# RUINS: LANDMINES AND COLONIALISM IN KOSOVO

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## Abstract

With current demining efforts, it will take 1100 years to rid the earth of the landmines contaminating it. We have no choice but to live with them. This project aims to analyze the impact of landmines in Kosovo, planted by several outsider and insider military actors during the Kosovo War. Landmines mainly affect civilians, and in Kosovo they have been left primarily by invading forces, which essentially lead this project to view landmines as imperial ruins -- a product of a colonial empire meant to last in the bodies and landscapes of Kosovars even after its fall.

*Keywords:* Landmines; post-war; ruins

## Introduction

I met Agim in the outskirts of Prishtina. The purpose of my project was to interview deminers in order to learn about the labor of the extended temporality of war and its slow violence. This project was more than just an academic endeavor; it was something that affected me personally. During my childhood, the peacekeeping corps often handed out pamphlets warning us of the dangers of retrieving a ball if it fell into a mined area. As time passed, landmines became less and less present in my life. I had forgotten about landmines until I took a class focusing on them, and started researching whether there were any left in Kosovo. Although landmines were removed quite efficiently in urban areas, a number of them remain by the borders of Kosovo.

Agim and I decided to meet for coffee at a local bakery. During my drive to meet him, I passed by Gërmia Regional Park, a large park where the people of Prishtina go to escape the city on the weekend. There were families on picnics, children and adults playing soccer, fast food stands, and young artists playing their music, among others. In a setting like that, it was easy to forget that Gërmia used to be enclosed -- it was a minefield. Then, there is a story every now and then of a jogger finding unexploded ordnance, and having to call

the explosive ordnance disposal unit. Suddenly, the temporality of war becomes complicated. Although the war ended over 20 years ago, its remains are still waiting to kill and maim. Inevitably, the realization hits: the landscape might still be weaponized. The objects left by war actively continue to kill and shape the postwar present. Since the war was a culmination of a colonial project in Kosovo, landmines are entangled with empire. In exploring this entanglement, I will provide a history of the colonial projects in Kosovo, along with a history of the emergence of landmines within this territory. While landmines act upon the world around them, their agency is inherently linked with the Yugoslav colonial project of Kosovo.

This article provides a historical account of landmines in Kosovo and their intertwining with the Yugoslav colonial project there. Based on the historical use of landmines, power asymmetry in war, as well as the colonial history of the place, I conceptualize landmines as imperial ruins – an object of imperial architecture imprinted in the bodies and landscape of the people of Kosovo. These objects continue to harm and dictate the use of space long after the colonial empire has perished.

## Methodology

This research is based on semi-structured interviews with deminers and former Kosovo Liberation Army members conducted between the months of June to August of 2019, as well as a period of one month between December 2019 and January of 2020. Interviews which took place during the summer were done in-person, while due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the interviews during winter were done through phone calls. An important part of the methodology of this article is the anonymity of those interviewed. KLA members were crucial to this project due to their participation in the war and knowledge of landmine use. It is worth noting that the majority of deminers are former KLA members, and their perspective was required for this research to understand the present as well as the historical

context of landmine presence in Kosovo.

## Remains of War and Empire

The 1999 war in Kosovo left more than landmines. It left bodies, too. In Batajnica, a neighborhood in Belgrade, a mass grave of Kosovo Albanians laid. The site was a police training center where 704 dead bodies were identified, and it was estimated that there are as many as 1000 (Ristic 2018a), and those were not the only ones. Vlastimir Djordjevic, a former high official in the interior ministry was prosecuted and found guilty of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Djordjevic testified the following:

“Yes, I was involved when trucks with bodies were coming to Batajnica [a mass grave near Belgrade], but I didn’t know when the crimes were committed. I didn’t confront those who tried to mask and hide the crimes and I didn’t take any measures to find those responsible for war crimes, which I was supposed to do.” (Ristic 2018b)

Another mass grave was found in Serbia, close to the Kosovo border, in 2010. The mass grave contained 250 bodies, the site was under the ownership of a state-owned road construction company, and had been built in 1999 after the Kosovo War. The bodies were carried out by the Serbian Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, SAJ. (The Guardian, 2010). As of now, 1,600 people -- mainly ethnic Albanians -- are listed as missing from the Kosovo War (Bami). These remains are outside of the borders of Kosovo, and the search for the missing continues to this day. Serbia never paid reparations. Furthermore, its government will not grant access to its military archives, as they argue they are state secrets (Bami). The war in Kosovo has left its remains, and now, 20 years after, the people of Kosovo have to live with them and search for them.

