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History and politics influence Israeli debate over NATO action

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JERUSALEM - Israelis are divided over NATO's military campaign against Serbia - and opinions and policy are being informed as much by history and the Holocaust as by current political realities.

Israeli sympathy for the Serbs, who were fellow victims of the Nazis during World War II, is countered by the images of massacres and streams of refugees as ethnic Albanians flee their native Kosovo.

Some 72 percent of Israelis support Israel's relief efforts for the ethnic Albanians fleeing Kosovo, according to a poll by the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke for many when he said last week: "Israel condemns the massacre being carried out by the Serbs and denounces any mass murder."

Others, recalling how some Albanians actively supported the Nazis, find themselves less sympathetic to the plight of the Kosovar Albanians. And still others, believing that the "friend of my enemy is my enemy," are focused on the outside support for the Kosovo Liberation Army, which spearheaded the fight for independence from Serbia before Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic clamped down on the region with an iron fist.


Elyakim Haetzni, an outspoken supporter of Israeli nationalism, lashed out last week at the "leftists" who in their support for the Kosovo refugees are "ignoring the fact that the KLA was collaborating with the Iranians and other enemies of Israel."

But even left-wing Israelis are not unanimous in support of the NATO raids. Among them is Raul Teitelbaum, a veteran journalist who at the end of 1943 was among the Jews of Prizren, Kosovo, who were put on a transport to Bergen-Belsen by members of an Albanian division working on behalf of the Nazi SS.

"Of course, there were among the Albanians those who fought against the Nazis," Teitelbaum told JTA. "But those who now say that the Albanians were known to have given shelter to the Jews are manipulating history."

"Clinton says the bombings in Yugoslavia are a lesson of the Holocaust," Teitelbaum added. "How can one compare this with the Holocaust? How can tiny Serbia be compared with a world power like Nazi Germany? How can Milosevic be compared with Hitler?"

Teitelbaum also questioned the effectiveness of the NATO raids. "In a way, President Bill Clinton is the best ally of President Milosevic," he said. "Thanks to the bombings, there is no longer any (internal) opposition to Milosevic. Thanks to the bombings,



Milosevic is able to carry out ethnic cleansing on a scope he had never dreamed of before."

On the other side of the divide, people such as Labor Knesset member Shlomo Ben-Ami, a historian, had only praise for the NATO operation. In his view, the operation has changed international norms of behavior in the face of atrocities that used to be considered "an internal matter."

"Kosovo is a belated response to the Nazis," said Ben-Ami. "From now on, intervention on a moral and humanitarian level is justified."

He conceded - as the Pentagon has already done - that the NATO strikes were unable to stop Serbian roundups of the ethnic Albanians.

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