This Time We Knew

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The Irish historian from Cambridge, Brendan Simms, astutely notes in this volume that the British look at 1938 not as a lesson in avoiding appeasement but rather as a lesson in isolating combatants in an area in which British self-interest is involved. He argues further that the British have applied this "lesson" to the current Balkan War.

Nevertheless I am puzzled why the French and the British remain so cruelly indifferent to Serbian aggression. Do they really fear German connections to Croatia, as the news media often suggest? That seems very farfetched indeed. Not only did the French impose a blockade following the Bolshevik Revolution, but they also sent troops, as indeed the United States did through Siberia, although briefly.

One also encounters frequently the interpretation—often implicit but sometimes made explicit—that Croatian behavior in the current Balkan War is an extension of Nazism and Ustashism, which included anti-Semitism as well as anti-Serbianism, and that the Serbs have every right to fear the Croats as well as their German backers. I am skeptical here, about the easy connections sometimes made between Nietzschean nihilism and Nazism, and even between Nazism and genocide. Anti-Semitism does not necessarily lead to genocide, and for the first years of Hitler,
Jews preferred Germany to Poland, even though Germany was not agreeable. Many accidental strains went into the linkage of anti-Semitism with the “final solution.”

In contrast, it seems to me that the American left helped create a silence on the evils of communism that continued during and even after the Cold War. And indeed, the image of Germany left over from World War I is significant, when there was even more hostility to the Germans than in World War II, as an “expansionist” power. But World War I had multiple causes, and Germany was perhaps less involved than Russia, France, and Austria.

I remember a dinner of Chicago sociologists at which the former chairman, Philip Hauser, a demographer, and also Lloyd Warner, who was in sociology, were critical of those who read any “foreigners”—French would not be any better than German. This was an oblique attack on Everett Hughes, less directly on me and also on Edward Shils—in a sense, anybody who had another language or any cultivation—an all-American outlook, not more sympathetic to Franco-British than to German thought.

It is very strange that Croatia, which has suffered so much, should be blamed by many authors, along with Serbia, for the war in the Balkans. This may be a reflection of the belief that all nationalism, of whatever sort, is “inherently evil,” a belief I understand very well because of my own lack of sympathy for most nationalisms. This is the case for ethnic nationalisms within the United States, and perhaps my antagonism to these has unduly influenced my attitude toward nationalisms elsewhere. I can see and even appreciate the energy behind French nationalism as I watch English become the standard language all over the world, as French had been for much of the world in an earlier day.

I find bewildering the contrast between the generosity extended to François Mitterrand, even after he admitted his Vichy connection, and the ferocious and unfair scrutiny of Franjo Tudjman, Croatia’s president. Mitterrand appears strange, at once opportunistic and perhaps with a touch of idealism, in working both for Vichy and for the antifascist opposition. Mitterrand himself has been more forthcoming, as I heard on National Public Radio. One can imagine that he was opportunistic under the Vichy regime, working with the regime and at the same time, or after a time, working also with the Resistance, but then at least he deserves a certain amount of credit for imagining that the Nazis, then so all-powerful, could be defeated. By contrast, it is striking how Tudjman’s strictly
antifascist activities during World War II are hardly ever mentioned in the media.

What I think is really hell is to watch the situation now in Bosnia deteriorate further and further, in a kind of self-confirming welter of tragedies in which the Croats also are behaving badly—which in no way justifies the enormously greater aggression of the Serbs—and in which even some Muslims have begun to be ferocious. *It is a jailhouse created by the Serbs in which the prisoners punish each other.*

**Western Inaction**

I wonder to what extent defenses of the Serbs or a refusal to see the ferocity and brutality of their crimes are related to having to justify inaction. I do not see some kind of conspiracy among the Western media in promoting the image of the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims as “equally guilty” and therefore unworthy of Western resolve to pick a just side. And I do not agree with those who claim that the Western media are merely cheering on a Western collaboration with Serbia against Muslims. Rather, I see guilt leading to self-justification and then to the media reporting to a public which, fixated by the “Vietnam syndrome,” does not want to get involved. Many do not want to get involved domestically either, with anybody other than their immediate circle.

Many in the American Congress seem to me cynical in wanting to lift the arms embargo against the Bosnian Muslims at this point, four years into this war, when the Serbs are all around the country and it would take a while for the new weapons to come in and for the Bosnian Muslims and others on their side, that is, cosmopolitan Bosnians, to learn to make use of them. By that time the Serbs might have taken much more territory.

