments on attempts to resolve conflict “peacefully,” i.e. without the credible threat of military action. Readers looking for Balkan intrigue, sinister behind-the-scenes deals or secret strategies are in the wrong place. In fact, *Conflict in Kosovo* is only about the most visible level of international conflict mediation—the level of public pronouncements. The striking observation to be made here is the sheer number of actors involved, and the sheer helplessness and irrelevance of much of their involvement. Certainly, if words could stop wars, Kosovo would still be at peace. Public statements of course are the favorite medium of those not important enough to be actual players on the scene; they are the favorite instrument for conflict resolution of those who do not want to invest anything in resolving conflicts beyond words. But even paper is not patient enough for the level of hypocrisy evident in those pages, and after reading through a few documents many a reader might feel the urge to close the book and turn on the television set. This impulse, however, should be resisted, for even the most naive of the documents under review here still carry an important lesson.

Conflict in Kosovo is rather elegant in its presentation of the materials, and mercifully short. An introduction provides essential and balanced historical background, followed by ten scenarios for how the conflict might work out. These brief speculations make for particularly interesting reading as the book was completed in the spring of 1998, at the time of the first serious massacre of the current war. Many a commentator, with the benefit of hindsight, has scolded Western governments for their passivity following the first Serbian massacres. Should NATO policy planners not have anticipated the wholesale destruction of ethnic Albanian life in Kosovo? The truth is that Troebst was one of a relatively small number of non-Kosovar observers who indeed did not rule out the possibility of the complete “ethnic cleansing” of Kosovo. The relevant passage is worth quoting: “Although not proclaimed publicly even by militant Serbian nationalists, the project of cleansing parts or even all of Kosovo of its Albanian population is on the hidden agenda of the regime and the nationalist opposition alike. In the view

of the Drenica massacre [of March 1998] which caused amongst others the long-term displacement of at least 17,000 people, the project of expelling up to 2 million people from their homes and of driving them into neighboring Albania and Macedonia seems much less utopian than it did before. The explanation of the Drenica events by the Kosovo Albanian Presidency as aiming at driving the Albanians out of Kosovo cannot be rejected offhand. ... The risk for Belgrade seems to be manageable: as the reaction of the international community to the Drenica massacre has demonstrated, swift and robust Western intervention in Kosovo is unlikely. Also, a partial or complete cleansing of Kosovo would probably not take more than several weeks” (pp. 15-16).

These words are chillingly prophetic. They are based on the correct understanding that the current war in Kosovo, very similar to earlier wars in Croatia and Bosnia, is not the result of centuries-old ethnic antagonisms bursting into the open but rather follow a premeditated course engineered by Belgrade. In light of such destructive determination, the “preventive diplomacy” of which the documents in *Conflict in Kosovo* are a part seems woefully inadequate, to put it mildly.

The biggest part of the book presents annotated documents in two sections. The first documentary section deals with mostly multilateral diplomacy while the second concerns NGO involvement (in an unwelcome and uncharacteristic intrusion of jargon titled “Third-Party Involvement in Track 2”).

The two documentary sections present an illustrative sample of policy statements from all imaginable actors and are extremely valuable for that reason alone. They also indicate a healthy sense of priorities on the part of the author: while the European Union takes up the most space—a reflection perhaps of the author’s European perspective and the fact that, after all, Kosovo vaguely lies in Europe—the next biggest section concerns U.S. policy, while rather irrelevant bodies like the European parliament and the Western European Union are in a benign display of kind judgment given just enough space not to come away as completely frivolous, incompetent, and superfluous. While this reviewer’s impatience might tinge his judgment of some of these documents, they also raise a range of fairly interesting and important questions, the most central of which is to what extent such public statements reflect real policies and decisions.

This is, for obvious reasons, the book’s main weak point—a weakness, however, for which the author carries no responsibility. The fact is that most truly interesting

documents will accumulate dust in personal collections and chancellery archives for decades to come: the documents that might shed light on the many questions surrounding the Kosovo crisis are government documents. Even in this post-cold war world, multilateral and non-governmental organizations are simply not the central actors even in a third-rate drama such as the one involving international responses to the conflict in Kosovo before 1998. This fact is hinted at by Troebst, with characteristic restraint, when he states that “the manifold frustrating experiences of international actors from the outbreak of the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina on in trying to mediate between Belgrade and Pristina provide a realistic background for an evaluation of the chance of current mediation efforts” (p. 22). This frustration is at least partly a reflection of the indecisiveness that has been so prominent in the West’s response to savagery in the Balkans, an indecisiveness that often relegated the Kosovo problem to the bottom of the priority list.

The documents reproduced in *Conflict in Kosovo* offer few new substantive insights on the international re-

sponse to the conflict that resulted in the current war. They will be of interest primarily to students of preventive and multilateral diplomacy, and as such the collection certainly fulfills its function. But they do not increase our understanding of the real policies that were driving Western involvement or non-involvement in the Balkans, and are of very limited value for anybody trying to understand current events.

Note

[1]. Indeed, many observers warned well before the outbreak of open violence in early 1998 that the exclusion of Kosovo from the Dayton accords might ultimately lead to conflagration. An example is Misha Glenny, “Bosnia II?” *New York Times*, December 9, 1997.

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