

Chapter 13: Bleeding Bosnia

Bosnia-Herzegovina exemplified the Yugoslav ideal more than any of the former republics. Its government's cabinet reflected the diverse makeup of its citizenry: eight Muslims, six Serbs, and six Croats. The legally elected government was committed to pluralism and the right of all citizens, irrespective of ethnicity, to live where they chose. But an ethnocentric, expansionist, chauvinistic neighbor opposed these concepts with a verve.

Several months before the Croatian election in the early spring of 1990, the Yugoslav Army began quietly arming the Serbian minority in Croatia. When the democratically elected government was installed, the local Serbs, who held all the weapons, initiated hostilities. At the same time these events were taking place in Croatia, Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic had blindly cooperated with the JNA and ordered weapons held by local territorial defense units to be turned over to the Serbian-controlled Yugoslav Army. But the Croats in Bosnia were acutely aware of the Serbs' true intentions and refused to hand over their arms.

The ethnic makeup of the Yugoslav Army demonstrates how the Serbs dominated Yugoslavia. Out of 16 JNA generals stationed in Bosnia-Herzegovina before the war, 16 were Serbs, one was Muslim, one Montenegrin, and one Croatian.

The Serbs initiated their ethnic cleansing program almost immediately when they rejected the legitimacy of the voting in the same areas of Bosnia where the Chetniks had at the start of World War II. According to Noel Malcolm, 8.1% of the Bosnian-Muslim population perished during World War II, mostly at the hands of the Chetniks. No other ethnic group in Yugoslavia lost such a high percentage of its people. The disappearance of hundreds of thousands of Muslims from the Foca, Zvornik, and Bijeljina areas received no notice during the World War II and the recent crisis because the ethnic cleansing campaigns occurred out of the media's sight. Even after Serbian paramilitary forces, like the notorious White Eagles, massacred several thousand Muslims in Bijeljina, President Izetbegovic publicly said that he doubted that Serbs were perpetrating such crimes.

The fact that the Roman Catholics in Bosnia fared much worse than the Muslims during the recent conflict has received scant public or media notice. The United States Information Agency reported in December, 1995, that the Bosnian-Croats had suffered the highest rate of injury during the conflict. In fighting across Bosnia-Herzegovina, 42% of Croats received injuries, in contrast to 15% of Bosnian-Muslims and 13% of Bosnian-Serbs. These appalling statistics were calculated prior to a sharp recrudescence of ethnic cleansing in Banja Luka. Despite the report's credible source, the media made no mention of the statistics. According to Cardinal Vinko Puljic, the Archbishop of Sarajevo, half of the 830,000 Croatian Catholics who lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina before the conflict were ethnically cleansed. For example, in the diocese of Banja Luka most of the 120,000 Catholics were purged or killed. The area was home to 47 parishes in 1991; only 3 remain today.

The non-Serbian survivors of ethnic cleansing in the Banja Luka area, as well as those from other areas under Serbian control, suffered in silence without the protection of any Bosnian, Croatian, or international body. Because all medical facilities in Banja Luka were closed to non-Serbs, the only organized institution that could help the survivors was the Catholic church. Catholic relief organization Caritas set up a center that provided health care for anybody in need, regardless of ethnicity. According to the Croatian Medical Journal, the center was staffed by 19 physicians, 22 nurses, and 3 other workers. All were volunteers who had been dismissed from state institutions because of their ethnic origins. Because the Serbian authorities didn't provide any assistance, the health center had to rely on donations.

The ethnic cleansing program continued without abatement, but markedly intensified during the first

two weeks of May, 1995, when Seselj's Serbian Radical Party (SRA) called upon Serbs to expel Croats and Muslims "immediately and without delay" from Banja Luka. Following Seselj's command, Serbian forces broke into a Roman Catholic church rectory (possibly in retaliation for the Croats' recapture of Western Slavonia). The Serbs murdered a priest and a nun, doused their bodies and the rectory with gasoline, and set them on fire. The Serbs blew up the church next door while the rectory and its inhabitants burned.

Approximately 25 nuns and 25 priests, including Bishop Franjo Komarica of Banja Luka, remain in the Banja Luka diocese. With only three churches left, Bishop Komarica said, "We perhaps fared somewhat better than our neighbor Muslims. Not a single mosque remains in the Banja Luka area." By the same token, not a single Orthodox church has been damaged.

