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PART VI

THE DEMISE OF YUGOSLAVIA

(1991 TO THE PRESENT)
19.
The War of Succession
(1991 to 1999)

*The Diplomatic Recognition of Slovenia and Croatia*

On 25 June 1991, both Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence. Suddenly the international community was confronted with a number of contentious issues. Did the actions of these two republics constitute unlawful secession or had Yugoslavia simply collapsed into its constituent parts? Were the borders between the republics international boundaries or were they only administrative divisions? Was an international armed conflict developing or a civil war?

That the path to independence would be clouded by violence had been obvious for months. After declaring independence, the Slovenes took the first step toward establishing an international border to Croatia, and in response, the Yugoslav People’s Army occupied the border posts. Following the first armed confrontation, a “Ten-Day War” developed from which Slovenia emerged relatively unscathed, having lost eighteen soldiers, as opposed to forty-four dead JNA soldiers.¹

Shocked representatives of the European Community managed to convince Slovenia and Croatia to sign a ceasefire agreement on 7 July 1991 on the Adriatic island of Brioni. The republics also agreed to postpone their independence for three months and to start negotiations over the future of Yugoslavia and its eventual breakup. Subsequently, the Yugoslav government ordered the pullback of its army on 18 July, which meant, in essence, the recognition of Slovenia’s independence. Ever since this “little war,” the two-million-people republic has been very proud that it repelled the attack of the powerful Yugoslav People’s Army through its superior war strategy.² However, Belgrade’s main concern at the time was not to prevent Slovenia’s independence but to keep the entire Serb population in a single nation state. Since very few Serbs lived in Slovenia, the conflict was quickly over.
Already in the spring of 1991, isolated incidents of violent clashes between Croatian Serbs and Croatian police forces occurred in places like Plitvice and Borovo Selo. It was, however, not until after Croatia’s declaration of independence on 25 June 1991 that larger armed conflicts erupted in the regions of Banija, Dalmatia, and Slavonia between Croatian armed forces, on the one hand, and the Yugoslav People’s Army and rebel Serb forces, on the other. The first mass killing of Croatian civilians and soldiers by local Serb units occurred in Kozibrod on 26 July 1991, followed by atrocities in other villages in Slavonia, Banja, and Dalmatia and in the town of Vukovar.

As key political and military leaders—including Serbia’s member of the federal presidency, Borisav Jović, and JNA admiral Branko Mamin—have acknowledged, plans were already in place in summer 1991 to create a new rump-Yugoslavia that encompassed Croatia’s and Bosnia’s Serb populations. The People’s Army General Staff had decided to “defend” Serbs living in Croatia and to strive for full control over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Another aim was to “create and defend a new Yugoslav state with those people who so desired it, currently the Serbs and the Montenegrins.”

The Croatian government decided on 14 September 1991 to attack all garrisons of the People’s Army, which prompted the Yugoslav General Staff to respond by launching a major offensive from eastern Slavonia, expelling non-Serbs from the areas over which they took control. Yugoslav troops surrounded the city of Vukovar and shelled its center. Serb paramilitary units invaded the city and its surrounding areas, leaving a bloody trail of horror behind them. For weeks, the baroque city suffered from massive bombardment until, reduced to rubble, it surrendered in November. The historic city of Dubrovnik, “the pearl of the Adriatic,” was attacked in October 1991. Within a few weeks the embattled region came completely under the control of the rebellious Serbs. The Croat population, a total of more than half a million people, were systematically driven out or fled. On 19 December 1991, President Milan Babić proclaimed the formation of the “Republic of Serb Krajina,” the capital of which was Knin.

The international community had few tools for managing such a crisis at the time. International crisis management was still considered an inadmissible external intervention in the domestic affairs of another state. Moreover, international law was contradictory. On the one hand, the United Nations Charter protected a people’s right to self-determination, a right that Slovenia and Croatia invoked, but on the other, it obliged its members to safeguard sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states, which is what Belgrade insisted on. However, the Yugoslav problem was not just a question of international law, it was also a political dilemma to which various answers could be found. Germany and Austria supported the efforts of the republics of Slovenia and
Croatia to become independent, while the UN Secretary General and the governments in London, Paris, and Washington wished to see the unity of Yugoslavia maintained. Although these positions seemed to be subliminally reminiscent of the loyalties to their First World War alliances, what Paris, London, and Moscow actually feared above all else was that the precedent being set by Slovenia and Croatia would trigger a chain reaction of declarations of independence.

After Jacques Poos, foreign minister of Luxembourg, proclaimed rather grandiloquently that “this is the hour of Europe,” the European Community hosted a peace conference in The Hague on 7 September 1991. Yet all attempts to mediate and all threats of sanctions came to nothing. Innumerable ceasefires were broken. It was not until Cyrus Vance, special envoy of the UN secretary-general, proposed to send Blue Helmets into the disputed areas in November 1991 that the Yugoslav People’s Army pulled out of Croatia. Following a UN-brokered truce in January 1992, an international United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was deployed a month later in those areas in Croatia where Serbs constituted the majority or a substantial minority of the population, with the aim of preparing for a political solution to this conflict. Although many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) could return to their places of origin, the number of Croats living within the Krajina had fallen from 353,595 to 18,200 by 1993–1994. On the other hand, tens of thousands of Serbs fled Croatia. By mid-October 1991, 78,555 refugees from Croatia had arrived in Serbia.

