

Sixteenth Anniversary of the War Against Yugoslavia: Surdulica, A “Good Day” for NATO?

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) proclaims its “commitment to maintaining international peace and security.” Mainstream media rarely, if ever, look beyond Western self-justifications and bland assurances of moral superiority, and little thought is given to what NATO’s wars of aggression might look like to those on the receiving end.

During the first two weeks of August, 1999, I was a member of a delegation travelling throughout Yugoslavia, documenting NATO war crimes. One of our stops was at Surdulica, a small town which then had a population of about 13,000. We initially met with management of Zastava Pes, an automotive electrical parts factory that had at one time employed about 500 workers. In better days, annual exports from the plant amounted to \$8 million. Western-imposed sanctions had stopped export contracts and prevented the import of materials, forcing a 70 percent reduction in the workforce and a decline in the local economy.

Staff at Zastava Pes told us that bombs and missiles had routinely rained down upon their town.

We were first taken to a sanatorium, located atop a heavily wooded hill overlooking the town. The sanatorium consisted of a Lung Disease Hospital, which also housed refugees, and a second building that served as a retirement home.

Shortly after midnight on the morning of May 31, 1999, NATO planes launched four missiles at the sanatorium complex, killing at least 19 people. It was not possible to ascertain the precise number of victims because numerous body parts could not be matched to the 19 bodies. Another 38 people were wounded. We were told that the force of the explosions had been so powerful that body parts were thrown as far as one kilometer away. Following the attack, body parts were hanging in the trees, and blood dripped from the branches. By the time of our visit, the area had largely been cleaned up, but we could still see torn clothing scattered high among the branches of the tall trees.

Although only one missile struck the nursing home, it caused enormous damage. We walked around to the back, on the building’s southwestern side. A section of the second floor had collapsed, and the entire side of the building was extensively damaged, with mounds of rubble at the base of the building. On the northeast side of the complex, the building that housed refugees and patients bore a gaping hole in its façade, from which a river of rubble had poured like blood from a wound. We clambered up the mound of rubble and made our way into the building. Debris littered the hallways and in several rooms we found scorched mattresses, clothes and damaged personal belongings jumbled together in disarray. Bricks and chunks of concrete were strewn among the rubble, and a loaf of bread rested against a

child's shirt. In another room, teenage magazines and a child's textbook were mixed among the wreckage. In the center of the room was a child's teddy bear.



Rear of nursing home in Surdulica. Photo: Gregory Elich.

According to the on-site investigation report of June 3, it took three days to dig the bodies from the rubble. The yard outside the Special Lung Hospital “was covered with parts of human bodies, torn heads, arms and hands as well as bodies partly covered with rubble material, dust, broken bricks” and debris from the building. “A torn-off head of a man, approximately 70-years-old, was found outdoors. North from this head, there was another body covered with debris and a torn arm.” Three bodies were a short distance away, including one with a partially damaged head. “Brain tissue...could be seen on some parts of the building ruins,” the report continued.

As refugees from Croatia, nineteen-year-old Milena Malobabich, her mother, and two brothers stayed in the sanatorium. The entire family was killed in the attack. During the air raid, panic-stricken, Milena ran from the building, clutching a notebook in which she had written poetry. The examiner of Milena's body noted: “The brain tissue is completely missing, and there is only dust and sand in the cranial cavity.” Blood had flowed from behind the right ear. Milena's ribs were crushed, and her abdomen and left leg were lacerated. Her notebook was found near her body; on one page she had written in large letters, “I love you, DeJane!” The brain that composed poetry and cherished a man named DeJane was scattered in pieces throughout the yard.

We next visited a residential neighborhood that was completely wiped out by NATO missiles. As we had seen in other towns, a remarkable reconstruction effort was underway. Responsibility for national reconstruction was assigned to the Directorate for National Recovery, which was formed just ten days into the war. An energetic program was soon launched, and destroyed neighborhoods were cleared of debris and construction of new homes began even as NATO continued its attacks.