During the early stages of the conflict, I asked Mustafa Cerić, Imam for the Bosnian Islamic community, if genocide was too strong a word to describe the Serbian actions. After a long thoughtful pause he defined genocide: "One group destroying another group's culture, traditions, and institutions--but most importantly, their lives. The term genocide is not harsh enough." He coined the term "humanocide" instead because "the Serbs do not differentiate between anyone who stands in the way of their ethnic cleansing program, be they Muslim, Croat or even Serb." "Humanocide" may well become the buzz word that best describes Serbian actions in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Despite highly credible international wire service reports that Serbian paramilitary units had destroyed five Roman Catholic churches, demolished a monastery, expelled nuns from two convents and killed a priest and nun in Banja Luka during a ten day period in May 1995, only one newspaper, *Newsday*, deemed the stories newsworthy enough to publish. According to spokesman for the U.N. High Commission for Refugees Chris Janewski, the Bosnian-Serb army took over the convents and used the facilities as its headquarters. Most of the media ignored these incidents, yet eagerly reported unsubstantiated allegations made by British U.N. delegates that the Serbs in Western Slavonia had been treated unmercifully by the Croats after they had liberated the area.

To their credit, the media, NGOs, and other international bodies working in the area contradicted the British allegations a few days later when they reported that Croatian treatment of Serbs in Western Slavonia was beyond reproach.

After the Croatian military liberated the Krajina in August, 1995, the Serbs intensified their ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. In less than three days, 15,000 Croatian Catholics were expelled from the Banja Luka area. Although CNN had been in the vanguard of reporting the orderly Serbian exodus from the Krajina, the news service neither mentioned that the mass migration was voluntary, nor covered the plight of Croats from Banja Luka. No news agency bothered to contrast the emaciated Croats who fled from Banja Luka with only the shirts on their backs, with the well nourished Serbs who left the Krajina in cars, trucks, and tractors loaded with goods.

Much as they had in Croatia, the Serbs rationalized their genocidal acts in Bosnia by conjuring up paranoid myths and prejudices. In Croatia, they had claimed to fear the certain return of the World War II era Ustashe puppet state. In Bosnia, they demanded revenge for a Muslim victory over the Serbs that took place 600 years ago.

The Serbs have committed genocide, yet Western governments were reluctant to use the term. Yugoslavia was a signatory to the International Genocide Treaty of 1951 that provides for trying individuals for crimes of genocide within the state they occurred. If a government accused Yugoslavia of genocide, that government would be obliged to indict Yugoslavia. Given the West's complicity with the Belgrade regime, no Western government wanted to utter the term publicly.

The Western governments propagated Serbian paranoia and mythology. But beyond that ideological support, the EC made a major mistake by negotiating with local self-appointed Serbian, Muslim and Croatian

renegade leaders instead of the legitimate governments.

The Bosnian government wasn't a faction, but a duly elected government with full rights associated with sovereignty. Those serving in the government were elected by an absolute majority of Bosnian citizens, and although most Bosnian politicians were Muslim, their government was inclusive. The conflict wasn't a civil war, but a war of territorial expansion by another state--Serbia.

The West's see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil approach to Serbian crimes found a champion in Los Angeles Times opinion writer Walter Russell Mead. The Serbs themselves had proudly coined the term "ethnic cleansing," but Mead went to great lengths to downgrade and sanitize their program by calling it "forcible relocation." Mead recklessly suggested that a Bosnian-Muslim surrender would be the best thing that could happen to Bosnia in the long run because prosperity might follow as it had in Germany and Japan after their World War II defeats. His point carefully ignored 250,000 dead, 25,000 rape victims, and countless refugees. In a February 13, 1994, Op-Ed piece, Mead compared ethnic cleansing to a divorce.

In the same article, Mead lauded the Clinton administration for finally agreeing to support the European peace plan it had once condemned and the end of sanctions against Serbia. He cited these changes in policy as a defeat of the "idealistic and fuzzy minded members of Clinton's foreign policy team."

Long aware of the existence and conditions of Serb-run concentration camps in Bosnia, Western governments remained silent until Roy Gutman broke the story in *Newsday*. In the February 28, 1994, issue of *Insight*, R. Rubenstein reported that U.N. officials admitted that they had been aware of the camps at least one month before the story broke, but didn't believe the camps were important enough to warrant publicity. When pictures of the inmates appeared on television, the shocked public, unable to stomach the horrors, rapidly switched TV channels to the safe cocoon of the Wheel of Fortune.

At first the Serbs denied the existence of the camps. Later they said the camps were housing prisoners of war. But when representatives from the International Committee of the Red Cross interviewed all 3,640 prisoners at a camp in Manjaca, the ICRC found that only four were soldiers. The remaining 3,636 prisoners were civilians taken from their homes in the ethnically cleansed area of Kozara.

