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The Only Good Serb Is A...  
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If John Q. Public were asked a dozen years ago what he thought of Serbs, the response would probably have been a shrug of the shoulders. A handful, with personal acquaintance of Serbs or knowledge of the fact that Serbs and Americans were allies in two world wars, might have made friendly observations.

Yet today, the same question would elicit many negative opinions,\*1 some perhaps echoing the sentiments of American political leaders and opinion-makers over the last few years:

"Serbs are illiterates and degenerates." (Senator Joseph Biden, Democrat of Delaware, on a Aug. 1, 1993 CNN broadcast.)

"These guys (Serbs) aren't ideologues, they're murderous assholes." (Richard Holbrooke,) Assistant Secretary of State,\*2 The New Yorker, Nov. 6, 1995.

"There's a total fascism now in Serbia." (Georgie Ann Geyer, Washington Week in Review, June 25, 1993.)

"Serbs are bastards." (Morton Kondracke, 1996 on CNN.)

How did it happen that a small Balkan people, 10 million-plus in number, became the object of such anathema on another continent more than 4,000 miles distant in a country that lacked any direct interest in the affairs of the Serbs and their neighborhood?

Our purpose is to explore how this seemingly visceral prejudice, verging on bigotry, arose. It is not our purpose to examine the bestialities unquestionably committed by Serbs in the course of more than four years of fighting or even to assess the proportion of Serb responsibility for the breakup of Yugoslavia and the brutal conflicts that followed. Those subjects are copiously if not always adequately dealt with in other works.

We contend that, rather than objectively seeking to determine who did what to whom and when and why in the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia, both the American Government - Bush and Clinton Administrations - and the mainstream media concentrated their fire on the Serb party from the outset. The depth of animosity toward the Serbs is evident for example in the new memoir of Richard Holbrooke, who shows that Serbophobia began life even in the fetal stage of the Clinton Administration, the campaign of 1992.\*3

Our sketch of the origins of anti-Serb bias covers overlapping elements of Yugoslav history, the relatively new role of public relations in international affairs and the nature of modern media.

### History

The breakup of the second Yugoslavia coincided - ominously as it turned out - with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the years 1989 through 1991 when the attention of the big powers was naturally concentrated on the latter rather than the former. In the decade after the death of Tito (1980), Yugoslavia had gradually become a blank spot, a country of perennial economic problems and quarrels led by uninspiring and unmemorable politicians. The American media withdrew permanent correspondents from Belgrade years before, leaving coverage to stringers and occasional staff correspondents flown in from elsewhere. As a result, the correspondents who flew in to report the war were woefully unprepared to deal with the complexity of Yugoslavia.

The struggle over the future of the country pitted centrifugal forces led by relatively wealthy Slovenia against centripetal forces led by



relatively poor Serbia. The contrasts could hardly have been greater.

Slovenia was already well along in antifederalism in the early 1980s. Serbia was ready for economic reform, but severely handicapped by having to drag an impoverished and recalcitrant Kosovo behind it.

The perennial Kosovo problem heated up as Albanian separatists, who controlled the still autonomous province, made life increasingly uncomfortable for the remaining Serbs of the region (then a scant 22 percent of the total). Between 1982 and 1984 alone, more than 15,000 Serbs fled Kosovo.\*4 Albanians in the diaspora were funding public relations campaigns and lobbying in Washington. The Serbs had no such propaganda machine.

Ethnically much more homogeneous Slovenia on the other hand was bent on extending sovereignty in its struggle against the federal center. In early 1989 the Slovene Communist leadership under Milan Kucan threw down the gauntlet vis a vis the government in Belgrade by openly siding with the Albanian minority in Serbia. In speeches to large crowds he linked the Albanian civil rights movement (a successful guise for their separatist ambitions) with Slovenia's right to secession.\*5

The new Serbian leadership of Slobodan Milosevic deliberately fostered Serb resentments - and thus nationalism - particularly on the Kosovo issue, as a means of strengthening his power base. His crackdown on the increasingly militant Kosovar Albanians made it much easier for Kucan and his allies to preach Slovenian secession and win sympathy for their cause in Western Europe and the United States. Milosevic's ugly use of state television and Politika, the country's largest daily, to promote his nationalist agenda immediately found imitators in the other Yugoslav republics.