Contrary to his Luxembourgian counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the German foreign minister, thought in the spring of 1991 that Yugoslavia had already effectively broken apart into its constitutive parts, which was why the independence of Slovenia and Croatia were not to be seen as acts of secession violating international law but as legitimate legal acts. For this reason he sought to gain formal recognition of the two new states, especially since the German foreign ministry (as well as Austria’s foreign office) believed that the Yugoslav People’s Army could be deterred from undertaking larger military actions if the conflict was internationalized. However, in London and Paris it was feared that a diplomatic fait accompli would only heat up the crisis militarily, since formal recognition would then deprive the international community of its only diplomatic leverage for an overall political solution. On 23 December 1991, Bonn duped its partners by officially recognizing Slovenia and Croatia unilaterally. The German public was disturbed to witness war and the plight of the refugees in neighboring regions, and media like the newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung never tired of condemning what they called Serbian-Orthodox barbarism, against which the Catholic countries of Slovenia and Croatia had to defend themselves. Following decades of reticence and
restraint in international relations, the German government also saw this crisis as the first favorable moment since its own reunification in 1990 to assume a more prominent role on the stage of international politics, one that corresponded to Germany’s economic stature. For the sake of political unity, there was little else the other European countries could do but follow suit, which they did by formally recognizing Slovenia and Croatia on 15 January 1992.13

Germany’s unilateral action created facts on the ground and left a bitter aftertaste among its European partners,14 and the internationalization of the Yugoslavia problem had all but the desired effect. After Bosnia-Herzegovina was formally recognized on 6 April 1992, the deterrence strategy failed. In a type of blitzkrieg, Bosnian Serb armed forces, supported by the JNA, conquered the greater part of Bosnian territory within weeks. The now rather sheepish Germans had to bear the brunt of the fierce criticism leveled against them by their allies.15 Later, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995) would spill into Kosovo (1998–1999) and Macedonia (2001).

To what degree did Germany’s foreign policy contribute to the approaching disaster? Certainly the timing and circumstances of its formal recognition were poorly considered. Why should Slovenes and Croats be permitted to exercise the right to self-determination, but not the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia or the Albanians in Kosovo? Why were no plans drawn up to provide humanitarian relief for the very probable case of the outbreak of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, when all signs pointed in the fall of 1991 to an armed conflict? The policy of recognition aimed to appease the German public and neglected the wider regional dimensions of Yugoslavia’s disintegration. The further course of events revealed, with disastrous consequences, the contradictions of the German approach. According to its constitutional law, Germany was barred from using its armed forces “out of area,” that is, for purposes other than self-defense. Thus, it could not provide any military cover to non-NATO members such as the Yugoslav successor states. To think that other governments would deploy their military and thereby risk the lives of many soldiers for a policy they considered wrong was unrealistic. That said, it is more than questionable that diplomatic means would have been able by this point to prevent or even effectively contain the war, in light of the determination of actors on the ground to use military force.

War in Bosnia-Herzegovina

During the bombardment of Dubrovnik and Vukovar, the Bosnian government in Sarajevo was deeply concerned about the future of its multiethnic republic. According to the 1991 census, the population of Bosnia-Herzegovina totaled 4.37 million, of which 43.5 percent were Muslims, 31.2 percent Serbs, 17.4 percent Croats, and 5.5 percent Yugoslavs. The remaining 2.4 percent consisted
of numerous other nationalities. Not a single municipality was homogenous, and clear ethnic boundaries did not exist. Therefore, at first the Bosnian coalition government backed the idea to reform Yugoslavia, but not to dissolve it. Following the German recognition of Slovenia and Croatia, this option seemed obsolete. Bosnian Croats and Muslims did not want to remain in a Serb-dominated Yugoslav rump state, and the Bosnian Serb leadership took steps toward forming autonomous areas with quasi-state powers.

On 14 October 1991, the Muslim SDA and the Croat HDZ-BiH party groups in Bosnia’s parliament drafted a resolution for independence against the votes of the Serb SDS. The incensed Serbs then quit the coalition and, in protest, refused to participate any longer in the institutions. Reminiscent of what happened at the Yugoslav federal level in 1989/1990, all of the republic’s institutions and organizations split into ethnic components, including parliament, city councils, factory assemblies, the media, and security forces. In one public speech, Radovan Karadžić, the Serb political leader, called for ethnic segregation “like in Turkish times.” On 24 December 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina’s rump government successfully petitioned the European Community for official recognition, along with Macedonia, Slovenia, and Croatia. In contrast, Montenegro decided to remain united with Serbia. In 1992, the two republics formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY).

Starting in the fall of 1991, Bosnian Serbs worked on their transition to independence in much the same way as their fellow Serbs in Croatia did. In November, they held an illegal plebiscite to remain in Yugoslavia and on 9 January 1992, proclaimed the Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika srpskog naroda Bosne i Hercegovine; later, the Serb Republic, Republika Srpska) which was to include all municipalities, local communities, and populated places in which over 50 percent of the Serbs had voted in the plebiscite to remain in Yugoslavia.

In accordance with the terms set by the European Community for the recognition of new states, the Bosnian government organized a referendum on independence, held on 29 February and 1 March 1992, which the Serbs boycotted, as was expected. Voter participation in this referendum still reached nearly 64 percent, of which 99 percent voted in favor of independence. On 6 April 1992, the anniversary of the German attack on Yugoslavia in 1941 and the day of the liberation of Sarajevo in 1945, Bosnia-Herzegovina was officially recognized by the European Community as a sovereign state. The next day, the Bosnian Serbs then declared their own independence.

Prior to these events, local skirmishes had already occurred. Both SDS and SDA members erected barricades and checkpoints in Sarajevo in order to take control of strategic buildings, military equipment, and city quarters. The first shooting began on 5 April, out of which extensive gunfire and shelling
developed on both sides. Violent clashes also occurred in many other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina in early April 1992 and quickly escalated into a major armed conflict. Once independence was declared, the armed forces of the Bosnian Serbs, aided by the Yugoslav People’s Army, launched an assault and first overran eastern Bosnia along the Drina River, the northern Posavina corridor, eastern Herzegovina, and Bosnian Krajina, thereby creating a territorial bridge between Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia. General Ratko Mladić ordered his 250,000-man army to drive the non-Serb population out of the areas they conquered.\textsuperscript{19} Within a couple of months, hundreds of thousands of people were on the move, and several tens of thousands were killed. The 100,000 soldiers from the Bosnian Muslim Territorial Defense Force and the SDA-loyal paramilitary troops were poorly armed and thus unable to stop the Serbs. By July 1992, barely four months after the outbreak of war, the Serb para-state controlled more than two-thirds of the Bosnian territory.\textsuperscript{20}

In many regions, such as in the Eastern Bosnian town of Foča, where the Chetniks, the Ustashas, and Muslim militias had committed some of the worst atrocities of the Second World War, people experienced an eerie feeling of \textit{déjà-vu}. Although half of the town’s population were Bosniaks, the Bosnian-Serb leadership declared the town to be part of their new state in the fall of 1991. The region was remote and impoverished but important for the war due to its strategic location and transportation routes. On 8 April 1991, the Serb forces began shelling the town with grenades and artillery and conquered it a few days later.

