

Military Force, Kosovo, and the Jews

Eric H. Yoffie

If we Jews have learned anything at all in this century, it is that the only sure way to confront policies of radical evil is with military force. For most of the last two millennia we have been a small, scattered, barely tolerated minority, unfamiliar with power and uncertain about its use. But the Nazi horrors taught us that in the absence of power applied for moral ends, all other values might be turned to dust.

The radically evil nature of the Serbian regime is not open to question. In the last eight years, Slobodan Milosevic's government has carried out massive ethnic cleansing in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo and has established the first death camps on European soil since World War II. The claim that NATO bombing created the refugee crisis in Kosovo is absurd. Milosevic had been planning the expulsions for more than a year; they had already begun when the bombing started and would have continued under any circumstances. Milosevic is not Hitler, but the evil of which he is guilty is one that we have no difficulty recognizing.

As Jews, we look at these slaughtered victims and see Jewish corpses. We look at the more than a million refugees and see Jewish faces. We are, of course, sensitive to tragedy wherever it occurs, but the killing fields in Europe have special meaning for us. For hundreds of years, Jews were the main victims of European persecution. For hundreds of years, we were the Other — the Stranger — of the Christian West. Because this was so, we were the ones to hold up a mirror to European civilization and to speak of justice, universal values, and human rights.

Now that we are no longer persecuted as a people, dwelling in a powerful state in the Middle East and with influence in North America, we have the responsibility to do what we have always asked

others to do: to think not only in the categories of national self-interest but also in the categories of morality and justice. And this means stopping the killing and returning the refugees to their homes, by whatever means necessary. When we said "Never Again" we were referring to Jews. But if "Never Again" is to be more than an empty slogan, it must be a phrase without ethnic or racial delineation.

What are the Jewish arguments put forward against military intervention? Jewish right-wingers oppose the attacks on the grounds that American "vital interests" are not at stake. Some Israeli officials have argued that the Serbs fought Hitler and that a Muslim state must not be allowed to emerge in the heart of Europe. Such claims are both dangerous and, in moral terms, deeply flawed. The Serbian role in fighting Hitler has been exaggerated, but

remains, in any case, irrelevant. As for the "vital interests" argument, Jews will always be better off with a morally based American foreign policy, first and foremost because we are commanded by our tradition to support what is right and just. In addition, we should remember that there are many more Arabs than Jews, and much more oil in Saudi Arabia than in Israel; America's ties to the Jewish State rely ultimately on moral and not strategic considerations. If the Albanian Kosovars were Jews, one wonders what these opponents of military force would be saying.

Something important is happening in the world when eighteen democratic nations — the members of NATO — are asserting their collective responsibility to end mass murder in Europe, uphold international law, and organize trials for war criminals. Their policy has a strategic dimension, of course, but moral considerations predominate. If ever there were a time to project American power, it would be now: the cause is right, the need is pressing, and

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our allies are prepared to join us. Jews must be on the side of those who, at a critical point in human history, are calling for the use of military force to advance universal principles of justice.

The great danger at this moment is not too much force but too little; as of this writing, there is at least an even chance that NATO will make a deal that will in effect be a capitulation to the Milosevic regime. If this does occur and an "agreement" is signed that leaves the refugees stranded in foreign lands and these terrible crimes unpunished, the implications for the 21st century will be ominous indeed.

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Since becoming President of the UAHC in June 1996, Rabbi Yoffie has made a return to Torah and the need for increased Jewish literacy his major messages. In 1983, Rabbi Yoffie was named Executive Director of ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. He was instrumental in founding the ARZA-sponsored Israel Religious Action Center in Jerusalem. The Center leads the battle for Reform rights and religious pluralism in the Jewish State.

Rabbi Yoffie's articles have appeared in Reform Judaism, CCAR Journal, Commentary, Tikkun, The Jerusalem Post, The Forward, The Jewish Spectator, Jewish Frontier, Sh'ma, and Hadoar. He serves on the Boards of Directors of many Jewish organizations, including MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Rabbi Yoffie and his wife, Amy Jacobson Yoffie, have two children and live in Westfield, NJ.

History's Haunting Lessons

Terry Holzman

During three weeks in Kosovo in late December and early January as volunteers for Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights, my husband, Todd Holzman, a child psychiatrist, and I conducted 37 interviews, documenting violations of medical neutrality. For us, and for those more familiar with life in Kosovo, nothing we are seeing now on the nightly news is a surprise. The humanitarian crisis there began in 1989 when Milosevic came to power. Kosovo was stripped of its autonomy, and ethnic Albanians, 90% of the population, were stripped of their rights. Physicians, schoolteachers, college professors, and government workers were fired; Serbs were imported to take their jobs. This tiny, poor, polluted province became the scene of human rights abuses of horrific proportions.

During a conversation in Kosovo, a surgeon, Dr. Osman Sejfiija, relayed countless stories of harassment, brutality, and imprisonment that Kosovar physicians endured between the spring of 1998 and our conversation in December. "We live in extraordinary conditions," he said, in the midst of "a dirty, unequal war where international humanitarian laws are not re-

spected. I read about Kristallnacht and thought it could not happen again...but now I think it's happening again." The Consul for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms in Pristina told us (with both written verification and photographic documentation) that there were 35 cases of noncombatant violent deaths in Kosovo in 1997; in 1998, the number was more than 1,884. We can only imagine what the number will be for 1999. The 1998 number is perhaps low, but officials only count what they can verify. The majority of these deaths occurred in the spring and summer of 1998. Albums show photographs of bodies shoveled into ravines, of pregnant women and young children literally bludgeoned to death. Whole families wiped out. Whole villages destroyed and deserted. All this in the summer and fall of 1998.

In the house from which he and his family had been forced to flee several times, Isak Bytyqi, a farmer, told us about the violence, terror and torture that he, his neighbors, and so many in Kosovo have already endured at the hands of the Serbs. These horrors, he said, were too indelible to be for-