

The U.S. Air Force in the Air War Over Serbia, 1999





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(Overleaf) The A-10 Thunderbolt II was a major aircraft in the air war over Serbia. (All photos USAF.)

IN EARLY 1998, VIOLENCE ERUPTED WITHIN KOSOVO BETWEEN YUGO-SLAVIAN (SERB) FORCES AND THE KOSOVO LIBERATION ARMY (KLA)

The last major United States military operation of the twentieth century was noteworthy in a number of ways. It marked the first time NATO took part in combat operations against a sovereign nation. It was the last time manned aircraft shot down manned enemy aircraft. The operation resulted in no American casualties. It ended one of the worst instances of genocide in a century of genocide. Most importantly, it was the first air campaign that produced victory without the use of ground forces. Operation Allied Force, or the Air War Over Serbia, resulted in victory without any American or NATO “boots on the ground.”

In early 1998, violence erupted within Kosovo between Yugoslavian (Serb) forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). As a result, a Contact Group consisting of the foreign ministers of six nations, the United States, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy met in London during March in an attempt to discuss the growing war within Kosovo. Partly in response to two statements from the Contact Group, dated March 9 and 25, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1160 on March 31. It urged a political settlement of issues in Kosovo, supported greater autonomy for Kosovo within Yugoslavia, and banned arms sales and deliveries to Yugoslavia. The resolution also condemned the use of excess force by Serbian paramilitary police forces against the civilian population, and denounced any terrorist activity such as that which the Serbs claimed the KLA performed.¹

In May and June, NATO leaders met in Brussels to consider military options. In June, an agreement between Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and Boris Yeltsin, President of Russia, allowed the formation of a Kosovo Diplomatic Observer Mission, consisting of representatives from several nations, to report on freedom of movement and security conditions in the troubled province. The six-nation Contact Group continued to meet, and issued statements on June 12 and July 8 on the increasing deterioration of conditions in Kosovo. Serbian police security forces in Kosovo, in an effort to deprive the KLA of their civilian supporters, began to drive ethnic Albanians from their homes.

The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, acknowledged “excessive and indiscriminate use of force by Serbian security forces and the Yugoslav Army which has resulted in numerous civilian casualties and...the displacement of more than 230,000 persons from their homes.” These words were incorporated into United Nations Security Council Resolution 1199 passed on September 23, that demanded a ceasefire in Kosovo, dialogue between the warring parties, the end of action by security forces against civilians, and the safe return of refugees.²

Concurrently, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization prepared to exercise air strikes, if necessary, to enforce UNSCR 1160. Dr. Javier Solana, Secretary-General of NATO, stated on September 24, the day following the passage of UNSCR 1160, that the alliance was preparing to act. Solana announced that the North Atlantic Council had just approved issuing an activation warning that increased its level of military preparedness and allowed NATO commanders to begin identifying forces required for possible air operations.³

On October 12, 1998, Richard Holbrooke, President Clinton’s special envoy to the Balkans, flew to Belgrade and warned the Yugoslavian president that if he failed to comply with UN resolutions, he risked NATO air strikes. Lt. Gen. Michael E. Short, USAF, who commanded NATO air forces in the theater, accompanied Holbrooke. He spoke personally with Milosevic, telling him essentially that the question was not whether NATO planes would be flying over Kosovo, but whether they would be taking photographs or dropping bombs. On October 13, NATO’s North Atlantic Council authorized activation orders for air strikes. United States aircraft and aircrews deployed to Europe in preparations for air strikes against Serbia.⁴

The threat produced diplomatic results in Belgrade. On October 15 and 16, Yugoslavian representatives signed agreements to allow a Kosovo verification mission on the ground and an air verification mission. On October 24, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1203, which endorsed the verification missions. However, Milosevic, as president of Yugoslavia, had signed neither agreement, suggesting that he could later

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