

# **Slobodan Milosevic in the Diplomatic Treatment during the Kosovo War Period, during Talks in the British Parliament, 1998–1999 (Abridged)**

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## **Abstract**

The war in Kosovo, the final internal conflict of the Yugoslav Federation, captured the attention of Europe, particularly the United Kingdom. Parliamentary sessions extensively debated the war, with Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic as the central figure, assigning him primary responsibility for the crisis. The British government, led by Prime Minister Tony Blair, elevated the Kosovo events to a foreign policy priority, shifting its focus from Globalism to addressing the ethnic problem in Kosovo. Blair was among the first European politicians to publicly state in the House of Commons that Milosevic was carrying out ethnic cleansing. Despite close British-American cooperation, London viewed the conflict as a continental issue requiring a European resolution. While effectively a war criminal, British policy maintained that Milosevic should only be formally labeled a criminal following judgment by the Hague Tribunal. The significance of Milosevic's treatment is evident in the government-opposition debates, which confronted differing evaluations of his actions. His ultimate decline is traced from his refusal to sign the Rambouillet Agreement. Attention was also given to the role of Russian diplomacy, which was initially praised under Boris Yeltsin for securing humanitarian intervention but later criticized for providing support to Serbia after the launch of NATO bombings. Slobodan Milosevic, the final major political figure of dictatorial Yugoslavia, received comprehensive analysis in British parliamentary talks.

**Keywords:** Slobodan Milosevic, British Parliament, Tony Blair, Kosovo, ONAT.

## **Introduction**

The war in Kosovo demanded the attention of all Europe, especially the United Kingdom. The British Parliament, as the primary legislative and policy-influencing institution, continuously voiced concerns throughout and after the conflict. As a key diplomatic center, London recognized that the war held serious potential for a domino effect across Europe, threatening smaller ethnic groups oppressed by larger nations.

Crucially, the conflict was recognized as stemming from the actions of specific political figures. The British Parliament, with its long tradition of political responsibility, understood the profound impact of figures like Slobodan Milosevic. Throughout the Kosovo War, he was analyzed, investigated, and judged across numerous parliamentary dimensions, aiming to secure a solution beneficial to all parties in Kosovo and Yugoslavia.

### **British Concern about the War in Kosovo**

The political actions of Slobodan Milosevic, President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the principal architect of the war, were a focal point of discussion in both chambers of the British Parliament. As early as 1998, with the onset of Serbian military attacks on Kosovar civilians, the British government warned Milosevic that a conflict in Kosovo, mirroring the one in Bosnia, would severely impact Europe. British embassy personnel in Belgrade regularly reported on the worsening situation.

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Mr. Robin Cook, following a visit to Belgrade in March 1998, declared that while the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) might be committing acts of terror, the use of state force against the civilian population was unacceptable (Cook, R. (10 March 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 308)). Despite the escalating violence, the British government strongly believed in the potential of diplomacy, even after NATO military action began. The immediate goal was to prevent humanitarian crises and ensure the fulfillment of all international diplomatic conditions. However, the consistent failures of diplomacy to curb Serbian actions led to growing disappointment within the British Parliament, though policymakers recognized a political solution was only possible after the repression of civilians ceased—a decision solely in Milosevic's hands (Blair, T. (13 April 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 329)).

Despite diplomatic setbacks, London never advocated for a total war, but rather for military action aimed at enforcing a diplomatic solution. Great Britain played a key role in combat operations as a NATO member, but its most critical contribution was on the political aspect (Badsey & Latawski, 2004). The British government persisted, even against parliamentary objections, in its commitment to military and diplomatic efforts until a result favorable to the humanity in Kosovo was achieved (Cook, R. (19 October 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 317)).