When I finally met Agim, he had just finished his shift and was still wearing the uniform of the Kosovo Security Forces, one with the explosive ordnance disposal badge on it. Before he became a deminer, he was a regular soldier at Kosovo Protection Corps. Before that, when he was 18, he had joined the Kosovo Liberation Army guerillas. He began his story by describing the oppression that Kosovar Albanians had faced under the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. He described

the protests he would attend with his friends against the dictatorship, and the beatings that they would receive by the riot police. The violence of the regime eventually led to an armed struggle for liberation by the Kosovo guerillas, which he was part of.

Agim’s military career started as a fight against Yugoslav oppression. Now, over 20 years after the war, it continues as a fight against the remains of it. The Kosovo War was the culmination of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia’s oppression against ethnic Albanians. The war, along with its brutality, is still deeply embedded in the minds of the Kosovo people. Peace was decreed, but landmines complicated the temporality of war. Rather than an outburst of violence which ends with the peace accords, landmines show that the violence continues. They embody a slow violence, stretched over time which is constantly present in low intensity, targeting those who are vulnerable (Nixon, 2013). While the war might have ended, its violence still lives in the landscape.

In Kosovo, landmines go beyond slow violence. They also tell the story of a colonial past. Since the 19th century, the imperial project of Yugoslavia has been to cleanse the land of Kosovo from ethnic Albanians. In 1878, tens of thousands of Albanians were expelled from their lands. This continued with the formation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1953, where imperialist policies led to the expulsion of tens of thousands of Albanians once more. (Qirezi, 50) The war itself is a culmination of this project, which succeeded in the expulsion of between 800,000 and 1 million Kosovo Albanians from their lands (Qirezi, 53). The war is over, and some of its imperial architects are dead. However, landmines remain and still dictate which spaces are habitable and in which ways. This further enforces the conceptualization of landmines as imperial ruins which continue to actively cause ruination after the empire is long dead.

By 1999 landmines were most concentrated along the border between Kosovo and Albania, restricting access between the two places. This concentration is not a coincidence. Looking at the colonial history of Kosovo, the next section shows that landmines materialized around the border as Yugoslav rule attempted to separate the Albanian ethnic identity in Kosovo from that in Albania.

## A History of Colonialism in Kosovo

In 1878, the Serbian regime expelled 49,000

Albanians from its southern regions, which intensified ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs (Stefanovic, 470). This was just the beginning of the imperial project in Kosovo. By the end of the century, officials of the Serbian government began to describe Albanians as “wild tribes'' with “cruel instincts”; the intellectual class joined in on the propaganda as well (Stefanovic, 472). A Serbian politician and public health expert described Albanians as “bloodthirsty, stunted, animal like” and although “the human tail had withered away [...] among the Albanians there seem to have been humans with tails as late as the nineteenth century” (Gay, 82). The imperial project in Kosovo preceded the SFRY. In 1936, Vasa Cubrilovic, a Bosnian Serb academic, presented his work titled “The Expulsion of the Albanians”. Cubrilovic argued that the colonization of Kosovo had been too slow, hence he proposed more aggressive policies (Cubrilovic, 100). His proposal was that fertile lands should be taken from Albanians, a series of expensive taxes be introduced, and several policies that make life harder for Albanians in Kosovo be implemented (Cubrilovic, 110). Furthermore, Cubrilovic proposed that the Serbian government secretly fund and assist Chetniks, a paramilitary royalist organization, and that riots be incited then brutally suppressed (Cubrilovic, 111). According to him, gradual colonization would not work, with one of the reasons being “the fecundity of Albanian women which defeated our colonization policy” (Cubrilovic, 130). Thus, “the only effective means of solving this problem is the mass expulsion of the Albanians” (Cubrilovic, 129). Cubrilovic held positions of several ministries throughout his career in the SFRY after World War II.

