

The view from Kukes: Listening to the refugees

by [Duncan Hanson](#) in the [May 12, 1999](#) issue

How could it happen in Europe? And how could it happen in Europe at the end of the 20th century? And how could it happen that Europe did not see what was occurring and intervene sooner? And, most important, what can be done now, to stop even more killing?

These are the questions that occupied the thoughts of my companions and me as we sought to make sense of what we saw around us in Kukes, the small town on the Albania-Kosovo border that has become the first safe haven for refugees fleeing from Kosovo. To us, as to everyone else we met, whether refugee, relief worker or reporter, it was no longer a question of whether genocide was happening but how genocide might be stopped.

The stories would have been monotonous in their similarity if they had not been so horrible in their content. The Serbian police knocked on the door of a young Kosovar woman as she was nursing her baby. "You need to leave now," they said. "Let me pack my bag," she said. "No, leave now," was the reply. Down the hall she heard gunshots and was told that her neighbor had been killed for not moving more quickly. When I met this woman at Kukes, she had not eaten for five days.

Several other women came from the same village. The police had come to their doors and said that all Kosovars had to gather before the village school. Quickly the police separated the men from the women and the children. Then, while the women and children watched, the men were shot. The soldiers said, "Now it's time for you to leave." The women begged for time to bury their husbands and fathers and sons. "No," the police replied, "leave now, or we'll shoot you too." So they started walking.

Eighteen hours later they arrived at the border and told their story to an Englishman, John Campbell, who works for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He telephoned the War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague and reported who these women were and what they had told him, since they now were

not only mourners but also potential witnesses for the War Crimes Tribunal.

Another woman told how the men from her village were gathered in a schoolhouse which was then set ablaze. Those men who tried to escape from the flames were shot.

So it happened over and over again. Almost shyly someone would come up to me and begin to tell her story. Soon many others would gather around. There was no reticence. Each one wanted to say what had happened to her husband, her son, her father or herself. I saw few tears, perhaps because most of those I talked with were too weak to cry, not having eaten for days, or having had to sleep on freezing mountain hillsides without adequate clothing. Or perhaps they were just numb from what had happened. Even so, hungry, cold or numb, they wanted to tell what had happened to them.

I knew the question would seem preposterous to those I asked, but I wanted to ask anyway, to be able to report the answer later: Did you leave because of the bombing? "The bombing?" they asked. No one I spoke with had even seen any bombing. They had heard airplanes overhead. Some had seen fires they understood had been caused by bombing. The idea that they had left because of the bombing was ludicrous to the refugees with whom I spoke. "You want to know why I left?" said one woman who appeared to be in her early 20s. "I left because my husband was murdered." An older woman, who looked very tired, said, "We left because the police came to our door and told us we had to." A teenage girl said, "We left because all the inhabitants of the next village were killed."

A young man, one of the relatively few adult men at Kukes, said, "I left because I saw the police coming to my house and I ran out the back door before they could find me." Another young man said, "I left because when I came home from a friend's house, my house had been burned."

In spite of all the stories we had heard of men being shot singly in their apartments, or in groups in public places, or burned in schoolhouses or blown up in cars, we were even more struck by the number of women who did not know the fate of their men. Where were these men?

When we were in Kukes perhaps 170,000 refugees were there--and perhaps 80 percent of the adults were women. Any way you calculate it, there are a great many missing men. Some of these men have, no doubt, joined the Kosovo Liberation

Army. Yet if all the missing husbands, fathers, brothers and sons that belonged to the women we saw in Kukes had joined the KLA, it would be one of Europe's largest armies.

It was equally inconceivable that the Serb police or army had set up a camp big enough to house all the men who were missing. If the Serbs were housing and feeding many tens of thousands of men as prisoners, it would be hard to keep it secret. It seems more likely that the missing men are dead. Indeed, a few days after we left Kukes, NATO satellite intelligence analysts reported that pictures taken over Kosovo indicated the presence of mass graves.

Assuming the missing men have been killed, the number of victims--so far--of the third Holocaust in Europe this century lies somewhere between 60,000 and 200,000. If all those men are still alive, which is unlikely, the number killed so far would still exceed 10,000. And every day, according to the reports of the refugees arriving from Kosovo, more are being killed. How could this be happening now for the third time in this century in Europe? No doubt historians and social scientists will be occupied for decades with trying to find an answer. I would like to offer some initial reflections based mainly on my own impressions and observations. A comprehensive explanation will have to wait until the end of the war.