Paramilitary units and volunteers like Arkan’s Tigers, Vojislav Šešelj’s Chetniks, and the White Eagles combed the streets and houses. They forced men and women to line up, then systematically separated and herded them into camps. The paramilitary bands revived practices known from the Second World War: the men were driven to the bridges, shot, and their bodies thrown into the river. Within a few weeks, nearly the entire Bosniak population had been driven out. The towns of Zvornik, Višegrad, Bijeljina, and many other locations were the scenes of similarly cruel and severe crimes.\textsuperscript{21}

The Serb forces thoroughly encircled Sarajevo and maintained the siege on the city for forty-four torturous months until the war ended. From the hills surrounding Sarajevo, they shelled the city incessantly, sometimes showering it with as many as 500 grenades per hour. Snipers arbitrarily gunned down civilians when they went out to get water, stood in line for food, sat in the streetcar, or simply walked down the street. “We had been encircled . . . from all sides. . . . Everybody shot at us constantly, like beasts. They were trying to kill as many of us as they could.” A man living in Sarajevo at the time, Bakir Nakaš, described how he managed to survive: “We managed to get by using only a litre of drinking water every day. We got used to it. We got used to
living, getting on without electricity, without drinking water. . . . Every day on your way to work you ran the risk of being killed or injured.” 22 Sheer survival became the central objective of the entire city.

Although Muslims and Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina had established joint command structures and had been fighting side by side against the Serbs since the start of the war, relations deteriorated in the autumn of 1992 when disputes arose over the future constitution of the independent state. The nationalist wing of the Croat HDZ party, centered in Herzegovina, advocated the unification of areas settled by Croats with Croatia. In November 1991 the autonomous region Herceg Bosna was formed and declared to be a separate state on 3 July 1992. 23 Its army, the Croatian Defense Council, now began to conquer areas in which the majority of the population were Muslims. In October 1992, the so-called “war within the war” broke out between these two former allies, resulting in serious violations of international humanitarian law against civilians on both sides. Franjo Tudjman, who did not preclude the idea of annexing Herzegovina for Croatia, sent troops to support his fellow countrymen militarily. 24 After a meeting between the Croatian president and Slobodan Milošević in Karadjordjevo on 25 March 1991, evidence grew stronger that Zagreb and Belgrade might reach an agreement on the division of Bosnia-Herzegovina at a heavy toll to the Muslims. 25

The “war within the war” changed the world’s image of Croatia as an innocent victim of Serb aggression and caused outright perplexity in the West. The fighting between the former allies caused horrendous destruction in central Bosnia and in Herzegovina, for which the demolition of the historic town of Mostar, including the famous sixteenth-century Old Bridge, by the Croatian Defense Council remains symbolic. Not until March 1994 could international mediators settle the conflict and commit the adversaries to the formation of a common state entity, the mutually disliked Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet, the fighting continued in many regions.

“Ethnic Cleansing”

As the war expanded, a form of mass atrocity thought to be forgotten suddenly confronted the shocked world community: “ethnic cleansing.” This euphemism stood for the planned and violent removal of undesired population groups from conquered territory, be it through deportation, displacement, or annihilation, as had occurred during the nineteenth century, the Balkan Wars, and the Second World War. 26

There is no doubt whatsoever that “ethnic cleansing” took place in a systematic and planned way. The regional context, the systematic implementation, and the summation of the results preclude any other conclusion except that homogenization was not a side effect of war but its main objective. 27
Approximately 70 percent of the expulsions, involving more than 2.2 million people, had already occurred between April and August 1992, during which time Serb armed forces attacked thirty-seven municipalities, most notably Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Višegrad, Prijedor, Sanski Most, Ključ, and municipalities along the Sava River Valley. In total, approximately 850 Bosniak- and Croat-occupied villages were obliterated, and entire families disappeared. Roma and Romani communities were also heavily affected.28

“Ethnic cleansing” was sought after politically, prepared by administrative bodies, and carried out within the framework of military operations by special forces of the regular army or by paramilitary units. Very similar to what occurred during the Second World War, the attackers tortured and massacred civilians, and burned down houses and entire villages. The aim of “ethnic cleansing” was to reinforce claims to the conquered territory and to create there an unequivocal power structure.29

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was able to prove later that the political preparation of mass expulsion in Bosnia-Herzegovina dated back to the first half of 1991 when the Bosnian Serbs, led by the SDS, decided to form a separate state and to arm their fellow countrymen. When the parliament dissolved in October 1991, ethnic segregation was already evident. In December 1991, the so-called crisis staffs (later war presidencies) began to convene as extraordinary administrative bodies, which took steps in preparation for the separation of the ethnic groups. After the Bosnian-Serb parliament proclaimed the founding of the Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 9 January 1992, the new bodies brought the claimed regions systematically under their control starting in late March. Ethnic exclusion was a key organizing principle of the new state; Muslims, Croats, and other non-Serbs were not wanted there.30

The ethnic composition of many municipalities changed radically. For instance, in 1991, Bosniaks and Croats made up 51 percent of the population in the eastern Bosnian town of Foča, but by the end of the war, this figure had dropped to only 3.8 percent. Overall, four-fifths of all non-Serbs were driven out of the territory of the Republika Srpska during the three and a half years of war. As a result, in thirty-seven municipalities the share of non-Serbs fell from 726,960 (53.97 percent) in 1991 to 235,015 (36.39 percent) in 1997, whereas the number of non-Serbs in the Croat-Bosniak–held territory in Bosnia-Herzegovina had increased by 41.18 percent. Altogether, the number of non-Serbs in the areas that now form the Republika Srpska had fallen by 81.74 percent.31 Whereas most incidents of “ethnic cleansing” were attributed to the Bosnian Serbs at the beginning of the war, the Croat and Bosniak armed forces also started in 1993 to homogenize the regions they conquered in order to consolidate territorial gains.32 According to estimates made by the Office
of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Serb population fell between 1991 and mid-1994 from 43,595 to 5,000 in Western Herzegovina; from 79,355 to 20,000 in the Zenica region; from 82,235 to 23,000 in the Tuzla area; and from 29,398 to 1,609 in the Bihać region. Yet, a clear majority of the dead and displaced were Bosniaks.