From the start, the new manifestations of the various Balkan nationalisms, the great no-no of Titoist Yugoslavia, were treated differently by outsiders even though each variety contained poisons that were lethal for a federal Yugoslavia. Slovenian, Kosovar-Albanian and Croatian nationalisms were generally regarded as benign and acceptable, sailing as they were under appealing but mostly false colors of "democratic pluralism" and "civil rights." Serbian nationalism alone was held to be dangerous. A common thread running through the other nationalisms is that they were all anti-Serb.

In the spirit of the times, Warren Zimmermann arrived in April 1989 as the new United States ambassador with a fresh agenda. In agreement with Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, Yugoslavia's greatly diminished geostrategic role as a buffer in the Cold War was replaced\*6 by Kosovar Albanian human rights, which enjoyed his great sympathy.

Eagleburger complemented this agenda by denouncing Milosevic before the United States Senate at his confirmation hearing saying that "What he has done is create a situation which I think is very dangerous." Not a word about Slovene or newly vocal Croatian secessionists - just about the Serb leadership. Zimmermann had not even met Milosevic at that point and would not see him for nearly a year. But he had made up his mind, as he discloses in his memoir, saying that "Milosevic's pursuit of a narrow Serbian agenda made him the major wrecker of Yugoslavia."\*7

The Serbs were getting a bad press in the West on the Kosovo issue, thanks in part to the very effective public relations operations of the Kosovars in Washington, New York and Bonn (with campaign contributions to key legislators in the case of Washington which were paid off with Congressional resolutions backing the Albanians and condemning the Serbs).\*8

Milosevic's strongarm domestic politics and avoidance of the press contributed to the unpleasant picture, and Zimmermann's influence at least with visiting American journalists fostered that negative image (in the sense of what he later wrote, on Kosovo, "where an authoritarian Serbian regime was systematically depriving the Albanian majority of its basic civil liberties."\*9

A psychological undercurrent that fed this prejudice may come from the American proclivity to divide contestants, especially in foreign places, into "good guys versus bad guys" or in Hollywood terms, "white hats versus black hats." This may also have been subconsciously influenced by a tradition begun in English literature in the 19th century and continued by Hollywood of depicting the Balkans as a region populated by nasty people.

That is the theme of a new study, "Inventing Ruritania," by Vesna Goldsworthy. The gist of her heavily documented study is that "Balkan"



became synonymous with "violence, incivility, even barbarism" soon after being coined in 1809 by a confused German geographer as a term for Southeastern Europe.<sup>\*10</sup> A few decades later a narrower term for those and other negative qualities was "Serb." With the exception of Rebecca West, almost all English writers wrote about Serbs as vile "shaggy ruffians" (Lawrence Durrell) with "dreamy fanatic eyes," from a "race of brigands" (Agatha Christie).

Ms. Goldsworthy concludes that the literary "colonization" of the Balkans by mainly British writers from the 19th century onward created stereotypes and biases that pervade the political thinking and establishment journalism of the English-speaking world. "Images produced in British fiction, transformed and transmitted by the British and American entertainment industries through countless films and television programs, were disseminated to an unprecedented and unrivaled degree."<sup>\*11</sup> "Textual colonization," she writes, "shows the way in which an area can be exploited as an object of the dominant culture's need for a dialogue with itself." These "feed the industry of conscious," she asserts, "to meet an insatiable appetite for involvement" and "passionate engagement." The writers then, like television now, raise questions about how to reconcile the national interests of a great power with "moral dimensions of foreign policy."

### Propaganda and Public Relations

At the end of 1990 the breakup of Yugoslavia moved from the realm of possibility to probability, with vehement propaganda exchanges between Belgrade on the one hand and Zagreb and Ljubljana on the other. Aided by relatively wealthy and resourceful emigre Croats in Canada and the United States, the new Zagreb leadership under Franjo Tudjman succeeded in painting the authorities in Belgrade as "the last Communist regime in Europe," headed by "Serbo-Bolsheviks" under Milosevic. (The fact that Tudjman had faithfully served the Communist regime in high positions for 15 years until 1960 was left unsaid.) With the Washington firm of Ruder Finn working for it at \$12,000 a month,<sup>\*12</sup> the Croatian government shifted into high gear in its anti-Serb campaign after it declared "independence" in June 1991. Sanctions soon made it virtually impossible for Belgrade to finance public relations operations in the United States and what it produced domestically was hopelessly inept. Nor was any coherent message coming from the deeply divided Serbian-American community where there were understandably strong reservations about Slobodan Milosevic, a product of the Serbian Communist Party.