Governments respond to moral dilemmas according to their own national interests. The well-meaning, post-World War II slogan "Never again" has proven to be as empty as George Bush's "new world order." Had the media captured the crimes of Treblinka or Auschwitz on camera, the Western governments of that time would've responded just as they did to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, with little more than teeth gnashing and hand wringing. The Allies knew of the concentration camps and Jewish deaths in the hundreds of thousands much earlier than the initial *London Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, and *New York Times* reports. Those papers gave exact names and locations of death camps, but the Allies refused to act. Apparently civilian deaths, although regrettable, weren't militarily relevant. The same attitude prevailed regarding Croatia and Bosnia. Although comparing one horror to another is an odious exercise, the similarities between the silences and inaction during World War II and the Balkan crisis is sadly telling.

A religious summit that was chaired by Rabbi Arthur Schneier, whose participants included Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle and the heads of the Muslim and Roman Catholic communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina, concluded that the war's cause wasn't rooted in religious differences and that "crime in the name of religion is the greatest crime against religion." Yet one of Serbia's rationales for the Bosnian conflict was the need to save Europe from Muslim fundamentalism. The Serbs forever quoted out of context from Izetbegovic's 1970 "Islamic Declaration" to prove of his fundamentalist tendencies. "There can be no peace or coexistence between Islamic Faith and non-Islamic social and political institutions; further, the Islamic movement must and can take power as soon as it is morally and numerically strong enough, not only to destroy the existing non-Islamic power but to build up a new Islamic order." Izetbegovic wrote his declaration during

one of Tito's intensive anti-religious campaigns. He was jailed for his statements.

No crime has been perpetrated against the Bosnian-Serbs that could justify their rape of Bosnia. President Bush dismissed the crisis in Bosnia as a "mere hiccup" in July, 1992, one month after the UNHCR had said that the conflict had created 2.2 million refugees. Bush's cynical quote ranks with one of Clinton's from early 1993 regarding Bosnia: "I don't have to spend one more minute on that than I have to."

The Western powers sanctimoniously responded to the carnage in Bosnia-Herzegovina by refusing to defend the Muslims or arm them for self-defense. The West banned Serbian air flights over Bosnia, but didn't enforce the ban during crucial moments. The West would neither offer asylum, nor establish safe havens for refugees. The powers placed sanctions on Serbia, yet wouldn't enforce them. The Croats and Muslims did their best not to be misled by the West's pattern of contradictory measures and actions. They were defending their homes and couldn't afford to be discouraged by inconsistency.

The Croats were initially unable to defend themselves and lost one-third of their country. When they finally stemmed further Serbian advances, the conflict spilled over into Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Bosnian government rolled over and played dead. Had the Bosnian-Croats not fought back against the Serbs, all of Bosnia, instead of just two-thirds of its land mass, would've ended up in Serbian hands.

The leaders of the Bosnian-Croat communities pleaded with Izetbegovic to take a firm stand against the JNA and Serbian irregular attacks on Croatian towns in the region of Herzegovina. Izetbegovic ignored their pleas and opted, instead, to placate the JNA by dismissing the attacks as isolated examples of Serbian and Croatian extremism. Even after he understood that the Serbs were perpetrating aggressive acts against his constituents, Izetbegovic refused to enter into a loose confederation with Croatia that would've legitimized and facilitated military cooperation against the aggressors. Izetbegovic didn't want to anger the Serbs, so he actively negotiated with the JNA to assume a military role in Bosnia-Herzegovina. When Izetbegovic realized that the JNA's interests lay with Serbia and not with the Bosnian government, he inexplicably appointed high ranking JNA officers to the high command in the Bosnian Army. Naming former JNA officers such as Sefer Hailovic and Refik Lendo, who had committed atrocities against Croats in Vukovar and elsewhere, was an obvious slap in the face to Izetbegovic's Croatian constituency.

Izetbegovic's actions made the Bosnian-Croats feel insecure about their status under his government and suspicious about his intentions. The alliance between the Bosnian-Croats and Muslims had been fragile at best. But all cooperation fell apart when the Vance-Owen proposal to partition Bosnia along ethnic lines was accepted by the Croats. Most Croats had never dreamed that they might receive their own part of Bosnia. So the Croats signed the agreement without hesitation when the U.N. offered them independent territory. The Bosnian-Croats then set about expelling Muslims, often brutally, from villages that were suddenly living on U.N.-mandated Croatian property. Muslims in other parts of Bosnia grew angry and responded by expelling Croats from their regions.