Since the founding of the SFRY, Albanians had not enjoyed equal rights as other ethnic groups. The

1946 Constitution listed major ethnic groups which enjoyed “equality of rights and duties and equal standing”. These ethnic groups listed were south slavic -- the list did not include Albanians (Neofotistos, 886). The SFRY president, Josip Broz Tito, attempted to form the Yugoslav identity, rather than further existing ethnic identities. Thus, Albanians were counted only as Yugoslavs in the constitution. In attempts to replace Albanian identity with a Yugoslav one, the first measures were to try and separate Kosovo Albanians and Albanians from Albania. The SFRY regime started to separate the language based on the dialects spoken. Since Kosovo Albanians speak the Gheg dialect, and those from Albania speak the Tosk dialect, it was a relatively easy distinction to make. Josip Broz Tito’s regime referred to Gheg Albanian as Siptarski, while Tosk Albanian as Albanski (Neofotistos, 886). This separation was crucial to attempts to construct the identity of Kosovo Albanians as separate.

However, this was not only a discursive project. By turning to this history, the positioning of landmines in Kosovo shows the material aspects of it. By 1999, once the war ended, the areas that were most densely mined in Kosovo were along its southwestern border. Unsurprisingly, this is the border between Kosovo and Albania. Landmines were placed there by imperial architecture as early as the 1970s, and are the remnants of the Titoist intentions for a separation between Kosovo Albanians and Albanians from Albania. Although Tito is dead, and the SFRY non-existent, landmines not only continue to be a reminder of the imperial projects, but they also act as agents of it. The maiming and killing by landmines continues to enforce the Yugoslav project in the landscape and bodies of the people of Kosovo.



Fig.1 Landmine and UXO Contaminated Areas in Kosovo 1999 (Sada, 5)

What had started as a promising socialist project, had become a brutal regime for the people of Kosovo. While the SFRY might have been indeed socialist for its other republics and provinces, it was nothing more than another colonial empire for the people of Kosovo. The previous racializations that had formed Kosovo Albanians as a different race persisted. During the 1950s and 1960s, ethnic cleansing continued to happen, where hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians were forced to flee to Turkey as a result of deals between Alexander Rankovic, the Yugoslav minister of interior affairs, and the Turkish foreign minister, Memet Fuat Koprulu (Qirezi, 50). During this time, ethnic Serbian and Montenegrin settlers were installed in Kosovo. Simultaneously, monuments were being constructed throughout Kosovo, signifying the slogan of *brotherhood and unity*, which intended to portray a multiethnic society of tolerance and equality -- yet, the actions of the Yugoslav functionaries were the very opposite of that. Just like landmines, these monuments still remain in Kosovo.

A few years after the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the fascist Serb political leader Slobodan Milosevic rose to power in Yugoslavia. Milosevic applied harsh nationalist rhetoric, especially directed towards Kosovo Albanians. During this time the SFRY became the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, consisting of Serbia as the center, with Montenegro as the other republic, and Kosovo as the target of potential threat. The period of Milosevic’s rule was characterized by mass oppression of ethnic Albanians. Since the vast majority of the population of Kosovo were ethnic Albanians, Kosovo was Milosevic’s main target. Kosovo Albanians were massively fired from their jobs, especially civil servants and those whose work wielded political power, by 1990 it is estimated that around 80% of Albanians were fired from public sector jobs (Qirezi, 50). The Milosevic regime set up an apartheid system in Kosovo (Qirezi, 39). The tactics of the regime also used brutal violence in quelling protests, acts of state terrorism such as poisoning primary and high school students by cafeteria food, executions of Kosovo Albanian military personnel, etc. As ethnic Albanian resistance rose in the form of armed struggle, Milosevic and his regime resorted to ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Albanian population in Kosovo.

