

Serbian Sorrows

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Any sincere Serbian Orthodox Christian must categorically reject the unjust conduct of the wars in Yugoslavia by at least some Serbs, whether in irregular "rogue" militias or orchestrated by the government of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade. Three particularly egregious offenses cry out for condemnation.

First, the deployment of snipers and the use of artillery and other means of indirect fire against civilian targets in urban areas is, whatever the political objective, a violation of the just-war principles of proportionality and discrimination (or non-combatant immunity). Not only cities but also humanitarian convoys of vehicles loaded with food and medical supplies have had to endure shelling, some of it no doubt by Serbs. In a lengthy statement issued on May 29, the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, to its credit, condemned Serbian attacks on civilian targets.

Second the strategy of "ethnic cleansing" proves that some Serbs have drunk too deeply from the poisoned well of their former Nazi persecutors in Croatia. Whether motivated by paranoia or by a reasonable fear of oppression by non-Serb majorities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the systematic displacement of people based solely on their ancestry through acts of physical intimidation of people and terror is regarded by the international community as a war crime. It also mocks the Christian moral imperative to love and to offer hospitality to one's neighbor.

Third, the mistreatment of prisoners-of-war in detention camps constitutes another violation of the law of land warfare as codified in the Geneva Conventions of 1925 and 1949. Without resorting to charges of Nazi-like "death camps," a fair-minded observer viewing the pictures of Muslim prisoners could not but wonder if they were fed properly.

But these sickening pictures do not justify the daily pounding of Serbia and "the Serbs" in the Western media. Reporters and pundits of varying

political persuasions seem determined to convict Serbia *alone* without considering all the evidence.

"Evidence" is sometimes created out of whole cloth, especially by political cartoonists: An Associated Press photograph showing a smiling Serbian soldier waving as he departed Sarajevo airport on June 29 was "revised" by Chuck Asay for the *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*: his cartoon (reprinted by *The Washington Times* on July 12) depicted a young child impaled on the soldier's bayonet. A particularly odious example was the "ethnic cleansing" cartoon of Jim Borgman for the *Cincinnati Inquirer*, which *The Washington Post* reprinted on August 9. Skeletal figures labeled "Croats" and "Muslims" are shown entering the "showers" of a "Serbian Concentration Camp." Not even the grim accounts given by former inmates of the detention camps in Bosnia suggest Nazi-like gas chambers.

In the current media frenzy, photographs and film footage have been grossly mislabeled. One of the spectacular video icons printed and broadcast during the week of August 3 purported to show a Croatia child initially identified by *New York Times* reporter John F. Bums on August 3 as Vedrana Glavas, a mentally handicapped three-year-old girl — being buried as the mourners were pounded by artillery shells, presumably of Serbian origin. The British newspaper *The Independent* reported on two weeks later that the United Nations forces on the ground in Bosnia were convinced that Muslims with grenade-launchers, not Serbian mortars, had attacked the cemetery in a ploy to curry international sympathy. Further, when a former resident of Sarajevo now living in Paris saw a fuller version on French television of the film footage from which the sound bite on Cable News Network in the United States was taken, he identified the site as a Serbian cemetery with a Serbian Orthodox priest conducting the burial service for a Serbian child!

This rush to judgment is often characterized by what some might describe, not without reason, as hysteria. Prominent reporters and commentators such as NBC television's John Chancellor have made free use of such heavy-handed phrases such as "Serb-Nazis" and "Serb-Saddam" (for Milosevic). Throwing caution to the wind, Democratic presidential nominee Bill Clinton pushed for some kind of American armed might to "force" "the Serbs" to open their "concentration camps." Political pundit Morton Kondracke suggested that air strikes on Serbia's infrastructure "would deter these bellicose bullies. Military analyst William Taylor of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., recommended that the Western powers bomb the Serbian command-and-control center in

Belgrade itself. Even the most timid doves on the Persian Gulf War are flexing newfound hawkish muscles against "the Serbs." Substitute "the Jews" or "the Arabs" or virtually any other ethnic group and see how long it takes before a storm of epithets like "bigot" or "racist" would rain upon the head of an insensitive journalist or pundit. Emotional excess is no substitute for reasoned policy analysis.

Meanwhile, the major print media in the United States occasionally report the atrocities committed by Muslims and Croats, but these stories are invariably buried in the inside pages, with virtually no mention in headlines. The only noteworthy exception was the lead editorial in the July 10 *New York Times*. Citing the forcible seizure of southwest Herzegovina approximately 30 percent of the new Bosnian republic's history by Croatian militias and President Franjo Tudjman's expressed hope that the Croats there would declare an "independent" secessionist Croatia "republic," the *Times* entitled its critique Croatia, the Butcher's Apprentice."