After losing every military encounter with the Serbs, the Bosnian government forces retreated from the battle lines along with great numbers of Muslim refugees. Because his relationship with the Croats had completely broken down, Izetbegovic turned his defeated army toward easier pickings than the Serbs: poorly armed Bosnian-Croat civilians. Izetbegovic had been close to signing the U. N. peace agreements that divided up Bosnia, but once his troops had scored unexpected successes against the Croats, he stonewalled the U.N. proposals. Although both sides had a paucity of weapons, the weapons in government forces' hands far exceeded those in the possession of the Croats. As a consequence, the Muslims captured 3,647 square kilometers of territory previously held by the Bosnian-Croats and wanted more. In another of the dichotomies that characterized this conflict, both Croats and Muslims used Serbian firepower against each other whenever they thought it militarily advantageous. The Serbs' rent-an-artillery did not discriminate and charged either side 2,000

German marks per hour.

The media focused all its attention on the Muslims' plight in Sarajevo, Zepa, Srebrenica, and Gorazde, but rarely mentioned the Bosnian-Croat towns of Konjic, Jablanica, Travnik, Bugojno, and Gornji Vakuf where Bosnian forces had perpetrated the same sort of atrocities that the Muslims had been subjected to by the Serbs. The highest percentage of casualties from fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina belongs to the Croats. Almost half became refugees or displaced persons. But most of the casualties came after April 16, 1993, when the Muslims launched their attack on the Bosnian-Croats. By November, 1993, the Muslims ethnically cleansed 156 Bosnian-Croat towns and villages. The huge influx of Muslim refugees into what had been predominantly Croatian areas severely changed the demographics. These great shifts of populations have become the seminal cause of animosity between Croats and Muslims, particularly in Mostar.

Although weak at first, the Bosnian government eventually redeemed itself militarily. Their defenses stiffened significantly enough to forestall a complete Serbian takeover. Once their military forces became coordinated and obtained desperately needed weapons, the Bosnian Army retook a great deal of territory. Most of their progress came while allied with the Croatian Army.

When Western *realpolitik* goals changed from a just settlement to just any settlement, the Bosnian demoralization was complete. The Western powers accepted the concept of partitioning Bosnia-Herzegovina along ethnic lines despite their recognition of Bosnia's sovereignty. The U.N.-created Muslim safe havens in Gorazde, Srebrenica, Zepa, and Bihac weren't safe at all because the cities were completely surrounded by Serbian forces. After the Serbs blockaded the supply routes, the inhabitants of the safe areas began to starve. Despite having created these ghettos, the U.N. felt no moral obligation to protect them and remained inert. The U.S. overruled its allies and unilaterally decided to provide food and medical air drops. But reports from Zepa and Gorazde indicated that most of the parachuted supplies had landed in either the Drina River or Serbian held territory.

Despite Belgrade's shallow pretense to the contrary, the JNA had complete control over the Bosnian-Serb aggression. Only an intact and functioning JNA command structure with its high level of logistic support could've coordinated the Bosnian-Serb artillery and aircraft attacks. The millions of refugees and at least 250,000 dead are testimony to the efficiency of Serbian attacks.

As early as October 28, 1992, U.N. Human Rights Investigator Tadeusz Mazowiecki said, "Serbian ethnic cleansing did not appear to be the consequence of the war but rather its goal, to a large extent already achieved." Mazowiecki's investigations, which most often incriminated the Serbs, were exercises in futility. So when his reports of "horrible crimes and barbarism" committed by Bosnian-Serbs after the fall of Srebrenica and Zepa went for naught, he resigned in protest. Mazowiecki had unimpeachable credentials. But he beat his head against the wall trying to move the U.N. out of its inertia regarding war crimes. His resignation statement best summarized the failed U.N. policy in Bosnia: "I cannot continue to participate in the pretense of the protection of human rights." The Serbs also ethnically cleansed Vojvodina of Hungarians and Kosovo of Albanians with minimum publicity.

The Bosnians gave up waiting for Clinton to fulfill his inaugural promise to use military force in Bosnia when "the will and conscience of the international community is defied." Apparently Clinton didn't consider the Serbian defiance severe enough until 3 1/2 years later when he ordered air attacks on Serbian positions.

According to a March, 1994, UNHCR report, an estimated 4.3 million people throughout former Yugoslavia were in need of relief assistance. Of this total, 3.5 million were classified as refugees or displaced persons: 2.74 million in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 690,000 in Croatia, 406,000 in Serbia, 110,000 in U.N. Protected Areas (UNPA), 62,000 in Montenegro, 30,000 in Slovenia, and 22,000 in Macedonia.