On June 26, 1991, a day after Slovenia's and Croatia's declarations of secession, fighting broke out between the Yugoslav Peoples Army, empowered by the federal parliament to defend the country's territorial integrity, and Slovenian troops. The relatively unbloody war, lasting 10 days, entered and left the American memory by way of wretchedly simplistic journalism as "the Yugoslav invasion of Slovenia," Richard Holbrooke's phrase, blaming it solely on Milosevic.<sup>\*13</sup>

The Croat-Serb conflict immediately following lasted six months and cost some 10,000 lives until a truce. The Serbian leadership with its clumsy and destructive siege of Vukovar and beleaguering of Dubrovnik put their nation on the international black list (in the case of Dubrovnik a Balkan city Americans at least recognized, which is why the Croats "defended" it).

This, in our opinion, was the beginning, with Milosevic as the bogeyman, of what gradually but surely transformed the entire Serbian nation into a monstrous caricature in Western eyes.

But in the next stage, the United States and Western Europe helped prepare the ground for the three-sided war for Bosnia and Hercegovina by pushing its secession under Muslim leadership in April 1992. This time the Serbs definitively cast themselves and were clearly cast as the villains, first with the siege of the central part of Sarajevo, then with sweeps of many Muslims and some Croats from their ancestral homes and atrocities against hundreds of prisoners in detention camps. The first year of the civil war - "Serb aggression" as most commentators called it, ended with Secretary of State Eagleburger proposing that Milosevic and some other Serbs be tried for war crimes.

Like besieged Madrid in the Spanish civil war, embattled but still accessible Sarajevo soon drew thousands of journalists. Many stayed put for



the next three years, grouped around the satellite dishes that brought vivid images and sounds solely from the Muslim side to the TV screens of their editors in America. They rarely ventured to other fronts or other (Croat or Serb) sides.

"We are all Greeks," Shelley wrote in 1823 about another violent conflict in the Balkans and, 170 years later, this sentiment was repeatedly echoed by the "multiethnic Sarajevo" crowd of instant sympathizers from Bianca Jagger through Susan Sontag to Bernard Henri-Levy, Peter Jennings, Anthony Lewis and many others as "We are all Bosnians." The subcontext being, "we are all anti-Serb."

Addressing a Chicago conference in 1995 on the Bosnian conflict, which was just coming to an end after three and one-half years of combat, Professor Philip Jenkins remarked that "the three combatant populations bear an approximately equal burden of guilt for torture, atrocities and mass expulsions." He then asked: "How then did one group receive all the blame?"

Using a social science theory called "constructionism," Jenkins described a process called "identification and contextualization" employed in contemporary mass media to "frame" events as a means of making difficult material comprehensible to large audiences. In the case of the wars of the Balkans this was done by creating "stereotypes or folk-devils," linking 'Serb aggression' and 'ethnic cleansing' with the Holocaust." In this fashion "the Serbs thus almost literally become the Nazis or Nazi-like" and "'Serb aggression' becomes a tautology."

He then explored the peculiar congruence of the Bosnian conflict in 1993-1994 with two events in the United States which, he said, contributed to "a popular tendency to contextualize the brutalities of the Balkans with the horrors of the Holocaust" that befell Europe's Jews. These were the appearance of the film "Schindler's List" and the opening of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington. As a consequence, he says, Bosnian reports struck "the American consciousness at a uniquely sensitive historical moment" which "could not but affect attitudes to what was portrayed as a similarly brutal series of atrocities in Sarajevo in 1993-1994, and the analogy was fully exploited by pro-Bosnian publicists."

Speaking at the inauguration of the United States Holocaust Museum in April 1993, Elie Wiesel, the author, referred directly to the Bosnia conflict as an echo of his experience of genocide. (Perversely, President Franjo Tudjman of Croatia, a prominent Holocaust denier, was in attendance by way of the State Department.)

In 1995 the museum staff indignantly barred American Serbs from commemorating the Serb-Jewish-Gypsy victims of the Jasenovac Concentration Camp on the museum premises and refused to accept a painting of a concentration camp from a Serb delegation.\*14 Since 1996, the museum's Committee of Conscience has attempted to "play a role in making sure that the past does not repeat itself," said its chairman, Thomas

Buergenthal,\*15 convening a heavily attended seminar on Yugoslavia in 1997 in which most of the speakers assailed the Serbs, some focusing on the rape issue. In fact the museum itself barely takes note of the killing of hundreds of thousands of Serbs in German and Ustashe concentration camps.

