4.2 THE WAR IN KOSOVO
A SHORT ANALYSIS OF A MILITARY CONFLICT

Already in 1997 the Austrian Commission of Military History presented a bibliography on Yugoslavia 1991-1995. Now it is submitting a specialized bibliography on The War in Kosovo which is to promote the future research work of historians. For the Austrian Commission the following authors worked on this bibliography and gave it the present form: Wolfgang ETSCHMANN, Claudia HAM and Thomas REICHL (French translation: Christoph HATSCHEK, Alessandra LAVIZZARI-RAEUBER). Our most cordial thanks are due to the following members of other commissions: Jean Langenberger, Piet Kamphuis, Ciro Paoletti, Eric Bastin, Ken Reynolds, Torunn Laugen, Marie-Annick Hepp, Dimitry Queloz, Hervé de Weck, Dino Willy Cozza, Yigal Sheffy and Jarl Kronlund.

1. Introductory Remarks on the War in Kosovo

Since the early 1980s the economic situation and the political climate in Kosovo have substantially worsened due to the decline in federal investments and the rapid growth of the Albanian population based on a high birth rate (around 3% per year) as well as a slow but steady migration of Serbs from Kosovo (their share in the total population of the province amounted to around 9% in 1998).

The political tensions in the region also became manifest in the early 80s, when in 1981 the first unrests initiated by Albanian activists took place. They were, however, turned down by police forces.

After the abolition of autonomy by the Serb president Slobodan Milosevic in 1989 Kosovar members of the former Yugoslav Parliament formed an underground government in 1991, worked out a constitution for the Kosovo territory and organized elections on 24 May 1992 (never recognized by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). Further suppression of the Albanians in Kosovo finally led to the formation of an armed „underground army“, the UCK or „Kosovo Liberation Army“ (KLA), which was highly inferior in number to the Serb police forces and was finally not able to offer serious resistance to the first Serb „counter-insurgency“ operations.

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In the course of skirmishes several members of the Albanian ethnic group were expelled by Serb police forces in summer and autumn of 1998. Serb guerrilla groups increasingly participated in these operations, and first atrocities against Kosovo-Albanian civilians were committed.

Nevertheless, the majority of the Albanians was able to return to their plundered and in some cases also destroyed villages, but they could by no means lead normal lives.

At the beginning of 1999 fighting between the UCK and Serb police forces — and in some cases also with the assistance of army units of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia — intensified, which led to the so far most massive use of military power, accompanied by further plundering, pillages, expulsions and mass killing. On a minor scale also KLA fighters proceeded violently against Serb civilians like e.g. in 1998.

However, it was the massacre of Racak committed by Serb guerrilla groups on 10 January 1999 — 40 corpses were found, among them members of the KLA, but mostly old people, women and children — that attracted world-wide attention.

Mediation efforts by the United Nations, the EU and NATO had been unsuccessful so far.
The negotiations of an international contact group at Rambouillet Palace near Paris, which had taken place between 6 and 23 February 1999, and the intervention of Richard Holbrooke, who had already acted as a mediator in Bosnia, did not bring any tangible results; instead, they only showed the unwillingness of the Yugoslav political leadership to meet the certainly heavy demands of the mediators. Operations by Serb police and army units, who proceeded from the Northern and Eastern fringe territories into the Western and Southern regions of Kosovo, aimed at pushing the KLA further back into the neighbouring states of Albania and Macedonia and urging the Kosovo Albanians to leave their settlements as well. These systematic operations made the states of the European Community believe in the existence of the so called „Horseshoe“ plan.

This plan provided for the pushing back of the KLA troops into Northern Albania and Northern Macedonia accepting the expulsion of a major part of the Albanian population in Kosovo.

Finally, in the evening of 24 March NATO air raids started against the units of the 3rd Yugoslav Army in Kosovo but also against targets in Serbia and Montenegro, which at first did not achieve any major results.

The political ineffectiveness which manifested itself a few days later – the Yugoslav leadership was still not willing to meet the demands of Rambouillet –, almost immediately led to the supply of further NATO air-force units, participating in the operations.

Yugoslav air defence could not be completely eliminated until the end of fighting, but it remained mostly ineffective. Yugoslav combat-pilot units were drastically reduced and did not achieve any provable results.

The air-defence units were able to shoot down two USAF war planes (the pilots were rescued unhurt by SAR units and were taken to a safe place), damaged several others and destroyed about ten reconnaissance planes of participating NATO forces. Despite more than thousand anti-aircraft missiles and a vast amount of ammunition fired from anti-aircraft guns the success remained modest.

On the other hand, material and personal losses of the 3rd Army in Kosovo were not so high, the mobility of the units was, however, vastly limited.

Heavy attacks on Serbia had led to an extensive destruction of the military as well as civil infrastructures in Serbia and Montenegro.

In total the air war lasted for 78 days. There were more than 38,000 flights (among them 14,000 war operations). Between 24 March and 10 June more than 20,000 bombs and missiles were dropped.

The plan of NATO units who had already gone into Macedonia to use combat helicopters and special forces was finally not carried out. Two combat helicopters AH 64 were, however, lost in accidents.

In early June 1999 the heavy damage caused to leadership institutions and infrastructure as well as the lack of hope to stand a military conflict against NATO convinced Yugoslav leaders to give in. According to Yugoslav sources their armed forces lost 532 soldiers, several hundred civilians were said to have been killed or wounded in Yugoslavia.

The 3rd Yugoslav Army had suffered bearable material losses in the air war and marched off to Serbia and Montenegro from 11 June onwards.

From the end of 1998 until June 1999 750,000 Albanians had been expelled or had fled. Until the end of 1999 most of the refugees returned home under the protection of the KFOR troops, whose first detachments were dropped with helicopters in Kosovo.

The march of a Russian unit from Bosnia (SFOR) to Pristina, where the airport was taken by surprise, led to a severe crisis within the KFOR contingent.