On the other hand, President Clinton seems such a waverer that it is hard to imagine him sticking to any policy line to which there is any serious opposition, let alone providing opposition. Even though Clinton is punished more than he “deserves,” his “I feel your pain” line is not something most people notice, actually, for they react as he did, with a false empathy where sympathy would have been appropriate. Like President Bush before him, who deflected sympathy for Bosnia onto Somalia, President Clinton deflected it onto Haiti.

What I find so dismal is Clinton’s wish to invade Haiti, prompted by the Congressional Black Caucus and by Randall Robinson, a black activ-
ist who helped start the divestment movement and, that coming to an end, turned to Haiti for an outlet; he conducted a hunger strike that apparently influenced Clinton. But there did not seem to be support in the country as a whole for an attack on Haiti—and yet at the same time it was a distraction from the former Yugoslavia.

Western inaction in Bosnia is justified further by references to Rwanda, Burundi, and Haiti, with the implication that the United States cannot be the world’s policeman. Haiti seems to me important because of the Black Congressional Caucus, but not of any profound importance, for there is simply another dictatorship there. I find it difficult to embrace the African slaughter of the Christians in southern Nigeria soon after Nigeria won its independence in the same framework as the former Yugoslavia, for the latter seems to me so essential, as Stjepan Meštrović and Akbar Ahmed have pointed out, in terms of Muslim attitudes and feelings around the world and in terms of the lessons provided further east, and further west as well. If you pile Africa on top of the Balkans, then I think most Americans will even more than at present resist any intervention, just as Clinton has not wanted to use any of his capital in order to mobilize American genuine help to the besieged Bosnians or Croatians and to make clear to the Serbs that they really run the danger of experiencing military action right at home in Belgrade. In general, as I reflect on the tortured reactions of Americans and many Europeans, it seems to me that these are excuses for not acting where it is clear that we ought to act, even at some risk to ourselves. I think Meštrović has written with clarity, eloquence, and effectiveness on this issue.

I do not understand why Republicans in the U.S. Congress, who are isolationists by tradition, suddenly seem to want to oppose President Clinton’s policies and to force him to lift the weapons embargo on Bosnia. I am puzzled by the Dole-Leiberman bill to lift the arms embargo on Bosnia, and why it is conditional on the withdrawal of the UN forces from Bosnia. Why should relatively isolationist, primarily Republican senators give a damn about the United Nations, or what Britain decides? Regarding the prospect of Serbia attacking Macedonia, I am surprised that this has not already occurred.

With reference to *The Lonely Crowd*, some see this Republican movement in the Congress as part of a larger rebellion against Clinton’s other-directedness into inner-directedness. But I do not see America moving toward a “conservative return to inner-directedness.” This is not a way to describe the nastiness and the gullibility-paranoia of so much of the
American would-be electorate, or nonvoting “turned off” individuals. The country, frightened for its future, has turned in an ungenerous direction, hostile to immigrants and eager to respond to people who promise tax cuts. The left continues to talk about “the people,” as in the pages of the Nation. But actually, in Massachusetts, the majority according to polls are opposed to the ballot initiative requiring a graduated rather than the flat income tax that the state has. People identify against the poor and in some measure with the rich, the corporate rich or rather the entrepreneurial rich, and they are hostile to the modest salaries paid to congressmen or public officials, or indeed to most college presidents. I do not see this sour mood as inner-directed but as a very group-oriented one of fellow talkshow hosts and fellow-people who are “turned off” and who have an incredible faith in what they know despite their ignorance.

I do think that recent Croatian and Bosnian military successes support the image of inner-directed Bosnians and Croats as people who value independence from the Serbs rather than seeing themselves only as victims.

Other Reasons for Inaction in Bosnia

In the case of the Nazis and the death camps, this was not widely known in the United States during World War II. There were ever so many Americans who loved the idea of going after “the Japs” but saw no reason to attack the Nazis, and Roosevelt was cautious to try to keep these Asia-first people on board.

It seems strange to me, knowing very little about the ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia, that so many intellectuals would be confident that war would not break out because Yugoslavs would “reason” that this was not in their best self-interest, as if the ethnic hatreds were a thing of the remote past, and as if antagonism by the more cosmopolitan and also Roman Catholic Slovenes and Croatians would be silenced by what appeared to the rest of Europe or to this country at the outset—but I think not at the present time—as “reasonable.”