Prime Minister Blair fundamentally shifted British foreign policy—moving away from a principle of non-interference toward military-humanitarian intervention against figures like Milosevic (Wintz, 2010). This policy change paralleled Blair's own professional focus, which moved from globalism to prioritizing the Kosovo crisis (Daddow, 2009). The government accused Milosevic of violating a foundational European principle—the free press—by blocking and blackmailing media outlets (Cook, R. (30 April 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 311)). This led to demands for monitoring mechanisms to verify Yugoslav compliance with international agreements (Symons, E. (12 October 1998). *Kosovo*

[Hansard]. (Vol. 593)), highlighting the deep skepticism of British politics towards Belgrade's commitments.

During the NATO bombings, Great Britain maintained a firm stance. Prime Minister Blair presented evidence to the House of Commons, declaring that Belgrade's deployment of troops and tanks was for the purpose of carrying out ethnic cleansing (Blair, T. (31 March 1999). *Engagements* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)). He acknowledged allied casualties but insisted that the Serbian casualties in Kosovo were intentional. This position was backed by refugee testimonies, which Blair frequently cited as justification for NATO's actions (Blair, T. (28 April 1999). *Engagements* [Hansard]. (Vol. 330)).

The parliamentary opposition largely supported the condemnation of violence but consistently demanded control over the actions of both the Serbs and the armed Kosovar groups. Opposition members were critical of Milosevic's failure to grant a visa to the prosecutor of the international criminal court. During the bombing period, NATO and the British government were accused by some MPs of failing to stop the violence, suggesting the government's approach was merely a "stick and carrot game" aimed only at the Kosovars (Symons, E. (1 February 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 596)).

Post-March 1999, the opposition viewed the bombing as a sign of diplomacy's failure, arguing it was a departure from British foreign policy ethics and violated international conventions by intervening in an internal Yugoslav conflict (Kennet, W. (6 May 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 600)). Accusations were even made regarding the use of depleted uranium, leading to government defensiveness. The government's consistent counter-argument was that the opposition must offer an alternative solution to stop Milosevic if they opposed bombing (Hancock, M. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)). They argued that Milosevic had repeatedly used diplomacy only to gain time for escalating violence against women and children, thereby justifying the military response. Blair's government actively engaged in defending the political necessity of the bombing with facts before its own parliament (Wintz, M. (2010). *Transatlantic Diplomacy and the Use of Military Force in the Post-Cold War Era*).

### **London Diplomacy between Pristina and Belgrade**

British diplomacy involved active participation in assessing the situation and implementing sanctions on Serbia. As early as March 1998, direct monitoring in Kosovo was requested, with R. Cook arguing that if Belgrade had nothing to hide, it should not fear an international presence (Cook, R. (10 March 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 308)). Key sanctions included an arms embargo, a ban on visas for high Yugoslav authorities, and a freeze on investment loans used to fund police activities. There was early concern, however, that these sanctions might inadvertently strengthen nationalist support for Milosevic.

Recognizing Milosevic's difficult negotiating posture, British diplomats emphasized the need for a unified stance from the European Union. June 1998 marked a period of intense diplomatic efforts interspersed with military threats (Blair, T. (10 June 1998). *Engagements* [Hansard]. (Vol. 313)). Foreign Secretary Robin Cook warned Milosevic that the Contact Group plan was his last chance to end the violence (Blair, T. (19 October 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 317)). The seriousness of the situation was underscored in the House of Lords when Baroness Symons stated that Milosevic must comply with Resolution 1199, or force would be used (Symons, E. (12 October 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 593)). This threat yielded immediate diplomatic results, as Milosevic agreed to withdraw military forces, though he maintained his usual tactic of delay (Howard, G. (12 October 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 593)).

Regarding the political future of Kosovo, the British Parliament, from March 1998, requested a United Nations resolution to protect the population. It also supported holding parallel elections in Kosovo, despite Belgrade's opposition, to establish legitimate leadership for diplomatic engagement. Prime Minister Blair, at the beginning of the bombings in March 1999, conditioned the end of Yugoslavia's isolation on Milosevic accepting a peaceful solution for Kosovo, cementing Kosovo as the benchmark for relations with Yugoslavia.

