

Sean M. Maloney. *Operation Kinetic: Stabilizing Kosovo*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. Pp 512.

In the 1990s Canada was involved in three major operations in Kosovo. The first was Operation Kimono from October 1998 to March 1999 as part of the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM). The purpose of the KVM was to monitor the cease fire by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and prevent further human rights abuses towards Kosovo's Albanian population. Operation Kimono ended in March 1999 when human rights abuses continued despite the KVM's presence. Canada's second major involvement in Kosovo was through Operation Allied Force, a seventy-eight-day air campaign from 24 March 1999 to 10 June 1999 against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia intended to force them to withdraw from Kosovo and create peace in the region. The final major involvement was Operation Kinetic between June 1999 and June 2000. Operation Kinetic was Canada's contribution to NATO's peacekeeping force, Kosovo Force (KFOR), which operated inside of Kosovo when the bombing campaign ended. In *Operation Kinetic: Stabilizing Kosovo*, military historian Sean Maloney aims to tell the story of Canada's third and final major involvement and mission in Kosovo as well as Canada's contribution to the overall stabilisation of Kosovo. It is meant to be an in-depth examination of how the international community transitioned from a small observer force, the KVM, to KFOR. However, the book does not deal with Canada's role in Operation Allied Force (NATO's seventy-eight-day air campaign). This sets *Operation Kinetic* apart from other books on the Kosovo War.

Operation Kinetic comes in three parts. The first part, "Background," gives a "quick and dirty" primer on the Balkans and tells the history of Kosovo starting in 1389 (p. 1). The aim of this section is to help the reader understand the complexity of Kosovo and the cause of Canada's involvement. Part two, "Crisis in Kosovo," analyses the events and human rights abuses that led to the international community's involvement in Kosovo. The final part, "Canada and KFOR Operations," explains the operational context, the tactical activities and, most importantly, the challenges faced by the Canadian Forces.

In *Operation Kinetic* Maloney is highly critical of a number of actors involved in the Kosovo War and the post-war stabilisation of

Kosovo. On the failure of diplomatic negotiations to avoid war at the Rambouillet Conference he asserts, “In the end the Kosovar Albanian delegation remained as intransigent as the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] delegation” (p. 82). But the Kosovar Albanian delegation signed the agreement presented and the FRY delegation did not. In addition, Maloney refers to Canadian bureaucrats as “fear-filled” and “skittish” (p. 374). Not surprisingly, he uses testimonies of soldiers who are highly critical of bureaucrats, but he rarely attempts to offer the historical and political context and there is no indication that he tried to interview any of those he is critical of. Maloney also criticises the Americans’ “serious confusion” about ground troops, and attributes their mixed messages to an attempt to “contain Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, and Monica Lewinsky all at the same time” (p. 64). He is highly critical of the media’s coverage of the air war explaining that, “the war of perceptions and the air war became indistinguishable, as commentators dissected the voice and word usage of NATO spokespersons, attempted to decipher hidden subliminal messages and *facilitated Belgrade’s attempts to distort reality for their purposes*” [emphasis added] (p. 102). According to Maloney, while the media was busy exaggerating the “miniscule” number of collateral casualties from the air campaign, they were neglecting to report on the buildup of KFOR. He concludes, “the pessimism of the media commentators, however, could not compete with the resolve and grim professional determination that resonated throughout the NATO forces” (p.103). Again, there is no evidence of any attempt by Maloney to present the media’s perspective or the reasoning for their coverage. A recently published book by Canadian historian Bob Bergen, *Scattering Chaff: Canadian Air Power and Censorship During the Kosovo War*, challenges Maloney’s assertion that the media alone was to blame for the lack of transparency during the Kosovo War by explaining that despite attempts of journalists to cover the Kosovo War fairly, their efforts were thwarted by restrictive media policies of both NATO and the Canadian government.¹

Maloney can be considered a “straight shooter,” but his biggest problem is shooting at the wrong target. This is most evident when he deals with the Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës (UÇK), also known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Maloney repeatedly accuses