In the spring of 1992, the world was alarmed when photographs became public of Serb prisoner of war camps that resembled concentration camps, such as Omarska, Keraterm, and Manjača. Experts would later compile a list of about 400 prisons, police stations, schools, warehouses, or factories in which the warring sides interned men, women, and children under inhumane conditions. On the heels of these revelations came shocking reports of mass executions and mass rapes, torture and mutilation. “Bosnia” became the code word for an extreme brutalization of the war—and of the guilty conscience of the international community.

The more numerous and defiant the unwanted population groups were in a region, the more brutal were the measures taken against them. “Ethnic cleansing” was sometimes carried out through intimidation and discrimination, sometimes by way of detention and deportation or by torture and mass murder. Civilians were deliberately attacked and humiliated. Acts of savagery laden with symbolism and methods of killing and mutilating known to have been used throughout history intensified the feelings of indignity, intimidation, and fear not only among those experiencing it, but also among all those who had to witness it or heard about it: Muslims were forced to recite Christian prayers; women were publicly raped; people were tortured by having religious symbols scratched into their skins—practices that evoke cultural patterns and symbolic codes.

Part of the logic behind the permanent usurpation of territory was to thoroughly eradicate the basis of existence for the unwanted populations, so that they would never return. Houses, neighborhoods, town centers, and infrastructure were targeted for complete destruction. All cultural evidence of these groups were also to disappear, which explains why the historic centers of cities were deliberately shelled and churches, mosques, cemeteries, libraries, archives, and other buildings were destroyed. Nearly every mosque and three out of four Catholic churches were damaged or completely demolished during the war. Orthodox churches and monasteries were also targeted for attack. Therefore, “ethnic cleansing” was not only directed against the physical presence of people, but also against sociocultural systems, meaning against institutions, identities, collective memory, and life worlds. The idea of turning these claimed regions into independent and homogeneously Serbian territory was supported in Belgrade. This would later lead, for the first time in history, to the trial of a former head of state—President Slobodan Milošević—before
an international criminal tribunal on the charges of genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva conventions, and violations of the laws or customs of war. The main counts against him were related to his command authority over the Yugoslav People’s Army, which was involved “in the planning, preparation, facilitation and execution of the forcible removal of the majority of non-Serbs.” The indictment also accused him of supporting the political leadership and armed forces of the Bosnian Serbs, participating in the planning and execution of “ethnic cleansing” operations, supporting irregular forces, and manipulating the media. Charges of genocide and complicity to commit genocide included the mass killings in Srebrenica and murder or mistreatment of Bosnian Muslims in detention facilities. Milošević’s unexpected death in 2006 at the detention center in The Hague during the proceedings brought a sudden end to his trial.36

Yet, there is ample evidence that the Yugoslav People’s Armylogistically supported the campaign for a separate Serb state by providing supplies of arms and gasoline. As many as 2,000 of its soldiers fought alongside the Bosnian-Serb forces, and various Yugoslav officers served under their command. Special operation units of the Serbian ministry of internal affairs, such as the “Red Berets,” also operated on Bosnian territory.37 In February 2007, the International Court of Justice rejected the appeal made by Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1993 to apply the charge of genocide against Serbia. But the judges did find that Belgrade had not used its influence to prevent the serious mass crimes perpetrated in its neighboring state.38

The Perpetrators
In every society people exist who voluntarily commit crimes. Whether due to narcissistic personality disorders or sadistic dispositions, these people experience a feeling of exuberance and liberation in their actions. The snipers of Sarajevo, for example, enjoyed putting victims in their crosshairs and having an unbridled power over life and death, as one of them stated in an interview. Among the volunteers in the special operations units were many who were filled with hatred toward an envisioned enemy, enjoyed killing, or simply craved the business of war. The warlords attracted social outsiders, petty criminals, hooligans, and weekend fighters who saw the war as an adventure or a way to earn extra income.39

However, the widespread expulsion on the scale experienced in Bosnia was only possible because thousands of “ordinary men,” and very few women, participated in these crimes alongside those who were predisposed to violence.40 The International Criminal Tribune for the former Yugoslavia estimates that 15,000 to 20,000 people participated in planning, administering and executing “ethnic cleansing,” including members of the political leadership, the bureaucracy, the police, and the military, who acted on their own or
carried out the instructions of their superiors. Many described later that they experienced the war as a matter of defense in which killing was a necessary evil. A sense of duty, an ideal of masculinity, and group pressure interacted here. “There was no choice,” testified the Serb commander Dragan Obrenović. “You could be either a soldier or a traitor . . . We didn’t even notice how we were drawn into the vortex of interethnic hatred.” Others were driven by delusion, a sense of duty, opportunism, fear, sadism, or greed. Exhaustion, stress, and alcohol led to emotional deadening and lowered inhibitions. The police chief of Bosanski Šamac, Stevan Todorović, simply lost his nerve in the face of the daily artillery shelling, the mountain of corpses, and the plight of refugees. He was scared, panicky, and became an alcoholic. In this condition, he paid little attention to the butchery carried out by his subordinates. Many defended their actions on the reasoning that they were simply carrying out their superior’s orders, similar to the excuses of German executioners from the Second World War. Dražan Erdemović, a 23-year-old executioner in Srebrenica, emphasized that he had fled from the executions at the first available opportunity. Allegedly he did not kill willingly.

