

KOSOVO

myths, conflict and war



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The Kosovo Liberation Army - the Myth of Origin

James Pettifer

In 1996 the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was an obscure organisation that numbered no more than a few hundred members, most of whom were not even in Kosovo. Throughout 1997-98 it evolved into the central force of Kosovo politics: an eighteen month period of armed struggle within Kosovo has galvanised the previously frozen status-quo, and in March 1999 a major European war began, with NATO bombing Yugoslavia in response to its anti-KLA activities in Kosovo. Opinions may differ about what exactly happened in Kosovo politics in the last three years, but it can be stated with certainty that NATO would not have intervened in Yugoslavia without the emergence of the KLA. Such a scenario was impossible to imagine in May 1996, when as a journalist I wrote my first report about the KLA, after shootings in the Decani region that resulted in the death of several Serb policemen. What is self-evident truth in 1999 would have looked quite beyond rational political calculation in 1996.

It has become natural for students of politics, historians, diplomats, peacekeepers and peacemakers - all the so-called 'international Community', in fact - to ask the question: Who are the KLA? Where did they come from, to produce such a cataclysmic change in the political climate? What do they believe? What do they want, in political terms? And the most important question of all for foreign ministries: Who are the leaders? How can they be influenced?

At one level, the question is easy to answer, because small groups of radicals opposed to the pacifist policies of Dr Ibrahim Rugova and the Kosovo Democratic League (LDK), had been in existence for many years, mostly in Germany and Switzerland.¹ Occasional public meetings and articles in radical Kosovar newspapers were vehicles for the increasing dissatisfaction of many exiles with the lack of concrete political progress. But such groupings seemed to be utterly marginal to the main Kosovo political struggle, and looked lost in a world of conspiracy, defunct Marxist ideology, and the delusions of exile. Yet behind the facade of cigarette smoke and endless coffee-drinking, a tough and effective movement was emerging, a movement that would prove itself a political survivor, despite its many weaknesses and problems. Here we should bear in mind some of the problems that the

* This world has been ably depicted by Miranda Vickers in her excellent book *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo* (Hurst 1998).

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KLA has had to face. Every guerrilla movement has to go through a long learning curve, and it usually takes a long time to achieve military efficiency. The KLA has had to do all its learning in public, under intense Serbian military pressure and equally intense media scrutiny.

At a second level, the internal political situation in Kosovo was transformed by the spring 1997 rising in Albania, which transferred large numbers of looted weapons into private hands. At least some of these weapons found their way to Kosovo, and allowed for the formation of popular self-defence forces against Milosevic's security apparatus.

At a third level, the leadership of Dr Rugova was fatally compromised by the autumn 1995 Dayton Accords, which delivered nothing to the Kosovars. Dr Rugova had led his followers to believe that his special relationship with the United States would allow a deal at Dayton that would bring at least some degree of self-government to Kosovo, if not full independence. But nothing materialised, and after Dayton more and more Kosovars turned to radical paths of political thought and action

But this still begs the question - why the KLA? What was the real origin of the organisation? Modern revolutionary movements have usually had a Marxist character, even in the post-1980 days of Islamic revolutions in Iran and elsewhere. Marxist movements have a tight internal discipline and a degree of bureaucracy, and when their history is written one usually knows the day when the central committee or similar structures met, and a specific decision was taken. It does not seem to be the case with the KLA. There was a sense of a militant popular movement that tried to clear the Serb forces from particular localities, first of all in the central Drenica region. When I visited the village of Klina in this region in January 1998, the villagers were proudly boasting that there was no Serb police there at all. When I asked who had achieved this, the answer was simply 'the young men did it'. They were, in fact, merely local armed groups. The KLA, as such, was only mentioned in cafes in Pristina. When I asked my friend Veton Surroi² what was happening, he just said 'they were the same people that you wrote about before. They are very underground and very conspiratorial'. And it is from this state of affairs that the peculiar power of the KLA grew.

Myth is important here. The KLA was at once 'the People', in a *undifferentiated* sense, resisting oppression in a just military struggle that was only being attempted after all peaceful avenues with Dr Rugova had

² Veton Surroi is a leading Pristina intellectual and publisher of the influential Kosovar daily *Koha Ditore*.

failed, yet it was also a secret conspiracy, the kind of elitist, underground organisation that seemed to belong more to the world of Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century than to the present day: masterminds in Switzerland planning the liberation of Kosovo. This has meant that the prevailing questions about the KLA - who ran it, who controlled it, and so on, could never be answered satisfactorily in the early days. 'The Myth of Origin' was an unanswerable question, because to account for the origin of the KLA one would at least have to imply answers to the question of who founded it, what they believed, and so on. Most of all, 'founding fathers' could be identified, whether they were the current leaders of the organisation or not. But the time demanded a blanket organisation that any Kosovo Albanian could join, and the single common denominator was a belief that military struggle was a legitimate means of liberating Kosovo from Serbian rule. Thus the KLA has always had a peculiar power, despite its manifold military and organisational weaknesses: it is in essence whatever you wish it to be, but basically it is the people armed, united, undivided by party or faction. Many different political currents contributed to the growth of the KLA, but the leadership absorbed and integrated them.