A consistent British diplomatic goal was the inclusion of the Kosovo conflict within Milosevic's crimes to be judged at the International Criminal Court for Yugoslavia in The Hague. Britain was an early financial supporter of these investigations (Morris, J. (12 November 1998). *Foreign Nationals (Prosecution)* [Hansard]. (Vol. 319)). The policy maintained an institutional correctness: Parliament never preemptively declared Milosevic a criminal, but consistently demanded that The Hague's investigative role be expanded. The formal declaration of Milosevic as a war criminal by The Hague came on May 27, 1999, a timing some considered late (Ramet & Pavlaković, V. (2007). *Serbia since 1989 Politics And Society Under Milošević And After*).

London, while fully cooperating with Washington, sought to frame the Kosovo War primarily as a European war with European responsibilities. However, the opposition often pointed out that Serbs feared the Americans more than the British and accused the government of bending its policy to align with US President Clinton, such as initially ruling out a ground attack (Paice, J. (19 April 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 329)). Blair later forcefully asserted that the introduction of ground troops was "decisive and necessary" (Blair, T. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)), a stance that boosted his support at home but led to some criticism from the Americans.

The role of the International Contact Group, of which Britain was a part, was intensely scrutinized. After October 1998, the group drew increasing criticism. Lord Avebury stated that the American leader of the group, Mr. Holbrooke, was leaving Belgrade empty-handed (Lubbock, E. (12 October 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 593)). Holbrooke himself

later informed Robin Cook that Milosevic had never been more challenging (Cook, R. (27 October 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 318)). The increase in scrutiny was largely driven by the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1199 on September 23, 1998, after which Parliament demanded full compliance or military action.

The Recak Massacre in January 1999 marked a turning point. Robin Cook explained that airstrikes had been delayed due to the hope placed in Resolution 1199, but that from this moment, the message to Milosevic would be different (Blair, T. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)). The Rambouillet Agreement was viewed as the most critical diplomatic juncture. The refusal to sign by the Serbian delegation was seen as Milosevic's fatal error. British MPs noted the KLA representatives signed despite their preference for independence, ensuring the political error lay with the Serbs. The refusal led ONAT General Klaus Naumann to declare military intervention necessary (Cook, F. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)). While tragic, the government justified the lack of earlier bombing by the presence of ongoing diplomatic talks. Critically, non-acceptance of Rambouillet's conditions ultimately resulted in the complete withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, a more favorable outcome for Kosovo than the agreement itself would have provided.

The role of Russia was viewed with significant concern. Given its Slavic, Orthodox, and historical ties to the Serbs, its diplomatic influence was decisive. Russia's role was evaluated in two phases:

1. Positive Phase: Russian President Boris Yeltsin was praised in June 1998 for convincing Milosevic to accept humanitarian missions in Kosovo. Russia was also noted to have advised Belgrade to accept the Rambouillet peace terms (Hood, M. (19 April 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 329)).
2. Negative Phase: Following the start of NATO bombings, the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Victor Chernomyrdin to Belgrade shifted the perception. Russia was accused of openly supporting Serbia, even blackmailing former allies like Bulgaria to withhold NATO support (Rawlings, E. (22 April 1999). *Tacis Programme: Ecc Report* [Hansard]. (Vol. 599)). British policy realized Russia's powerful leverage over Milosevic and began to view Moscow as indirectly supporting the ethnic cleansing.

### **British Concern about Dictatorial Yugoslavia**

Though Slobodan Milosevic was the dominant figure, the British Parliament did not ignore his corrosive influence on the Yugoslav Federation. The regime and Milosevic were seen as a detrimental symbiosis. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook emphasized that European Union sanctions must target Milosevic's repressive capacity, not the innocent population. Parliament expressed concern that Milosevic's actions—choosing repression and

conflict—were isolating the Yugoslav people from the European community (Cook, R. (30 April 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 311)).