Amid all this, individuals still had leeway and opportunity to make their own choices. Grozdana Ćećez, a Serb woman who was raped every evening by her Muslim guards at the Čelebići camp, tried to ward off the attacks by humiliating her abusers with the question: “I could be your mother . . . don’t you have a mother?” The effect varied. Only one of the men was embarrassed, apologized, and left without having done what he had come for. Others, however, were not halted by her words, including one of her husband’s former work colleagues and one of her son’s classmates.

Perpetrators found it easier to justify their own actions if they could resort to symbolic forms of legitimation. The president of the Serb Republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Biljana Plavšić, expressed remorse and referred to her obsession over time with experiences and memories from the Second World War. Radovan Karadžić reached into the prop box of folklore to proclaim himself the descendant of the linguistic scholar Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and had himself filmed in a bizarre pose wearing historical costume. Hajduks, the Robin Hoods of the Balkans during the Ottoman era, were depicted as the role models for the warlords. Whoever took part in the battles were perpetuating the historical fight and carrying on the tradition of heroic deeds that had been celebrated in oral history for generations.

The Media and the Escalation of Violence

The International Tribunal for Yugoslavia came to the conclusion that the media was guilty of contributing significantly to the brutalization of the war. Radio, television, and the printed press created enemy images and stereotypes, spread rumors and untruths, provoked fear, hate, and revenge, and broke down
moral barriers. They resorted to well-tested propaganda strategies to give the war the necessary psychological underpinning, especially by portraying everything as black or white, by demonizing the enemy, by ignoring, exaggerating, and falsifying information, by drawing parallels between current occurrences and historic events and myths, by using hateful language and constantly repeating the same messages.\textsuperscript{48} The authors of a study on media communication noted correctly that the Yugoslav war was “the mere continuation of the evening news by military means.”\textsuperscript{49}

Since the motto “no pictures, no news” prevailed in the media age, the warring parties hired professional public relations agencies abroad to promote their cause. Alone in the United States, they signed at least 157 contracts with partners between 1991 and 2002, a figure that most certainly represents just the tip of the iceberg. Among the jobs to be done, for example, was to improve the image of Slovenia and Croatia as Western European countries or to equate the Serbs with Nazis.\textsuperscript{50} Thanks to satellite technology and digital recording, editing, and transmission capabilities, international news channels—especially CNN, BBC, and later Al Jazeera—brought images of the war directly from the crisis regions to the rest of the world, thereby mobilizing a global civil society calling for humanitarian and military intervention.\textsuperscript{51}

Hate-filled tirades appeared in the media on all sides, making it soon hard to distinguish between true and false. In the Serbian evening news, an alarmed public learned that Muslim extremists had supposedly fed Serb children to the lions in the Sarajevo zoo. More dangerous than such horror myths were the many unverifiable, one-sided, or falsified news stories about events that sounded plausible, such as the report that Bosnian troops were shelling their own civilian population in Sarajevo in order to place the blame on the Serbs.\textsuperscript{52} German politicians were also tricked into believing a bogus report or two, including one in which Serb doctors were said to be implanting dog fetuses into Bosniak women. Such stories not only perpetuated repulsive images of the enemy, they also appealed to forms of media voyeurism.\textsuperscript{53}

The war allowed aggression to be acted out openly and provided a framework in which violent acts were suddenly wanted, encouraged, and socially sanctioned.\textsuperscript{54} Under exceptional conditions, people can certainly be tempted into committing deeds that they never would do under peaceful circumstances. This makes it almost impossible to maintain friendly neighborly relations in wartime. Once war has erupted, it becomes the source for a vicious cycle of never-ending violence. It alters ideas, emotions, aims, behavior, and identities of people from the ground up. People who are otherwise respectable citizens may carry out personal vendettas under the guise of higher national interests and thus attribute a type of private meaning to the war, and this may even prompt acquaintances to go after one another.\textsuperscript{55}
Insecurity and anxiety are the most important means by which to transform ethnic distance and latent nationalism into open antagonism. The 1993 British documentary *We Are All Neighbors* shows how uncertainty and fear, rumors and media disinformation, followed by the first violent incidents and finally the outbreak of war, turned peaceful coexistence into distrust, then rejection, and eventually hate. In a village not far from Kiseljak in central Bosnia, life seemed to be rather normal in 1993. As long as the artillery fire was only to be heard faintly in the distance, Croats and Muslims met for coffee as usual. No one believed that anything could change the good neighborly relations. But the more the war interfered with daily life and the closer the front approached the village, the more uneasy people began to feel. By the time the first refugees arrived, people were talking about “us” and “them.” Visits with one another became less frequent; some no longer greeted the others. Out of doubt grew distrust, out of insecurity developed fear, and out of that, betrayal. When Croat troops were about to launch an attack on the village and therefore warned the local Croats, not one gathered up enough courage to inform their Muslim neighbors. All Muslims could do once the assault started was to tear out of town head over heels under a shower of grenades.56

Similar examples of crumbling solidarity could be observed everywhere as people became fearful of losing their homes or their lives.57 In mid-1991, the Croat Witness E reported that, shortly before the assault on Vukovar, his Serb friends left town. Why, he asked them. “They would shrug their shoulders and they would say, ‘We believe you will see it soon too.’”58 Witness DD, whose husband and two sons were murdered in the massacres in Srebrenica, described the relationship to her Serb acquaintances: “We were friends, in fact. We went to have coffee at each other’s houses. And if we were working on something, we would help one another. We would help them, and they would help us.” She later saw one of these neighbors standing among the soldiers who took away her 14-year-old son, who was never seen again. At that moment she remembered that many Serb women and children had left the area a few days before the attack. “Then someone asked, ‘Where are you going? What’s happening?’ . . . Their answer was very vague. ‘Some fools could come along and do who knows what.’ . . . And we were wondering. Until then, they didn’t do anything wrong. They didn’t hurt us and, of course, we didn’t hurt them either.”59

**Containment Policy**

While public opinion in the West favored military intervention in light of the horrific images from Bosnia that flicked across people’s television screens every evening, political leaders remained reticent. Die for Sarajevo? Politicians and military experts knew that it would not be enough to simply make threatening gestures, but they feared the risks of deploying ground troops.60 Nor
was there any hope that an intervention could offer political solutions since the warring parties had already rejected one peace plan after another.