I have read with interest the excerpts from Slaven Letica’s diary of the visit to the White House in 1990. Letica, a Croatian sociologist, was at the time President Franjo Tudjman’s national security advisor. In the diary, Letica recounts how he and President Tudjman attempted to establish a Croatian federation with local Serbs so as to ease their fears, and how they both tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade President Bush as well
as leading American statesmen such as Henry Kissinger to support the idea of an independent yet confederated Croatia. I also read Slaven Letica's published letter to the editor of *Newsweek*, "Missed Opportunity," drawing on his visit to the White House, learning from it, for example, how completely Croatia had been disarmed by the former Yugoslav Republic. The cynicism of Henry Kissinger's reaction does not surprise me, though at an earlier point, when we were colleagues at Harvard, and even when he first went into the Nixon administration, I had more regard for him.

But in addition to Western and particularly American inaction, I find it puzzling that Muslims in other nations are not especially helpful to Bosnia. Could it be that the active Muslims are the more "fundamentalist" ones, and they do not see the Muslims of the former Yugoslavia as their kind of Muslims? The Muslims in the United States have such inadequate representation that when there was a bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, some people immediately thought that it must have been the Muslims! The Jews, in contrast to the Muslims, have two groups to count on: the newspaper and media people, and the lawyers and judges. Muslims have, for the most part, neither cohort.

My wife, Evey, and I listened together to a *Talk of the Nation* broadcast where Stjepan Meštrović and Akbar Ahmed discussed the current situation in Bosnia. I thought they were remarkably effective and collaborated well. I was just waiting, as one can imagine, for the first pro-Serb voice to come—a harsh, male voice, proclaiming bias in the program. It is anxiety-provoking, I should imagine, to be on such a program, not knowing from what quarter questions may come. It seemed to me that Ray Suarez, the host of the program, was knowledgeable, as I have often found him to be on *Talk of the Nation*. I was surprised by the man who called in to express his fears of an Islamic empire and wondered about his own ethnicity. In turn, I was reminded of the willingness of George Bush to fight Iraq on behalf of Kuwait, where there might have been a settlement with just minimal concessions to Iraq, in contrast to his unwillingness, then followed by Clinton and most of this country, to get involved in the far more significant issue of Serbian aggression, first against the Croats and then against the people of Bosnia.

The views of the caller who accused Meštrović and Ahmed of bias can be found expressed in the *Boston Globe* and other newspapers about the belief of Bosnian Serbs that they are under siege, that they are victims. I found Meštrović's invention of the concept of "postemotional" to account
for this line of reasoning illuminating, more so than that of "postmodern." Specifically, Meštrović claimed on the program that Serb justification of present-day atrocities on the basis of historical grievances against the Croats from World War II and against the Muslims dating back to 1389 constitutes postemotionalism. By contrast, I cannot agree with Roger Cohen's claim, in an article on the Balkan War as "postmodern," that distributing "live images of suffering ... sap[s] whatever will or ability there may be to prosecute a devastating military campaign." 3 If there were no notice at all in the media, there would be no will at all, let alone ability. How the writer could assume that the killings in Sarajevo are a kind of fiction—all this seems desperate, indeed, a sick form of voyeurism. This reminds me of my concern that if we had not fought the Gulf War, would we have been more ready to take on this anti-Serbian conflict? I thought at the time of the Gulf War that there might have been a reconciliation between Iraq and Kuwait had the Bush administration not wanted to go to war (certainly we, that is, America, have much more interest in the former Yugoslavia than in Somalia or indeed other African countries).

Another frequently cited justification for inaction is that taking action in Bosnia would be Eurocentric. I must say I detest the notion that it is "Eurocentric" to be concerned about the Balkans and Serbian aggression. What an extraordinary self-abnegation of Americans who are, in so many ways, European and Eurocentric, and properly so.

But the most common rationalization for inaction seems to be that all sides in the conflict are somehow equally guilty. The author of a recent book review in International Affairs, for example, makes this argument. 4 Even if it is, as he implies, "unsophisticated" Americans who support the argument that the Belgrade regime is most responsible for the current Balkan War, that is a different picture than one sometimes has, of the Serbs having pretty wide control of public opinion in the United States. The reviewer's judgment that Croatia "mirrored Serbia's aggression in the region" is weird.

I had grave reservations about the war crimes tribunals in Germany and in Japan after World War II, which seemed to me the justice of the victor. One wonders how the international tribunal that is supposed to try war crimes from the current Balkan War will fare.

And finally, I should mention that it is also curious that the women's movements in the United States have made little response to the ethnic
and cruel rapes by the Serbs. This only confirms my sense that they are entirely provincial to the situations in the United States.

NOTES