"If Bosnia was a Holocaust," Jenkins continued, "then it had to have its war crimes trials, which created enthusiastic acceptance for the astonishingly one-sided hearings that eventually occurred." (The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia was created in 1993, most notably on the initiative of Madeleine Albright, then the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Its creators made clear that a principal aim was to try Serbs on charges of "war crimes" and "genocide.")\*16

He added: "the analogy was immensely important in securing support among the majority of western Jews, who might otherwise have had serious qualms about supporting anyone with the historical inheritance of the Croats {the crimes of the wartime Ustashe} or the contemporary friends of the Bosnians. More widely, supporting Bosnia became essential not just for western liberals, but for virtually all political strands."\*17

Jenkins further contended that "the Serbian cause has been irreparably damaged by the rape" issue, following unsupported allegations that Serbian soldiers had raped many thousands of Bosnian Muslim women.

After initial claims of 30,000 rapes, cries of outrage by feminist groups and an international investigation, Simone Veil, the French intellectual, remarked: "These numbers were obtained from one of the



warring sides in this conflict and they are highly improbable and should not be trusted." But she was ignored. Then there was the photo in The New York Times on Jan. 15, 1993 of a two-month-old baby identified as the daughter of a woman "raped in a Bosnian-Serb detention camp." The infant would have had to have been conceived in February 1992, three months before the Bosnia conflict began. Such discrepancies were routinely passed over.

"Death camps," "genocide," and other emotive terms were part of the regular vocabulary of the establishment press and of United States Government officials used to denounce the Serbian side in the Bosnia conflict. Senator Biden was particularly outspoken: as on May 15, 1993 in a National Public Radio broadcast: "We face not a religious war but a blatant act of Serbian expansionism and aggression" and, "This is Fascist thuggery on the march." Again, Aug. 3, 1993, in the Senate: "the extremes of Serb bestiality" ... "the rape of Bosnia and the rabid Serb fascism behind it" ... "Serb barbarisms."

On the principle perhaps that a greater number of dead would confirm the existence of genocide, death tolls were widely exaggerated. Richard Holbrooke, in his memoir, says, "Between 1991 and 1995 close to 300,000 people were killed in the former Yugoslavia."<sup>18</sup> Not even the Bosnian Muslims had gone that high, talking at most of 200,000 dead. The actual number, though still uncertain, is estimated by independent investigators from the Red Cross to be closer to 100,000 and probably less.

### Media

Nik Gowing, a BBC TV correspondent who explored the performance of the media in the Bosnian fighting, has written: "There is one cancer above all that afflicts much of the reporting from wars and conflict. It is the virtually unspoken issue of partiality and bias in conflict journalism."<sup>19</sup>

He noted that a rare admission of bias in Sarajevo was that of BBC's Martin Bell (now a Member of Parliament), who spoke of the emotional pressures of war coverage that made him take sides and then plead for a "journalism of attachment" in such circumstances.

Gowing then cites a comment by Gen. Charles G. Boyd, who was deputy commander in chief of the US European Command: "Serbian people have suffered when hostile forces have advanced, with little interest or condemnation by Washington or CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour."

"In Bosnia above all there is more evidence than many media personnel care to admit that journalists embarked on crusades and became partial. They empathized with the Bosnian government because of personal outrage at Serb aggression. Prima facie, this partiality distorted the reporting."

"What could be called the hypocrisy of governments - especially of the U.S. - has reinforced this cancer, along with a trend towards what might be called deceit."

Noting that "Bosnian government officials and spokesmen were always ready to comment or rush to the live satellite dishes to condemn the Serbs," Gowing remarks, "They usually enjoyed a free ride, their increasingly exaggerated claims accepted as fact by callow interviewers and anchors in distant studios who did not have the knowledge or background briefings to know better."

"There is evidence that leading U.S. newspapers, and TV news in particular, had scant interest in running stories that did not fit a clear editorial line on Bosnia," he added. "They indulged in a pro-Bosnian Muslim campaign without openly declaring it."<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

The time is long overdue to approach the situation in the former Yugoslavia with more objectivity and balance. Had the United States Government and the establishment media done so from the beginning, the Yugoslav wars could probably have been terminated much earlier, and might even have been prevented.