Of the 690,000 displaced persons who found refuge in Croatia, 280,000 were Bosnian-Muslims. U.S. Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith tried to put the amount of Muslim refugees in Croatia into proper perspective in a November 8, 1993, Matica interview. He said the situation would be the equivalent of the U.S. taking in 30,000,000 refugees.

To salve its conscience, the U.N. instituted a humanitarian aid program so the Muslims could die with full bellies. This change in policy came relatively late and only in response to NGO pressure. NGOs were the humanitarian organizations that supplied and delivered medicines and food to disaster areas, often at great bodily risk. The U.N. underplayed the plight of the Muslims who had been herded into ghettos and placed almost insurmountable barriers on the NGOs that wanted to provide a modicum of comfort. Because Serbian barricades made bringing supplies by land difficult, the NGOs requested air drops. Their requests fell on deaf ears until their tenaciousness eventually willed out.

Most donations came from individuals or organizations that were moved by the sorry plight of the victims. Reports from the UNHCR clearly revealed that the Muslim ghettos received the least amount of that donated aid. The lion's share had to be given to Serbian forces as tribute for allowing the delivery. Almost from the very onset of humanitarian deliveries to Sarajevo, more than one-half was taken by the Serbs. Even more was stolen through distribution channels. Prior to the Dayton Accords, only about 30% of the aid made it to the Sarajevans. The confiscated food relief was sold on the black market for foreign currency. And almost invariably U.N. forces were involved in this illegal trade.

In what may have simply been a Freudian slip by the humanitarians, or a jaded twist on ethnic cleansing, a relief plane with a cargo hold full of condoms landed at Sarajevo's airport at a time when no bread was available. Many reports complained about medications that were long outdated. Medications in one shipment meant for the mosque in Zagreb had an expiration date of 1947.

Most of the Bosnian aid was delivered to the Serbian-conquered, ethnically cleansed territories. A comparison between the Muslim enclave of Bihac and Serb-controlled Banja Luka typifies the way the U.N. dispensed humanitarian aid. Carole Hodge reported in a January, 1994, New Republic article that the UNHCR documented an actual delivery of 2,527 metric tons of food to Banja Luka, a city whose pre-war Muslim population had been ethnically cleansed. But the targeted delivery for Banja Luka had only been 2,075 tons. The protected Muslim enclave of Bihac had received just 126 metric tons out of its 1,936 allotment during the same period.

As part of a major Serbian offensive, planes from the Serb-held Croatian airfield in Udbina struck Bihac. The U.N. acquiesced to international pressure and ordered NATO to launch a massive air attack by 39 aircraft. The West then went on a self-aggrandizement binge. But its euphoria died when the media later reported that the raid only resulted in five, easily repairable craters. Ammunition dumps and fuel stores that the Serbs would continue to use against Bihac were left intact.

When U.N. officials were confronted about why the raid was so indecisive, the officials answered that they had only intended to send a message to the Serbs. Just what message they wished to convey was unclear.

Enes Kisevic's poem, "Hava's Plea," metaphorically epitomizes the abject appeals of the Bosnian nation.

Hava's Plea
That night
when the seven of them
raped me at the camp,
I prayed for you to spit

from my womb the seed of that dog's sort,
why did you not heed my prayers, oh Lord,
when I have done you no wrong?

I prayed to You
to free me, if but an instant,
from the vigil of my captors,
so that with my fingernails
I could scrape out of my womb,

Why did you not heed my prayers, oh Lord,
when I have done you no wrong?

I turned my head from water,
I turned my head from bread,
if only death would heed my prayers,
but how could death take mercy on me
when everything rests in your hand, Almighty.

I begged those who raped me,
the ones who set my house afire,
I swore to them in Your name
that I would forgive them for all they had done
if only they would kill me,
if they would draw and quarter me;

They did not heed my plea, oh Lord,
giving me instead an apple,
feeling day and night
how their brood grew.

That morning,
when the unborn child first kicked inside,
I prayed to You
that my man Alija
not return from the battlefield;

You heeded me not, Oh Lord,
instead You had
the Militia set me free,
instead they took me to the hospital,
where four doctors held me
by my legs and my arms
so that I could not smother this child
with my thighs
whom more than the sun longed to see,
stillborn

or that it should set eyes on its
mother, dead.

Why did You heed my prayer,
Good Lord,
when this innocent nubbin,
and I,
have done you no wrong?
Give me strength,
on Dear God,
to raise this male child,
whom no one but You
would spare,
and grace the boy with the mercy
to live among people and with
their truth,
so pleads with You his wretched
mother Hava.