Because the war continued to escalate, the credibility and reputation of the international community in dealing with Yugoslavia suffered. Miscalculations and delayed reactions as well as conflicting national interests and evaluations prevented the West from presenting a united front and made it look thoroughly helpless, disoriented, and devoid of any overall concept on how to cope with the situation. An army of special envoys, diplomats, and military experts scurried around just trying to catch up with the tumultuous events, hundreds of ceasefires were broken, and the heads of state of the world’s greatest powers exposed themselves to public ridicule by arrogant provincial politicians from the Balkans. Not only did the international community lack the political will to form a united approach, it also possessed no effective instruments of conflict management.\(^{61}\)

For all these reasons, the international community limited itself to developing a strategy of humanitarian relief and containment. It imposed an arms embargo and commissioned the United Nations in Sarajevo with the distribution of food and medicine. Serbia and Montenegro, which had united as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, were punished in May 1992 with comprehensive economic and diplomatic sanctions. In February 1993, the UN Security Council established the International Criminal Court for the Former Yugoslavia to prosecute the worst war crimes.\(^{62}\)

In light of the relatively weak response from the West, the Bosnian government received support from the Islamic world. Hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars are thought to have been spent between 1992 and 1995 on illegal weapon sales. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Malaysia, and Indonesia were particularly prominent sponsors. Radical, violence-prone groups from abroad also arrived in the embattled region, including up to five thousand Iranian, Afghani, and Saudi *mujahideen* fighters who joined the Bosniak armed forces.\(^{63}\) Although conflicts between Saudi Arabia and Iran, between the Sunnis and Shiites, stood in the way of a unified Islamic policy, pan-Islamic solidarity was strengthened. This encouraged the re-Islamization of Bosnian Muslims, who felt abandoned by the West.\(^{64}\)

Brutal “ethnic cleansing” continued to force thousands of people to flee to the cities, where unsustainable conditions had prevailed for months. Therefore, the UN Security Council declared Srebrenica, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Žepa, Goražde, and Bihać “safe areas” in April and May 1993. Lightly armed Blue Helmet peacekeeping forces were to provide humanitarian aid under the protection of possible NATO air strikes. The concept of the safe areas revealed serious flaws from day one, starting with the fact that peacekeepers were being sent into a region in which there was no peace to keep. The rules of their deployment referred to consent of the conflicting parties, impartiality, and nonuse of
force except in self-defense. The Blue Helmets therefore did not have either the mandate or equipment and arms necessary for active battle. “Knowing that any other course of action would jeopardize the lives of the troops, we tried to create—or imagine—an environment in which the tenets of peacekeeping . . . could be upheld,” stated UN secretary-general Kofi Annan later.\(^{65}\) The Security Council passed more than 200 resolutions to stitch together a complex and contradictory mandate, the boundaries of which were incomprehensible to all. Where did this mandate start, where did it end? Ultimately, the tragedy was that the term “safe area” duped the population into believing these areas offered a measure of protection that actually never existed. Furthermore, there was an extreme disparity between the UN’s aims and its resources: instead of the 34,000 soldiers demanded by UN headquarters to man the six designated safe areas, the UN member states only sent 7,500 soldiers to serve.\(^{66}\)

Meanwhile, the possibility of “humanitarian intervention” was being debated throughout the West. These debates between advocates and opponents of such intervention were particularly controversial in Germany, where the central question was whether Germany should and could participate in military operations abroad in the future, although these were expressly prohibited by the constitution. Because the German air force had been participating in the international airlift to Sarajevo since July 1992, members of Germany’s Liberal and Social Democratic parties turned to the Constitutional Court in April 1993. The judges ruled on 12 July 1994 that Germany could take part in peacekeeping missions without having to first amend the constitution, as long as parliament approved the mission by simple majority. Step by step, the self-imposed limitation on military involvement that had prevailed in Germany since 1945 gave way to a greater acceptance of the idea to deploy German troops abroad and to assume a new foreign policy role in world politics.\(^{67}\)

**Srebrenica**

On the morning of 11 July 1995, Bosnian-Serb army and police units stormed the safe area of Srebrenica, which had been under artillery fire for days. Although the president of Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić, had ordered the removal of the Muslim population from the enclaves of Srebrenica and Žepa back on 8 March, the attack caught the 150 Dutch UN troops deployed there completely by surprise.\(^{68}\) During the torturous July days that followed, as many as 8,200 men and boys were systematically executed by Serb forces, making the Srebrenica massacres the first legally recognized genocide on European soil since 1945. In a tragic way, this incident symbolized the belated, helpless, and fully inadequate response of the West.

From the standpoint of the Bosnian Serbs, there were many reasons to attack the city. They viewed eastern Bosnia as ancient Serbian territory, the Drina River as an “internal river” and not a “border,” as General Mladić
expressed it. “The main obstacle today is Srebrenica with which the Germans and Americans, who defend it, want to fix Serbia’s border at the Drina,” he said in addressing his soldiers. “It is your task to prevent this.” In the summer of 1995, Mladić’s troops controlled all of eastern Bosnia with the exception of a few enclaves, while the Bosnian army only launched attacks periodically against the regions surrounding what were actually demilitarized safe areas. Bosniak troops had grown increasingly strong since 1994, had retaken regions, and were preparing to break the siege of Sarajevo in the summer of 1995. In this context, the Bosnian military pulled soldiers out of Srebrenica, a clear indication that they did not intend to make a serious effort to defend the enclave. Furthermore, the Serbs could count on encountering no resistance from the UN peacekeeping troops. That spring a precedent had been set in Croatia in which the Croatian army had overrun the UN safe area in western Slavonia and driven out the Serb population living there. Last but not least, contempt and revenge against the balija, a derogatory term for Muslims, played a role after Muslim militias had caused a bloodbath in the villages of Glogova and Kravica on the Orthodox Christmas Eve of 1993. “Kad, tad”—sooner or later, Serbs vowed, there would be revenge.

