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“The Whole Town Cried”

Sixteenth Anniversary of the Attack on Yugoslavia: Aleksinac

by GREGORY ELICH

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It was 1999, shortly after the NATO war. I was with a delegation that came to Yugoslavia to document NATO war crimes, and we found no shortage of them. In all of the towns and cities we visited, not one had been spared destruction.

One of our stops was at Aleksinac, a small mining town that NATO had targeted with a special ferocity. The town was led by a strong socialist local government, which may not have been entirely unrelated to NATO’s attentions. Local officials provided us with statistics that were startling for such a small town: 767 houses and 908 apartment flats were destroyed or damaged, as were 302 public buildings. Dragoljub Todorovich, a 74-year-old retired teacher, was at the opening meeting. Metal braces encased his left leg, and he walked with crutches. A missile levelled his home in one of the attacks. “I had been told for forty to fifty years that Americans were our friends,” he reflected. “Americans, with Russians, destroyed fascism together. I survived the Second World War. I was a partisan during the war.” Now war had once again visited Todorovich, but this time he nearly hadn’t survived.

Following our meeting, we visited the site of Todorovich’s home. Nothing remained but blasted concrete and bricks strewn about the area. As we stepped through the rubble, the clinking of bricks underfoot wove a counterpoint to his words. “When I regained consciousness, I saw that

only a small part of skin connected my leg with my body,” he recalled. Although surgery saved Todorovich’s leg, he would remain crippled for the remainder of his life. During his fourteen-week recovery in the hospital, he was in constant pain and suffered a heart attack. One thought persisted in his bedridden state: “The worst way possible – that was the way America chose.”

We strolled down Dushan Trivunac Street, where on April 5 of that year, NATO warplanes wiped out nearly an entire city block. On the night of the attack, Vukoman Djokich heard NATO planes swoop overhead. Djokich knew what the sound meant, and warned his wife, “It’s Aleksinac’s turn now. They are surely going to bomb us.” The sound of planes faded, but two minutes later the noise returned. An instant later an explosion thundered, and Djokich saw a “blazing light.” A second explosion followed in quick succession, filling the house with light and knocking Djokich off his chair. The door to his home blew down, and the roof collapsed. Djokich and his wife managed to pull themselves together and escape through the doorway, where they were confronted by the sight of “huge fire, smoke and a cloud of dust. People were screaming and crying for help.”



Damaged home adjacent to destroyed neighborhood on Vuk Karadzich Street. Photo: Gregory Elich.

Despite the destruction this site had suffered, all of the rubble had been cleared by the time of our visit and it was now a construction site. Neatly stacked bricks and building materials bordered the area, and a dump truck and towering crane stood ready as workers were just departing for lunch. The only sign of the tragedy that had taken place was a neighboring apartment building, still pockmarked by shrapnel from the blasts. Further down the street, at the site of another explosion, the foundation of a new building was already being laid.

Turning down Vuk Karadzich Street, we entered an appealing neighborhood of two-story homes with red tile roofs and balconies lined with flowers. At the end of the street, we came to a

residential area had been bombed on April 5. In a deposition taken two weeks after the attack, Srboljub Stojanovich described the attack. "There was a terrific explosion. The windowpanes burst, the ceiling fell down on us, and the walls collapsed and practically buried us. After that, I could only hear the screams and cries of my family members. My whole body was injured." He and his family managed to dig their way out from under the rubble, but a ghastly sight awaited them. "There were heaps of various construction material, glass, destroyed vehicles, and people coming out and trying to help those who were buried. I could hear cries for help, crying, screams, calls, and all this was horrific."

Thirteen-year-old Dushan Miletich was at home with his brother and parents when NATO planes began to bomb the town. "I remember a terrible explosion, the electricity went off, and then the ceiling, pieces of glass and wood came down on us," he told investigators. "I was injured by this; especially my head, and I could feel the blood trickling down. My parents somehow managed to pull us out through the house window." The force of the blast threw his father, Slavimir, against the wall. "Immediately after that," Slavimir reported, "I felt I was hit on the head by an object, which made me fall to the ground. I felt blood gushing down my face. I stood up and went to the room where my wife was with my two sons, and from where I could hear crying and screams." After their escape through the window, "We ran through smoke and dust, jumping over beams, glass, smashed tiles and bricks. I heard weeping, sobbing and cries for help. There was a family with a baby in the street, seeking shelter." Slavimir's wife, Verica, recalled, "The streets were jammed with people who cried."

As soon as Vukica Miladinovich heard NATO warplanes "flying at an extremely low level making a great noise," she and her family raced to the basement and closed the door. "Immediately after that, two detonations were heard. I had the impression that my body would burst at that moment. At such moments, people lose their minds. The room was shaking like in the worst and strongest earthquake. I stood next to my bed. Air pressure threw me away, but when falling down I still managed to cover my children with my right hand and press them to the bed. The room was in darkness, covered with smoke and dust. The door which was flung out of its frame hit my father-in-law." Vukica's eyeglasses shattered in the blast, damaging her eye. "I wiped the blood pouring from my eye. I became afraid that I had lost my sight, but soon after, although it was dark, I started recognizing shadows. I thought that fire would break out. The basement was stuffy, and there was little air. We were suffocating." She called out to her children and managed to locate them in the darkness. "A bed bar was stuck in my son Marko's leg, but he managed to take it out by himself. I knew that my father-in-law and sister-in-law were dead, and my mother-in-law was hurt. I could not afford to lose any more time." Vukica began frantically digging with her bare hands and legs, trying to open a passageway through all the piled rubble. Then the house began to collapse around her, with debris falling everywhere, but she managed to clear the way and rescue her children and mother-in-law.