¹ Bob Bergen, *Scattering Chaff: Canadian Air Power and Censorship During the Kosovo War* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2019).

the KLA of having connections, of all sorts, with al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists. He states, “The lure of weapons training proved too great for some young Kosovar Albanians, and a number made their way to Taliban-dominated Afghanistan to train with the al Qaeda terror network run by Osama bin Laden” (p. 41). The sole source for this accusation is a confidential interview. While it is not uncommon to use confidential interviews, other sources discredit Maloney’s claim, most notably *Liberating Kosovo: Coercive Diplomacy and U.S. Intervention* by David Phillips, a former diplomat and one of the leading American experts on Kosovo. As Phillips explains,

Serbian propaganda tried to discredit the KLA by fabricating links to Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists. Media reports surfaced that the KLA was being trained by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard and that Al Qaeda was providing funds. It is correct that Al Qaeda established a network of charities in Albania...an Egyptian national did, in fact, approach the KLA offering money and weapons on behalf of Al Qaeda; however, the envoy was rebuffed. The KLA’s war of liberation was not about religion. Foreign fighters saw Kosovo as an opportunity for holy war, but Albanians were engaged in a struggle for national liberation.²

Thus, while Maloney criticises the media for facilitating Belgrade’s attempts to distort reality for its own purposes, evidence suggests he may be falling into the same trap twenty years later. As proof of this, Maloney uses the instructions that came from Western nations that individual advisors and freedom fighters from other states should be withdrawn from Kosovo within thirty days. “It was time for the mujaheddin to go home,” he says (p. 137). However, this is more likely referring to Albanians from other countries who went to Kosovo to fight in hopes of liberating their home country, such as the “Atlantic Brigade” which consisted of fire fighters from the Bronx. Phillips acknowledges that in 1998, twenty-two mujaheddin showed up wanting to join the KLA. However, he explains that they were largely wiped out in an accident before making it into Kosovo.³ It is important to note, that some of the soldiers interviewed for *Operation Kinetic* refer to the mujahedeen as well. This is unsurprising since,

² David L. Phillips, *Liberating Kosovo: Coercive Diplomacy and U.S Intervention* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 70.

³ Phillips, *Liberating Kosovo*.

as has been acknowledged, this was a concern in both the media and intelligence at the time. However, it is the responsibility of the historian to both present memories and put them into historical context, enlightening the facts.

In the third part of the book, Maloney is in his element when writing about the details of Operation Kinetic and the structure of the Canadian military. He illustrates the difficulties the Canadian units overcame to become instrumental in preventing violence and stabilising post-war Kosovo despite not being given their own sector. The biggest strength of this book is the depth, vulnerability and candidness of the recollections Maloney is able to obtain from his interviewees. Soldiers reflect candidly on their fears: “it was quite scary, especially at night. We had NVGs [night vision goggles], but you can’t see jack shit” (p. 180); their triumphs: “it was like a World War II movie, the Canadians going through Holland. It was a terrific send-off” (p. 164), and their frustrations: “minute by minute management by Ottawa [is] frustrating - call it tyranny of real time” (p. 245). Soldiers also reflect on the toll of digging up mass graves, working near hazardous material and working with so many other countries, including Russia.

In his acknowledgments, Maloney laments that after the events of 11 September 2001 and the wars that followed, “the Balkans had seemingly become irrelevant, and publishers made that point clear” (p. xvi). Though the blame does not lie solely with the publishers, it is an unfortunate reality that Maloney’s assessment is right. Unlike many historians, Maloney attempts to present adequate historical background of Kosovo. However, this commendable effort is complicated by the inaccuracies. It is when Maloney is in his element, describing military operations, technologies and eliciting testimony from soldiers that *Operation Kinetic* is the most useful. Despite some setbacks, *Operation Kinetic* still represents a valuable contribution to the field of Canada/Kosovo relations and the Kosovo War.