By the time of our visit, every trace of rubble had been removed from this neighborhood, and the earth smoothed over. A bulldozer and grader were parked nearby, and construction

of two new homes had begun. Surviving residents approached and talked to us, showing us photographs they had taken in the immediate aftermath of the bombing. The level of destruction shown in the photographs was appalling, a jumbled riot of debris where several homes once stood.

We visited a second neighborhood obliterated by NATO missiles. Here too, reconstruction was underway. Smashed automobiles and partially roofless homes bordering the area were the only physical reminders of the tragedy.

In the first neighborhood, a man named Dragan told us that the homes were hit as a result of errant missiles. "They were trying to hit the water supply plant nearby, with two missiles." Another survivor, Zoran Savich told us that sirens sounded every day, and the town was bombed on multiple occasions. Four months had passed since his neighborhood had been hit, but Dragan's son was still so terrified that he fled into the basement every time he heard the sound of an airplane overhead. Quite a long distance away was another of NATO's targets, an army barracks that was abandoned during the war. I climbed atop a large mound of dirt to view the barracks from afar, and saw that it too was damaged. NATO sprayed its bombs and missiles liberally around Surdulica. The destruction of an empty barracks was of doubtful military utility. The targeting of a water supply plant was cruel, but there were no words to adequately characterize the destruction of entire neighborhoods, as we had repeatedly witnessed in our travels. By the end of the war, NATO had destroyed about fifty homes in Surdulica and damaged around 600 more.

One of the bombed homes belonged to Radica Rastich. In a deposition, her neighbor Borica Novkovich recalled, "The sound was like a huge blow on the head. Everything turned over and rolled down the hill. Radica was screaming, screaming, when we came to help her. She was taken from the house all twisted and bent over. She was shaking and shaking; her hands were pressed tight over her ears." Another survivor, Perica Jovanovich, stated, "I'll never forget the strange voice of the bomb. When the plane is flying and drops the bomb the noise changes. It's awful. It's like the static on the radio but so loud, and then there is this awful crash and pressure and everything moves and boils up."

It was a clear day on April 27 when the first neighborhood was bombed. On Jovan Jovanovich Zmaj Street, children were happily playing outside when NATO warplanes made their approach. Hearing the wail of air raid sirens, the children ran into the home of Aleksandar Milich, where they took refuge in the strongest basement in the neighborhood. It was not long before two NATO missiles sailed into that very house. The sound of the blast was deafening, and smoke and dust filled the air. Every home in the area was destroyed, and survivors were screaming as they struggled to escape from under the rubble.

Stojanche Petkovich reported that after hearing the first explosion, he rushed into the Milich home. He was in the upper cellar and about to descend into the lower cellar when the next missile hit the house, hurling him against a wall. "I covered my mouth with my hand to prevent the dust to enter, because there was a cloud of smoke and dust in there. When I recovered a bit after the second explosion, I called out to those from the second basement, but no one answered me. I could see that the ceiling in that part of the basement had collapsed." Moments later, Petkovich heard blocks falling and looked up to see "the ceiling above my head coming down on me. The concrete ceiling was now down, pinning my right lower leg. I was watching the other end of the ceiling also coming down on me, and I saw the iron bars in it stretching. Then everything stopped." It took two hours to pull Petkovich out, the lone survivor from the Milich home. Blood was spattered all around where the cellar

had once been, and the smell of burning flesh filled the air. Every victim was decapitated and dismembered. "Bits of them were all over the road," one man was reported as saying. "We found the head of a child in a garden and many limbs in the mud."

When 65-year-old Vojislav Milich heard the air raid sirens that day, he ran to his home. He was about 100 meters away when he saw the two missiles exploding on his home. "When the smoke vanished, I saw just ruins of my house. It had been razed to the ground, completely torn down. I presumed that all of the members of my family and all of the people from the neighborhood got killed, which unfortunately proved to be true."

The morning after the attack, I read the news on a Yugoslav internet site. There was a photograph of the back of an ambulance, its doors thrown open. Inside were piled chunks of shapeless human flesh, still smoking – remains of the eleven victims, the youngest of whom was only four years old.

Four hours after the attack, the British Ministry of Defense announced that it had been a good day for NATO.

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