The oppression turned into an asymmetrical war between the Yugoslav Army and Kosovo Albanian guerillas. Over 13,000 people were killed during the war -- the vast majority of them ethnic Albanians

(Domanovic 2014). Over 1,000 ethnic Albanian children were murdered (Begisholli and Fana 2019). Over 20,000 ethnic Albanian women and girls were raped (Haxhiaj 2018). None of the victims of these crimes have gotten recognition from the now Serbian state, let alone reparations.

The atrocities committed against Kosovo Albanians during the war led to the NATO intervention, a series of bombings across Kosovo and Serbia led by NATO. The bombings lasted four months, targeting Yugoslav bases in Kosovo, as well as several locations across Serbia, considering it was the political center of the Yugoslav regime. The bombing campaign led to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ending the genocide, and the liberation of Kosovo was declared. The war officially ended.

What was left, however, were landmines and ruins. During the bombings, the cluster bombs which the North Atlantic Peace Treaty dropped, separated into 289,563 bomblets, 10% of which did not explode (ICRC, 8). Although, there are different estimations, which hold that the failure rate of these bomblets exploding is as high as 20%. The NATO unexploded ordnance are responsible for 1300 contaminated areas (Sada, 4). Furthermore, the FRY was responsible for 620 mined areas in Kosovo by the end of the war (Sada, 1). In total, there are 1920 contaminated areas (Sada, 4).

Although the imperial project provided the blueprint, the battlefield was the optimal opportunity for upscaling landmine use in general, and in Kosovo in particular. It is important to understand what mechanisms allowed landmines to become a major problem. In order to provide insight into this, the next section will focus on the history of how landmines became popular, and how they were used in Kosovo. I argue that landmines are effective only through military-state apparatus which allow for their use en-masse. The Yugoslav colonial rule was the sole owner of this apparatus, and as such was most effective in the use of landmines. The imperial structure of rule in Kosovo and its role in the use of landmines further lead this article to conceptualize them as imperial ruins.

## Historical Emergence of Landmines and Their Use in Kosovo

The question of how landmines came to be, and what accounts for their popularity is crucial in order to understand what a landmine is and what its effects are. There are many examples throughout

history that one could point to and shout that it is a landmine; however, one should also note that all landmines “before the twentieth century were used in relatively small numbers'' (Monin and Gallimore, 40). Examples before the twentieth century can include the fougasse, which was a hole dug in the ground and filled with gunpowder, rocks, and metal fragments” (Monin and Gallimore, 40). Once the gunpowder would be detonated, the approaching party would be hit with debris and rocks. The caltrop is an even earlier example, “a piece of metal twisted to produce four spikes'' (Monin and Gallimore, 45). Unlike the fougasse, the caltrop is victim-operated, where -- similar to a landmine -- it lies in wait. As mentioned earlier, the scale of these early objects, which could be classified as landmines, is not nearly as large as that of modern landmines. Instead, the technological aspect of landmines has to be highlighted here.

The First World War is the period when mines started to become significant on the battlefield, and resulted in the contamination of the world. They were developed “against the backdrop of rapidly accelerating industrialisation” (Monin and Gallimore, 40). This was the first war where weapons could be mass-produced, where there “was one war in the field, and another in the arms factories” (Monin and Gallimore, 42). It was the terrifying new technologies that resulted in the invention of landmines. The invention of the tank is one that also contributed to the rise of the landmine. The tank was an invention that was “capable of driving through trenches and barbed wire” (Monin and Gallimore, 43). Since the Germans “had developed a strong defensive mentality during the war” they were the first to develop the anti-tank mine (Monin and Gallimore, 44). However, the anti-personnel landmine did not become useful in the battlefield until the Second World War. In the war between Russia and Finland in 1939-1940, the Finnish made “extensive use of ‘cast-iron fragmentation mines’” (Monin and Gallimore, 49). Furthermore, the invention of the S-Mine is one that became popularized and “is still copied extensively today” (Monin and Gallimore, 49). This is a landmine with two explosions, one so the landmine would be launched into the air, and another once in the air, where steel fragments would discharge “up to 30 meters” (Monin and Gallimore, 49). Thus, while there are historical examples of landmines before the twentieth century, it is not until the twentieth century, with industrialization and mass production, that landmines became significant. It was the

emerging technologies that were changing the way warfare was conducted in the First World War and the landmine was one of them. For landmines to have power, industrialization was needed. How does this historical understanding of landmines then relate to landmine use in Kosovo?