We now know who the leaders of the KLA are. They began to emerge during the long and testing summer of 1998. Perhaps the first was Jakup Krasniqi, KLA's official spokesman, for the simple reason that someone had to speak to the international press, who were employing some of their best reporters to try to discover who the leadership of the movement were. It is a sign of the power and importance of the modern media that the clandestine side of the KLA was able to survive the attentions of diplomats for much longer than those of the journalists. Nevertheless, the *attitude* of the KLA to journalists was less than welcoming for much of the time, and it has remained so to this day. Transparency seems impossible in a war against Slobodan Milosevic.

Did this sense of conspiracy and clandestinity assist or hinder the KLA? This is something that is best left to future historians, but there is no doubt in my mind that the mythical and secretive nature of the organisation assisted the KLA *considerably* in the early phases of its struggle. The quest of the media and diplomats to find 'the people who mattered', and the impossibility of doing so led to more and more interest in the movement, particularly among newspaper editors. Imagery was also helpful to the KLA. The young fighters seemed like something left over from the Partisan days of the Second World War, and important early martyrs like the Jashari family provided a visual connection with the days of Albanian nationalist struggle against the Ottomans. The picture

of Jashari on the wall of the offices of the Party for Democratic Prosperity in Tetovo, draped in the Albanian flag, could have been that of a man who died in 1898, rather than 1998. The KLA were perceived as classic Balkan rebels, the oppressed in the hills taking on the foreign occupiers, the Serbs, who - similar to the earlier Ottomans - controlled the province by methods of fear, and physical control of roads and towns. And most important for the international media, they were 'the underdogs', risking all for their country, an attractive image compared to the heavily protected and repressive Serbian security forces.

At the heart of this strength of imagery is the mystical identification of the KLA with the whole (Albanian) people of Kosovo, so that even though the fortunes of the KLA might vary, it has never lost its capacity to inspire fear in its opponents and respect among politicians in the West. It has done so by preserving its mythical core of identity with the people as a whole, whereas by contrast, the Kosovo Democratic League of Dr Rugova came more and more to be seen as an organisation above the people, with a distinct communist ethos in some of its political *modus operandi*, in particular the claims to unique wisdom and foresight often attributed to Dr Rugova himself by some of his more uncritical followers. It is odd that Rugova's party is generally seen as a 'right-wing*' organisation compared to the KLA, when the whole ethos of the 'presidency' as it evolved under Dr Rugova was much closer to the hierarchical and centralised model of the Yugoslav League of Communists, built around one leading man. This model stands in sharp contrast to the loose and decentralised structures of the KLA. In this respect the KLA is clearly the product of wartime improvisations in the late 1990s, while the LDK was shaped by the attempts at peaceful change in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The KLA has 'turned the mirror around' from nearly ten years of almost exclusive focus on one man, Dr Rugova, as the embodiment of the aims and aspirations of all Kosovars. In 1998 the KLA embodied a near total demolition of authority, in contrast to the previous highly traditional focus at the top of the hierarchical pyramid of authority in Kosovo Albanian life. Around the time of the Rambouillet conference (February-March 1999) the KLA underwent a visible change. Its leaders became public figures and they formed a government in exile in Tirana, locked in fierce competition with the earlier government in exile headed by LDK's Bujar Bukoshi. KLA's prime minister in exile, Hashim Thaci, was previously a student in the political science faculty at Zurich University, and he looks like a completely modern politician in his good suit and with his mobile telephone. So has the old myth of origin disappeared, the obscurity of a rural revolution in the Kosovo countryside where the people and the

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leaders are one and the same in their rebellious aspirations, and armed to fight the Serbs? It is too early to give a definite answer to this question. Western diplomats will try, understandably, to bring the KLA into the normal parameters of western political discourse. No doubt Mr Thaci can discuss Mill or Thomas Hobbes with all the fluency of an Oxford PPE graduate. But his other name is 'Snake', and he is a natural, elemental force from the Kosovo countryside, a rural revolutionary who seeks to destroy Serbian rule. Thaci's thirtieth birthday came in April 1999, at a time when he was deep inside Kosovo, fighting the Serbs and communicating daily with Western politicians and military men on his mobile phone. At the very same time NATO jets were fighting against Milosevic's regime high above the Kosovo countryside, living in a parallel technological world to the men in the forests with their Kalashnikovs. And just as it was impossible to foresee the current situation a year or eighteen months ago, it is equally impossible to foresee the exact outcome of the present conflict.