I believe that the Serb people as a whole simply do not understand what is happening in their name. They have been told that there are terrorists operating in Kosovo, which seems credible, particularly since for years they (like all of us) have been reading newspaper accounts of terrorists all over the world. They know that their police and soldiers have been trying to capture the terrorists and that sometimes some terrorists, not to mention police or soldiers, have been killed in the process. They do not think that killing terrorists in a police action is a war crime any more than the average U.S. citizen believes that his government is committing a war crime when it bombs a suspected terrorist camp in Sudan or Afghanistan.

Serbs seem to have been influenced by the ferocity with which NATO countries and particularly the U.S. have gone after putative international criminals. If the U.S., which in some ways defines for Serbs what a democratic nation should be, can be so harsh in treating those it regards as terrorists, why should the Serbs not do likewise with their own terrorists in Kosovo? There is, of course, a crucial distinction between targeting terrorists and killing all the men in a medium-size village. Even so, the willingness of the U.S. and NATO to use force, even when doing so sometimes puts

civilian populations at risk, probably contributes subliminally to the willingness of Serbs to tolerate what they view as civilian casualties in their government's campaign against terrorism in Kosovo.

But what about those Serbs who do know about the genocide or who have actually been participating in it? It is not enough to say that these Serbs consider that they are fighting terrorism. Nor is it enough to say they view Kosovo as part of the Serb homeland and that they see the Kosovars as interlopers. Perhaps part of the explanation lies also in the negative attitudes toward Kosovars that many Serbs acquire so early in life that when they grow up the veracity of these beliefs seems self-evident.

I remember traveling in 1965 and 1970 in what was then Yugoslavia and hearing young Serbs tell about how profoundly lazy and disloyal the Kosovars were. I was struck by the passion with which these beliefs were expressed, all the more since many of us in the West then regarded Yugoslavia as a model of a successful multiethnic state. Of course, Serbia is not the only country in which the prejudices of adults are inculcated in the children.

Another part of the explanation may have to do with how the history of World War II was taught and perhaps still is taught in Serb schools. My impression, from conversations with Serbs over the past 30 years, is that their schools taught them a lot about the real and very serious evils inflicted on the Serbs by the Croats and Germans during World War II but relatively little about the killing of the Jews. Even up until 1989 some former east bloc governments still considered that the quasi-Marxist societies which they governed constituted a more or less complete break from the bourgeois societies that preceded them. Therefore they could treat the murder of the Jews as a phenomenon of capitalist society which did not concern them. The crimes of the Nazis and their eastern European allies could be subsumed under those of the capitalists. The practical result was that for several decades there were schoolchildren in the former east bloc who never studied the Holocaust and never had the chance to learn its crucial lesson, namely that not only is genocide wrong, but that it also destroys those who commit it.

Does the church in Serbia bear some responsibility for the genocide of the Kosovars? The willingness of both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches in the U.S. to accommodate themselves to slavery and segregation shows that it is empirically untrue that the church is somehow supernaturally protected from serious moral

error. In Serbia, Patriarch Pavle and Bishop Artemije of the Serbian Orthodox Church have long been critics of Milosevic, and many Serbian Orthodox clergy and laity oppose his policies in Kosovo. Still, on balance, the Orthodox Church in Serbia has probably not done enough to challenge the prejudices of many Serbs toward their Muslim neighbors in Kosovo and Bosnia. Indeed, even after the killings at Srebrenica by Bosnian Serbs in 1995 only a few church leaders were willing to acknowledge that the killings even happened, let alone to speak out against them.

Finally, as a practical matter, most Serbs simply do not have access to objective reporting about the killing in Kosovo that they consider credible. As I write, I have just read a newspaper story about a member of Italy's Green Party who managed to get an invitation to visit Belgrade. Because he opposed the bombing, he was interviewed on Yugoslav television. But the interview was terminated when he mentioned that people in Italy had been hearing reports of genocide. His Yugoslav television interviewers said they did not believe the reports and they were not going to be responsible for such lies being broadcast.

The Serb people can be held responsible for tolerating one of Europe's last dictatorships. They have been willing to live in a society in which, for practical purposes, all politically significant news is either censored or manipulated.

But it is hard to imagine that the killing in Kosovo could go on if the news media in Serbia were not so completely controlled. The people can be held responsible for the genocide against the Kosovars only if they knew that genocide was happening and then did nothing to resist it.