Within the Federation, the welfare of Serbia was of equivalent concern to Kosovo. Cook stressed that the arms embargo, fund freezes, and visa restrictions were designed to target those escalating the conflict, not the poor Serbian population (Cook, R. (30 April 1998). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 311)). Serbia was seen as a country held hostage by Milosevic, whose presence was a barrier to European investment and the establishment of democratic institutions (Blair, T. (8 June 1999). *Kosovo Cologne European Summit* [Hansard]. (Vol. 332)). Parliament also sought to ensure humanitarian standards for Kosovo Serbs, though noting their post-war suffering was not comparable to the atrocities committed by the Serbian army against the Kosovar population.

Milosevic was widely seen as an "irrational statesman" (Gilbert, J. (6 May 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 600)), destroying and impoverishing his own people while believing Western attacks would never materialize. His actions—censoring the free press (closing down B92 radio) and denying democratic rights—were recognized as the greatest damage to Serbia. The aim of the NATO bombing was defined as defeating the repressive capacity of Slobodan Milosevic, not the Yugoslav army (Robertson, G. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)).

Parliamentary debate also considered the root cause of the conflict, which many MPs traced to Serbian nationalism (Tyrie, A. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)), which Milosevic had stimulated. There was deep concern over who might replace him, as figures like Vojislav Šešelj, who had committed atrocities in Bosnia, were viewed as potentially "more dangerous" (Maples, J. (17 June 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 333)). This indicated that British policy required a careful approach to any post-Milosevic leadership, scrutinizing their nationalist goals.

A key challenge was persuading the Serbian people to turn against Milosevic (King, T. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)), which was considered a "greater victory than the victory of air attacks." MPs expressed genuine sympathy for the Serbs, historically strong allies, but recognized their current plight was due to Milosevic's extreme nationalist influence (Mohan, A. (25 March 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 328)). Prime Minister Blair himself appealed to British traditions to support the victims of Milosevic's regime, regardless of direct national impact (Blair, T. (13 April 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 329)).

Parliamentary opinion was divided on the bombing's impact: the anti-bombing group argued that the policy had united Milosevic's opponents and exacerbated the refugee crisis (Tapsell, P. (13 April 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 329)). Conversely, Blair insisted that Milosevic alone was the creator of victims and massacres, having manipulated his people through propaganda. The Prime Minister pointed out that by refusing to sign Rambouillet, Milosevic had betrayed the Kosovo Serbs by denying them the cultural,

economic, and religious protection the agreement would have guaranteed (Cook, R. (17 June 1999). *Kosovo* [Hansard]. (Vol. 333)).

## Conclusions

The Kosovo War represented the end of an era and the eventual fall of a dictator unfamiliar to modern Europe. The debates in the British Parliament demonstrated a clear sense of duty and responsibility, particularly given Britain's historical role in the South Slav state since 1918. London recognized the necessity of intervention when a state's leadership spirals out of control, threatening regional stability and human life.

Slobodan Milosevic was unanimously assessed as a dictator, and the objective was to end not only his rule but the very dictatorial concept in Europe. Parliamentary discussions were focused on deriving lessons for the future and preventing any subsequent nationalist revenge or retribution.

British policy showed equal concern for both Kosovo and an unhumiliated Serbia. It was mandated that while the Kosovar people must be protected, there should be no vengeful actions against the Serbian population in Kosovo after the war. The ONAT (NATO) bombing was subject to rigorous parliamentary oversight to ensure its sole purpose remained the cessation of Milosevic's aggression and the restoration of a power balance between Serbia and Kosovo.

The comprehensive documentation of the British Parliament provides a vital framework for understanding the conflict. It proves that the British state was determined to maintain the balance of forces and utilize democratic mechanisms to bring those responsible for atrocities to justice. The Kosovo War was not only the last in the Yugoslav series but the necessary mechanism for initiating the downfall of a detrimental dictatorial figure.

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