

The evolution of British foreign policy during the Balkan wars of the 1990s represents one of the most significant shifts in modern UK diplomacy. The UK shifted from a policy of **neutral containment and arms embargoes** during the [Bosnian War \(1992–1995\)](#)—which critics argued implicitly favored the heavily armed aggressor—to **aggressive humanitarian intervention** during the [Kosovo War \(1999\)](#). [1]

The breakdown below details how the British government's stance was heavily criticized in Bosnia, how it "changed over," and how it shaped the actions taken in Kosovo.

The Comparison: Bosnia vs. Kosovo Policy

Feature	The Bosnian War (1992–1995)	The Kosovo War (1999)
UK Prime Minister	John Major (Conservative)	Tony Blair (New Labour)
Initial Stance	Neutrality, containment, and maintaining the UN arms embargo.	Active deterrence, ultimatums, and demanding regional autonomy.
Accusation of "Backing the Wrong Side"	Sustaining an arms embargo that left Bosnian Muslims defenseless against heavily armed Serb forces.	Initial reluctance to back the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) due to its guerrilla tactics.
Turning Point	The Srebrenica Genocide (July 1995).	The Račak Massacre (January 1999).
UK Action/Outcome	Belated airstrikes leading to the US-brokered Dayton Accords.	Spearheaded the NATO bombing campaign and pushed for ground troops.

Phase 1: The Bosnian War (1992–1995) – The "Wrong Side" Allegation

During the early 1990s, the Conservative government under [John Major](#) pursued a policy of cautious neutrality. Historians like [Brendan Simms](#) (*Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia*) argue that British policy inadvertently **backed the Serbian aggressors** by enforcing a

blanket UN arms embargo across the entire former Yugoslavia. [2]

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- **The Embargo Imbalance:** The remnants of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) had left the Bosnian Serb Army heavily weaponised. The newly declared Bosnian government had almost no heavy weaponry. The UK-backed arms embargo effectively froze this imbalance, leaving Bosnian Muslims defenseless against ethnic cleansing. [1]
- **Blocking US Intervention:** The Clinton administration in the US favored a policy called "**Lift and Strike**"—lifting the arms embargo for the Bosnians and striking Serb positions from the air. The British government actively blocked this, fearing it would endanger British UN peacekeepers on the ground. [2]
- **The Failure:** This passive approach culminated in the [Srebrenica Genocide](#) in July 1995, where over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were massacred in a UN-designated "safe area". Srebrenica was widely viewed as a catastrophic failure of Western—and British—diplomatic paralysis. [3]
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Phase 2: The "Change Over" (1997–1998)

The failure to prevent genocide in Bosnia caused a profound psychological shift within the British foreign policy establishment. [4]

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- **The Election of New Labour:** In 1997, [Tony Blair](#) came to power with a desire for a "moral foreign policy." The shadows of Bosnia heavily influenced his administration. Blair and his Foreign Secretary, [Robin Cook](#), believed that structural inaction by the West had permitted mass atrocities. [5]
- **The Paradigm Shift:** British policymakers realized that treating all sides as equally responsible in an asymmetric conflict failed to protect civilians. The UK adopted the doctrine of "**Humanitarian Intervention**," arguing that the international community had a moral duty to intervene inside a sovereign state if that state was committing atrocities against its own people. [6]
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Phase 3: The Kosovo War (1999) – Active Intervention

When Serbian President [Slobodan Milošević](#) began a brutal military crackdown on ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in 1998, the British government resolved not to repeat the mistakes of Bosnia. [7]

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- **Leading the Hawks:** Rather than stalling, [Tony Blair](#) became the most hawkish leader in NATO. When Milošević refused to sign the Rambouillet Accords—which demanded autonomy for Kosovo and the placement of NATO peacekeepers—the UK aggressively pushed for military action.

- **NATO Bombing Campaign:** In March 1999, NATO launched a 78-day airstrike campaign against Yugoslavia. When airstrikes alone failed to immediately halt the ethnic cleansing, Blair went to Washington to personally convince a reluctant [Bill Clinton](#) to prepare for a **ground invasion**.
- **The Shift on Independence:** Initially, the UK and its allies only sought autonomy for Kosovo within Yugoslavia, fearing that supporting the guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) would destabilize the region. However, as the conflict intensified, Blair shifted toward advocating for **Kosovo's complete independence**, concluding that peaceful coexistence under Belgrade was no longer viable. [8]
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Milošević eventually capitulated, withdrawing his forces and allowing NATO peacekeepers to secure the region, which paved the way for Kosovo's eventual declaration of independence. [7]

If you would like to explore this historical shift further, let me know if you want to focus on **Tony Blair's "Chicago Speech"** on humanitarian intervention, the tactical role of the **Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)**, or how the **Dayton Accords** failed to address Kosovo earlier.

[1] <https://www.bbc.com>

[2] <https://www.lrb.co.uk>

[3] <https://www.gov.uk>

[4] <https://journals.sagepub.com>

[5] <https://www.youtube.com>

[6] <https://www.facebook.com>

[7] <https://www.britannica.com>

[8] <https://publications.parliament.uk>