A dangerous concoction of strategic scheming, nationalist incitement, and outright vengefulness was brewing as Mladić’s men waited for an opportunity for the ultimate reckoning with the Muslims. In the preceding months, thousands had flown to the safe area from the large territories under Serb control. Instead of 9,000 people, there were now 30,000 people in the city—another reason why the UN military experts believed that Srebrenica could not be taken by force. General Mladić assessed the situation differently and assumed that he could force the city to surrender without a major battle by placing it under siege. However, contrary to expectations, Muslim soldiers, along with a good number of the male population, decided to break out of town during the night of 11 July. This made the Serbs hopping mad. It was then, at the latest, that Mladić must have given the order to massacre as many men and boys as they could find. Following the assault on the city, his troops captured all those seeking protection on the grounds of the UN compound in Potočari or hiding in the surrounding woods. Thousands were taken away in buses, packed into empty school buildings or warehouses, and then slaughtered like livestock or systematically executed.

The 17-year-old Witness O, who was able to escape, severely injured, after a mass shooting on the morning of 15 July 1995, recounted the events of that night: “The situation was chaotic. We were all tied up. . . . the firing started, and then they would call out people in groups of five. . . . And when it was my turn . . . we were told to find a place for us, . . . when we were on the right-hand side of the truck, I saw rows of killed people. It looked like they had been lined up one row after the other. . . . And when we reached the spot,
somebody said, ‘Lie down.’ And when we started to fall down to the front, they were behind our backs, the shooting started. . . . I felt pain in the right side of my chest . . . . I was waiting for another bullet to come and hit me and I was waiting to die. . . . I don’t know how long it took. They kept bringing people up. . . . Once they had finished, somebody said that all the dead should be inspected . . . and if they find a warm body, they should fire one more bullet into their head.”

71 Miraculously, Witness O was overlooked, so that he was later able to crawl away on all fours into the forest.

Both the UN and the government of the Netherlands promised to investigate and report their findings on the greatest mass murder of postwar European history to a shocked world. Their reports placed responsibility on many shoulders: the UN Security Council, for limiting its involvement to containment and choosing a peacekeeping mission that was not implementable and based on an ill-conceived concept of safe areas; the UN member states, for sending too few, poorly trained, and insufficiently equipped Blue Helmets into a highly dangerous operation; the imprudent UN commanders in Srebrenica who did not have serious reconnaissance equipment at their disposal, for evaluating the situation quite falsely up to the bitter end and for not concerning themselves with the fate of those taken prisoner by the Serbs after the town fell; the headquarters of the UN peacekeeping forces in Zagreb, for turning down requests by the UN troops on site for NATO air power; and the defense minister of the Netherlands, for supporting that decision because he feared reprisals against fifty-five of his soldiers who served as Blue Helmets and who were being held hostage by the Serbs. Yet, with all that said, incidents of mass murder on this scale far exceeded what most people could have imagined.

The Dayton Peace Accord

NATO had been bombing Serb positions on a limited scale since the brutal mortar attack on the Markale market in Sarajevo on 6 February 1994, in which at least 68 people were killed and 197 injured. But the Srebrenica massacre became a clarion call to action for the West, and the alliance started a campaign of massive bombardment. With the help of foreign arms shipments and American military advisers, the Croatian and Bosniak armed forces became more professionally run, improved their military clout, and could seriously challenge the previously superior Bosnian Serb army.73 The myth of Serb invincibility was definitely shattered when the Croatian army overran the UN safe area in western Slavonia in May 1995 and finally conquered the so-called Republic of Serb Krajina in its Operation _oluja_ (Storm) in August 1995, thereby driving away 150,000 to 200,000 Serbs. In cars, buses, and horse-drawn wagons, tens of thousands of men, women, and children fled head over heels, with barely any time to gather together the bare necessities. Once the political leadership also bolted, the statelet collapsed altogether. The
Serbs only managed to hold onto an area in eastern Slavonia that was later reincorporated peacefully into Croatia. As far as it was concerned, Zagreb had thus solved the “Serb question” permanently. Very few of the displaced Serbs returned to their homes when the war ended.  

All of these factors led to a military standoff in mid-1995. Bosnian Serbs and Croat-Muslim troops each controlled about half of the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina. That fall, U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke presented an agreement that he intended to bulldoze through. For three weeks, the presidents and the delegations from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia were housed in a lockdown situation at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, until they came to an agreement on 21 November 1995. The peace accord was formally signed in Paris a month later on 14 December.

The Dayton Accord squared the circle by keeping Bosnia-Herzegovina as a unified state with its prewar borders (Muslim position) and by dividing it into two quite independent yet constituent entities (Serb position). The Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was ruled by Croats and Muslims, received 51 percent of the territory and thus a symbolic majority. A complicated system of cantons was meant to fulfill the Croat demand for autonomy (but never did). The other entity continued to be the Serb Republic (Republika Srpska), which received 49 percent of the territory. Very few competencies were delegated to the central government in Sarajevo, namely foreign policy, issues of citizenship, and monetary policy. The so-called entities governed themselves practically autonomously and were permitted their own currency, police force, and army. The agreement guaranteed that all refugees and displaced persons could return and demanded the prosecution of war criminals. To implement the accord, the international community installed a High Representative with quasi-dictatorial powers and sent a 60,000-strong peacekeeping force under NATO (and later EU) command.