Her husband, Bratislav, was away from home when the missiles struck. Arriving on the scene, he was informed of what had happened to his family. His mother was to die in the hospital two days later. The loss of his parents and sister was so devastating to Bratislav that he considered committing suicide.

Danijela Dimitrijevič, president of the Socialist Youth in Aleksinac, acted as our translator and guide. She told us that she had frequent nightmares of hearing an air raid siren, which caused her to awake, thinking the town was going to be bombed. Dimitrijevič described the reaction when she arrived in town for work the morning after the attack. “Everyone was in a big shock. It was unbelievable to us. I didn’t expect to see this. I cried. It was the only possible feeling for me at that moment. Not just me. The whole town cried. The whole town.”

Everyone in Zago Militič’s family was wounded in the attack. She wept as she told us, “We have been friends [with Americans] until now. This is something none of us expected. We always thought they were our friends. I am 65-years-old, and now I must think about finding a new home.”



Damaged home near bombed neighborhood of Nishka and Uzhička Streets. Photo: Gregory Elich.

Photographs of the neighborhood from the day after the bombing showed a staggering level of destruction. Like other sites in Aleksinac, this neighborhood had been largely cleared of rubble by the time of our visit. A power shovel had scooped out most of the debris, and the ground was freshly dug. Adjoining the area, there was a house that had lost most of its roof. Shrapnel had sprayed two apartment buildings near the area, leaving dozens of gaping holes and twisted windows. No sign remained of the destroyed houses except a lone wall with a stairway leading nowhere.

Dragoslav Milenkovič’s home was in one of the damaged apartment buildings. “Everything was shaking, breaking apart. No one knew where it would fall,” he told us. “Large shrapnel smashed through the wall, and everything was on fire.” Milenkovič lost everything he owned. With nowhere else to go, he was staying as a guest in a neighbor’s home.

Angrokolonijal, a food processing plant, was also targeted by NATO on the night of April 5, killing a night watchman. We found the main storage building locked and no one present. Peering through a hole, we saw a devastated interior. The registration office near the gate was a ruin. Across the street, most of the roof was torn away from the Commercial Department auxiliary building. A fence, twisted and bent from the heat of the blast, prevented us from going inside. Based on what we were able to view from one end of the building, we assumed that the interior damage was extensive. By the time of our visit, construction inspectors had already determined that all of these buildings would have to be torn down.

In the next lot was Empa, a worker cooperative that manufactured streetlights and lights for factories and homes. On the periphery of the blast radius at Angrokolonijal on April 5, it would later become a direct target, sustaining more than \$300,000 in damage. The plant's director, Slobodan Todorovich, told us that the attack killed one worker and wounded another. During the war, air raid sirens in the town sounded almost daily, he said, and workers stayed at their posts during the bombardment as a show of resistance to NATO. Empa was hit in the last of NATO's three assaults on Aleksinac. That attack took place in the early morning of May 28, when NATO warplanes fired 21 missiles into the town.

The neighborhood of Nishka and Uzhichka Streets was one of the targets in that last attack. The walls of many brick homes stood eerily erect, but the roofs were gone and the interiors empty. One house appeared to have taken a direct hit. Only a portion of a few walls were still standing, surrounded by piles of rubble. Someone had placed a memorial to one of the victims on a wall. We saw these remembrances everywhere we went in Yugoslavia, posted at the sites where victims had been killed. Single sheets of paper or cloth, posted on walls, trees or telephone poles, displaying a photograph and name of the person killed along with comments. The victims were not forgotten. In a communal society, every person killed was seen as a loss for the whole community.

One woman approached us and spoke of those who died. "When we saw that everything was destroyed, we were crying. We saw that our neighbors were dead and we were shocked." One of those who NATO killed was Dushanka Savich, a technical manager in the local confectionary factory that had sustained severe damage in one of the bombing raids. "She was a very good neighbor," the woman told us. "She regretted that she never had children." I could not help dwelling upon this woman with her failed dream of parenthood. What other dreams did she harbor that now would never be realized? How could she have known that all of her dreams would vanish in an instant, along with her life and all of its joys and struggles and everyday pleasures? Our witness had a message for U.S. President Bill Clinton: "I am not guilty, and my children are not guilty."

Another woman spoke of a man named Predrag Nedeljkovich, killed when an explosion caused a wall to fall on him. He built his home in Aleksinac only the year before. "No mother will ever again give birth to such a man," she said. "He worked very hard in the hospital to help people. He was a man of very good disposition, and he was not ashamed to do anything. He did everything, from cleaning to managing the hospital. He always had time to talk with people, also with sick people. He was not arrogant." He was a man of kind and gentle disposition, and now he was gone. This woman felt nothing but bitterness towards Western leaders. "We came out of hell

but they will not.” There was a pause, and then the emotions welled up within her. “Predrag is here in my heart,” she whispered as she lightly touched the center of her chest. A painful silence fell, and then she burst into tears.