Unfortunately the anti-Serb pattern - treating Serbs as "perpetrators" while Muslims and to a lesser extent Croats are regarded as "victims" - continues. That pattern is being largely repeated in the American media and by the Administration and Congress today with regard to the Kosovo issue.<sup>21</sup>

As Aleksandr Nenadovic, the Nestor of Belgrade journalism, remarked a



decade ago: "You can do many things against the Serbs, but you cannot do anything in the Balkans without the Serbs." Reminded in 1998 of his epigram, Nenadovic added: "and Serbs can do very little for Serbs without the help of others."\*22

Whatever happens, 10 million Serbs will remain on the Balkan Peninsula. Their rights and aspirations will have to be taken into account. Relegating them to the status of second-class citizens through sanctions while supporting other ethnic groups financially and politically will only exacerbate tensions and will not lead to a peaceful resolution of the region's tragic conflicts.

footnotes follow:

1. In a paper presented at a conference on the former Yugoslavia in Chicago Aug. 31, 1995, Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religion at Pennsylvania State University, remarked: "Though 'Serbians' were a relatively unknown quantity in the United States two or three decades ago, they have now come to have demonic qualities otherwise associated with religious or political groups like the Shi'ites or even the German Nazis."

2. Holbrooke may be something of an exception in the longevity of his dislike of Serbs, as he indicates in his memoir, "To End a War." In the prologue he recalls seeing in 1960 as a student of 19 the memorial plaque in Sarajevo commemorating Gavrilo Princip's killing of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 as a "blow for Serbian liberty" He erred. The inscription did not mention Serbs, but he then compounds the error by saying, "I never forgot that first brush with extreme nationalism." To End A War, Richard Holbrooke, Random House. New York. 1988. p. xix

3. Ibid. pp. 40-53. Holbrooke lists Al Gore and Strobe Talbott among the initial adherents of this view. Gore's foreign policy aide, Leon Fuerth, and Madeleine Albright appear later.

4. In 1983, a Serb member of the Kosovo provincial parliament spoke of this exodus as "ethnic cleansing" of Serbs by the Kosovar Albanians, probably the first use of this term in the contemporary context of the Yugoslav conflicts.

5. Balkan Tragedy, Susan L. Woodward, The Brookings Institution. Washington. 1995, p. 98.

6. Origins of a Catastrophe, Warren Zimmermann, Times Books. New York. 1996. p. 5

7. Ibid. p. 27

8. Registration No. 4315 Under Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 in 1992 by Ruder Finn {public relations firm} "Kosovo - Compilation of background materials and dissemination of information regarding the brutal Serbian repression of minorities in Kosovo, a former Yugoslav republic (sic), to Members of Congress, the Clinton Transition team and Administration, and news media based [sic]. Tools included the use of op-ed pieces, letters to elected officials, regular information faxes to the renamed groups, media tours, meetings with Members of Congress or Administration officials, organization of congressional delegation trips to Kosovo and other communications techniques. Republic of Kosovo \$5,000 a month for November."

9. Zimmermann. Ibid. p. 7.

10. Inventing Ruritania/The Imperialism of the Imagination. Vesna Goldsworthy. Yale University Press. New Haven. 1998. p.3

11. Ibid pp. 201-211.

12. Op.cit. Footnote 6.

13. Holbrooke. Ibid. p. 27.

14. Letter of Mary E. Morrison, director of Communications, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, to Milan Visnick. Sept. 8, 1995.

15. The Washington Post. April 22, 1998. P. D6.

16. The term "genocide" was applied first by American and British reporters to the events in Bosnia in August 1992 after the discovery of Serbian-run detention camps in the vicinity of Prijedor where torture and killings took place. They dubbed these "concentration camps," although subsequent investigations failed to establish that they were constructed in the manner of those created by the Nazi SS during World War II. Nor were Muslim or Croat detention camps for Serbs where killings and torture occurred ever called "concentration camps." The Hague Tribunal statutes



adopted in 1993 reflected the press usage of the term, allowing punishment of "planning and execution of genocide," "complicity in genocide" and "command responsibility for genocide." In effect, the court has decided that there was genocide in Bosnia simply because it says there was genocide. See: Tina Rosenberg, "Defending the Indefensible," The New York Times Magazine. April 19, 1998.

17. Philip Jenkins. Constructing Aggression: The Demonization of the Serbs in the Bosnian Conflict. International Conference on Former Yugoslavia. Chicago. Aug. 31, 1995. pp. 5-6

18. Holbrooke. Ibid p. xv

19. Nik Gowing, The Media's Secret Shame, Partiality in Conflict Reporting Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, Sept. 1997. p.1

20. The first author here (Binder), can attest in chapter and verse to the validity of Gowing's contention.

21. For example, In the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on European Affairs hearing on Kosovo on May 6, 1998, those invited to testify were John Fox and James Hooper, two former State Department officials who have been rabidly anti-Serb, and Joseph Dioguardi. a former Republican Congressman who heads the Albanian-American Civic League. No one spoke on the Serb side of the issue.

22. In conversation with the first author.