The initial euphoria over the end of the war soon subsided, and the general mood sobered. Society had changed to such a degree that peaceful coexistence of the different nationalities seemed impossible. Roughly 100,000 people had lost their lives, and more than two million had been driven from their homes. The Dayton Accord created a highly complicated and barely functional state that was weakened by a general unwillingness to cooperate, political radicalism, and serious economic problems. Last but not least, the new state suffered from the fact that a major part of the population did not identify with it.

**War in Kosovo**

All hopes that the Dayton agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina would bring lasting peace to the former Yugoslavia were dashed when unrest broke out in Kosovo in 1997. The “forgotten of Dayton”—the Albanians in Kosovo—drew attention to themselves after the West continued to consistently ignore their
demands for independence. Radicalized by the loss of autonomy, human rights abuse at the hands of Serb security forces, and growing economic problems, the underground organization Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK) burst onto the scene with a series of terror attacks. The Serb special police forces and army started a massive crackdown that caused mass expulsions and killings. Yet, neither the sanctions leveled against Belgrade by the European Community nor the numerous warnings of the United States and European powers were of any avail. When forty-five Albanians were murdered in Račak in January 1999, determination grew in the West to end the conflict militarily in order to prevent a “second Bosnia.” The last diplomatic efforts of the Contact Group failed in February 1999 at the Château de Rambouillet near Paris when, despite being threatened with military action, Slobodan Milošević rejected the final version of a peace plan, because this would have meant the stationing of NATO troops on the FRY sovereign state’s territory, which he deemed a violation of international law.  

The Social Democratic Party–Green Party coalition government of Germany was soon faced with the parliamentary inquiry on whether Germany could participate in NATO air strikes even without a mandate from the UN Security Council. Those in favor drew parallels between the crimes occurring in Kosovo and Hitler’s annihilation policy, which gave the basic German narrative of its Nazi history a new emphasis. No longer was the main lesson from the past “never again war,” but rather “never again Auschwitz!” The order of the day was not military abstinence, but intervention. The German parliament decided by a large majority to participate in Operation Allied Force against Serbia.  

On 24 March 1999, NATO began its first air war “out of area” against military installations, infrastructure, and industrial plants in Serbia and Kosovo, accompanied by a large media campaign to present the intervention as a “just war.” “Our credo at NATO was just to be on the air the whole time,” NATO spokesman Jamie Shea explained later, “crowd out the opposition, give every interview, do every briefing.” But instead of forcing Belgrade to relent, the air strikes only incited Serbian armed forces and special police to even greater destructiveness. Within a few days, as many as 800,000 people fled their homes or were expelled, most of them finding refuge in Macedonia and Albania. Yet the accusation persistently leveled by Western governments and NATO that the Serbian armed forces were deploying a long-prepared “Horseshoe Plan” of targeted “ethnic cleansing” in Kosovo was proven later to be false.  

Slobodan Milošević did not give in until eleven weeks later, on 9 June 1999. Under the pressure of the air strikes, he eventually agreed to transform Kosovo into a UN protectorate within Yugoslavia. The relieved Contact Group, which had been having painful discussions about the necessity of ground-troop intervention, assured that the territorial integrity of the FRY
would be upheld. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1244 on 10 June 1999, which established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo and shortly thereafter a peacekeeping force under NATO command arrived there. The international civilian and military presence would oversee the return of refugees and IDPs and the withdrawal of military forces from Kosovo. The main objective was to promote “the establishment, pending a final settlement, of substantial autonomy and self-government in Kosovo.” A process to determine the future status of Kosovo was started, which resulted in a proposal by UN special envoy Martti Ahtisaari to grant Kosovo “supervised independence,” which Serbia immediately rejected and which therefore did not obtain Security Council approval.

However, in Serbia, the end of the Kosovo war set the country on a new political course. In October 2000, after a lost election, mass demonstrations, and a march on Belgrade, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia swept Slobodan Milošević out of office and extradited him a year later to the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague. Under a new democratic government, Serbia started a process of “Europeanization,” and sanctions were lifted.

Meanwhile, the UÇK looked around for a new field of operation. In the Preševo Valley of southern Serbia and in Macedonia, where a fourth of the population is Albanian, it carried out attacks with the aim being to consolidate all areas inhabited by Albanians. More than 200 people died in its conflict against the Macedonian security forces, and about 100,000 fled or were driven out. The EU and the United States mediated a peace agreement in August 2001 that granted Albanians more rights and left the country with at least the temporary hope of more stability.82

Shortly thereafter, with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), the last institutional remnant of Yugoslavia dissolved. It was transformed in 2003 into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. In May 2006, Montenegro left the union with Serbia after a slight majority of 55.5 percent of voters backed independence in a referendum. The new state was immediately recognized by Belgrade.83

On the basis of the Ahtisaari plan, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence on 17 February 2008. Although the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its advisory opinion of 22 July 2010, concluded that the unilateral declaration of independence did not violate general international law or Security Council resolutions, the international community remained split over this question, including the EU. The United States was one of the first countries to officially recognize the newest state in Europe. As of May 2018, 113 out of 193 UN member states have recognized Kosovo.84

Gradually Yugoslavia dissolved into its constitutive parts in what seems to be an almost logical consequence of the process of disintegration that had
started in the 1980s. The erosion of political institutions, the demise of the state’s monopoly on the use of force, and the cessation of international control mechanisms created a vacuum of authority that enabled actors to pursue their specific interests ruthlessly with military means. The result was a hybrid of civil war and war of aggression in which more than 100,000 people lost their lives. The economization of the conflicts and the media involvement in them led some to believe that what occurred in Yugoslavia constituted the prototype of “new war.” However, the form of this armed conflict was not new, only the way in which it was perceived and subsequently interpreted from abroad. Actually, it was but a continuation of the secular process of nation and state building that began in the nineteenth century with the collapse of foreign rule over the Balkans and led in periodic stages to armed conflicts and “ethnic cleansing.” In this process, the ethnic-inclusive South Slavic idea has eventually succumbed to its strongest rival, the idea of a homogeneous nation state. The new political order of the post-Yugoslav era arose as a consequence of military force, in the same way as the entire map of European statehood evolved.