

Assessing Events in Kosovo 1999

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Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond / by Michael Ignatieff. - New York : Henry Holt, 2000. - 176 p. - ISBN 0-8050-6490-7

Kosovo, War and Revenge / Tim Judah. - New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 2000. - 288 p. - ISBN 0-300-08313-0, ISBN 0-300-08354-8 (pbk)

The two books under review could not be more different. Tim Judah's *Kosovo: War and Revenge* is a dense, breathless account of the campaign and its background, filled with first-class reporting and guided by a keen sense for the political manoeuvring behind the conflict, while Michael Ignatieff's *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* is in a sense more ambitious, aiming to address some of the fundamental questions raised by the way the alliance fought the campaign.

A collection of previously published articles complemented with a meditation on the nature of "virtual war", Ignatieff's book is one step of reflection removed from the events reported in Judah's. His main thesis is that "Kosovo broke new ground" (p. 5) in that the campaign was fought by no more than 1,500 NATO air-men with high precision weaponry. The allies "talked the language of ultimate commitment and practised the warfare of minimum risk" (p. 111). Indeed, Ignatieff's story of how the new technology of warfare was deployed over Kosovo, how armies adapt or fail to adapt to its use, and how this changes the complex moral calculus not just of how, but also of whether wars are fought, is fascinating. Particularly illuminating is a piece previously published in *The New Yorker* under the title "The Virtual Commander", describing how the war was actually conducted from the allied side, and specifically the extent to which moral and legal reasoning has become an integral part of the target selection process, with military lawyers from the great powers reviewing individual targets in light of the Geneva Conventions and other considerations.

Ignatieff's main thesis, however, is not borne out by his own interpretation of

the Kosovo war. He maintains that by reducing the risk of unwanted death, the deployment of technologically advanced violence becomes more politically acceptable to liberal democracies. But his description of how the allies stumbled into this war makes clear that its “clean” character – relatively few accidental killings, no allied casualties – was by no means a foregone conclusion, and great power governments were in fact quite reluctant to go to war over this forsaken place in an unfortunate corner of Europe. That the allies did exhaust diplomacy to the last reflects at least in part a more general disinclination to use force. Moreover, while Ignatieff is rather good at framing the complex moral questions raised by the new technology of warfare, he frequently fails to be as confident in suggesting answers. His long, ambitious piece on “virtual war” does not engage in any sustained argument regarding the legitimacy of large-scale strategic bombing of civilian or dual-use objects such as bridges and power networks, while clearly stating the importance of that question: “The irony here was obvious: the most effective strike of the war was also the most [morally] problematic” (p. 108).

Tim Judah, whose articles have appeared in *The Economist*, the *London Times* and the *New York Review of Books*, knows a good source when he sees one, and his book builds on many years spent studying Kosovar politics and cultivating its protagonists. His book is an extremely valuable source of information, and he is particularly strong in describing the politics of the Kosovar diaspora, a seemingly arcane topic that proved decisive in the ill-fated Rambouillet negotiations. Diaspora politics were even more decisive in Kosovo than in Croatia, as resistance against the Serbian state – peaceful at first, then violent after its futility became obvious – was in large part financed from abroad. His background chapters are short but clear, and his basic point here is certainly valid: the disappointment of being excluded from the Dayton settlement, together with the collapse of the Albanian government in 1997, created the conditions for a general uprising in Kosovo, and when Serbian counter-insurgency efforts turned nasty, the great powers had to back their words with force. Judah is perhaps too cautious in his discussion of the massive displacement that followed NATO air strikes in March of 1999 and seems to have some reservations regarding its organised character (p. 250), but much like Ignatieff he does not believe that there were alternatives to war. His analysis of the Rambouillet talks is the best account so far of that last-minute attempt to avert war, and he makes it clear that the Serbian side had no interest whatsoever in genuine negotiations.

Both books share a largely unstated but essentially correct assumption that US leadership or the lack thereof was decisive both in the run-up to and during the war. The US stumbled into the Kosovo affair as unprepared as anyone else. But almost a decade after the demise of the Soviet Union (which at least in name lives on happily in Ignatieff’s book, having slipped the editor’s eye), the European powers are unable to deal with a third-class dictator in their backyard and look to the Americans whenever trouble breaks out in the Balkans, which it has done quite frequently over the past years. While the Kosovo war might indeed have prompted

the Europeans to think a bit more seriously about defence by brutally exposing their inability to ship their soldiers and hardware to a place just across the Adriatic from Italy's beaches, things are not likely to improve without substantial investments for which the political will is lacking. Ignatieff's volume states these problems without really addressing them, instead describing the ways in which Kosovo was a supposedly new kind of virtual war (at least for the allied side). What both books make abundantly – if in Ignatieff's case perhaps inadvertently – clear, however, is how much Kosovo resembles a classic great power intervention so typical of the 19th century. Our own century has shown that outside interference in the Balkans has tended to make things worse; it is not clear that it will be different in the case of Kosovo.