There were two sides that used landmines in Kosovo: the Kosovo Liberation Army -- a guerilla force of Kosovo Albanians fighting for independence, and the Federal Yugoslav Army. Both sides used landmines; however, the extent was largely asymmetrical. The Federal Yugoslav Army already had access to landmines and other weapons as they were an established army. Yugoslavia also had produced anti-personnel landmines since before the Second World War, and after the war it was one of the top ten producers (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor). The Yugoslav Army did “adhere quite carefully to military doctrine, and the use of mines was generally recorded in some form” (ICRC, 15).

The KLA, as a guerilla force, did not have a stockpile of weapons. The structures of did not dispose of the necessary infrastructures to mass produce, nor mass transport landmines such that they can be useful in war. Thus, the KLA used mines “sparingly, possibly because their soldiers often operated on foot and carrying large quantities of mines [was] simply not practical” (ICRC, 15).

The flow of weapons mainly came from Albania as a result of the weapons storage looting. The Albanian Revolts of 1997 had left Albania disorganized and poor. However, as a result of this the KLA was able to attain weapons including mines. During the revolt, the people of Albania seized and looted weapons storages, and then sold them to the KLA. A large amount of these weapons were manufactured in China, before the Albanian-Sino split during communist times.

However, it is important to note that they were not able to use mines on a large scale and as efficiently as an army. The landmines did not have as much power for the KLA, as they did for a state-backed army. As mentioned earlier, landmines became popular as a result of industrialization and mass production. However, in order for this mass production to be significant, one needs mass transportation, which is difficult to achieve outside of state-power. The asymmetry in power between the KLA and Yugoslavia reflects in the use of landmines. Landmines were useful for the powerful,

and useless for the powerless.

## Landmines as Imperial Ruins

The asymmetry of power involved in the use of landmines in Kosovo leads this article to conceptualize landmines as imperial ruins. Landmines are not simply leftovers from a dead regime, they still continue to omit political power and shape the way in which people inhabit contaminated landscapes. Stoler argues that ruination “is an act perpetrated, a condition to which one is subject” (Stoler, 195). There is intentionality in landmines beyond war, landmines as ruins are meant to continue destroying certain people and places after war ends and continue to do so even after the empire is long gone. They are “political projects” and to “think with the ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artifacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present” (Stoler, 196). Stoler also argues that imperial projects “are themselves processes of ongoing ruination, processes that “bring ruin upon,” exerting material and social force in the present.” (Stoler, 195). Landmines then are meant to continue causing harm, as part of such imperial projects. They are also “made but not just by anyone, anytime, or anywhere” (Stoler, 202). She argues that large-scale “ruin making takes resources and planning that may involve forced removal of populations and new zones of uninhabitable space,

reassigning inhabitable space, and dictating how people are supposed to live in them” (Stoler, 202). Thus, “these ruin-making endeavors are typically state projects, ones that are often strategic” (Stoler, 202). The Yugoslav project in Kosovo has ended, yet its shadow haunts and harms through the material remains of its weaponry. The concept of imperial ruins is fitting and powerful in its critique. The violence that continues is deliberate – a project with imperial architects, many of whom are still alive today.

## Conclusion

The historical emergence and use of landmines is tied to power asymmetries. In Kosovo, they were tools of a colonial project which intended to cleanse the land of the Albanian population and prevent their return. As a narrative distinction of racial difference between two types of Albanians (those of Kosovo and those of Albania) was created by Yugoslav rule, landmines came into play. They were the material product of the narrative distinction -- drawn across racial lines to limit interaction between the newly created identities. As the war proliferated landmines, they became an extension of colonial violence. Although peace accords were signed, the slow violence continues to act as a shadow of empire to this day. Landmines continue to act as imperial agents dictating which ways one can inhabit a space, and which spaces are inhabitable in the first place.

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