Tudjman, like his counterpart in Belgrade an ex-Communist and born-again nationalist, has skillfully exploited the Bosnian civil war for his own ends. This Croatian aggrandizement reminds us of the Japanese "parable of the waterbirds," which Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey proposed as a model of causation in his 1973 book *The Causes of Wars*: while two waterbirds fight over a fish, the fisherman may snatch the fish away. With the world's attention riveted on the Serbian-Muslim conflict in Sarajevo and northern and eastern Bosnia, Tudjman has proved himself the big fisherman in the south.

Some Serbs have committed terrible crimes in the wars of the Yugoslav secession. Yet "the Serbs" as a people should not be subject to the slanderous rewriting of their often painful history that passes for journalism in the Western media. No mention is made in news reports, for example, that Serbs were original victims of "ethnic cleansing" in Nazi-satellite Croatia in World War II (with hundreds of thousands of brutal massacres) and during the thirty-five years of Yugoslav (actually Croatian) dictator Josip Broz Tito's rule by proxy through the Muslim Albanians in Serbia's Kosovo province. The brutality and harassment visited upon Serbs in Kosovo — the cradle of Serbian religious and national culture — has, together with an increased birth rate among Albanians there, reduced the Serbian percentage of the population in this region from around 50 to 12. Those who never raised a voice to condemn the ethnic cleansing perpetrated against Serbs should think twice before they express one-sided moral outrage in the present Bosnian conflict.

Serbia but have ignored the stated aims of the Muslim leader in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Alija Izerbegovic. In his 1990 book entitled *Islamic Declaration*, he wrote: "There can be no peace or coexistence between Islamic faith and non-Islamic social and political institutions." Casting aside any visions of a secular pluralistic state on Bosnian territory, he also declared: "The Islamic movement should and can start to take over power as soon as it is morally and numerically strong enough to be able to overturn not only the existing non-Islamic government, but also to build up a new Islamic one." And Izerbegovic is supposed to be a moderate Muslim.

The media continue to ignore certain inconvenient facts. For example, in the Balkan Wars (1912-13) and World War I, Serbia fought at great human and material costs to liberate Serbian majority populations in Turkish-controlled Kosovo and Austrian-dominated Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as Serbian regions in Croatia and Slovenia. Serbia's costly alliance with the Triple Entente in the First World War was duly rewarded in 1919, when the Treaty of Versailles incorporated most the region's Serbs into the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929). Although Yugoslavia prior to Tito's Communist regime was not divided into republics or other ethnic units, the Communists carved up the country so that one-third of the Serbs were left outside the Socialist republic of Serbia. Yet the Western media have behaved as if the Serbs had no legitimate interest in the Serb-populated areas of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Over and over again, the media have reported that "the Serbs" have "captured" two-thirds of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as if they had dropped there from Serbia or Mars. While they constitute about one-third of the population in this region, they resided in about 60 percent of the area *before* any fighting took place. And the media usually refer to the smuggling of Serbian arms into Bosnia-Herzegovina the primary arsenal of the Yugoslavia after its break with Stalin in 1948. The Bosnian Serbs already had ample firepower at their disposal when their war began in June.

Sadly, many in the West who applaud the fall of Communism seem determined to fight to defend one of Tito's worse offenses against the Serbs - the artificial internal borders. When Yugoslavia began to disintegrate, several voices in the West declared that the wishes of the various peoples would be respected. If they had studied Yugoslavian history, they would have known that as, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia seceded from Yugoslavia, Serbia would not stand by passively without seeking resolution of its greatest grievance - the unfair territorial boundaries.

Perhaps the most glaring example of journalistic inertia is the apparent

refusal of the Western media to pursue the claim of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church that Croatian forces have depopulated Serbian villages in western Slavonia and western Herzegovina and opened "concentration camps" for Serbs. In their May 29 statement the bishops provided place names and numbers: for example, 4,000 Serbian soldiers in Odzalc; 643 men, women, and children in Livno; 570 men and women Duvno. Refugees have also reported to the bishops that, in a revival of the Croatian Ustasha barbarism of 1941, Serbs have been thrown into "bottomless pits" at Surmanci near Medjugorje in Herzegovina and at the Katina pit at Velebit. The Serbian Orthodox bishops are a spiritually sober, prudent lot not usually given to political activism of any sort. They deserve to be taken seriously in the West.

What is truly ironic is that the governments of the United States and the European Community may have helped to precipitate the current political and military morass by their incomprehension of the ethnic, religious, and political complexities of the region. Did these governments understand the likely consequences of their acquiescence to the break-up of the Yugoslav federation? Did they care so little how the close-knit Serbian minority in an independent Croatia would be haunted by the specter of the last attempt by Zagreb at nationhood? Or how far from sanguine the minority Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina would be at the prospects of a Muslim-dominated government in the land that served as one of the principal anti-Serbian "killing fields" during the Second World War? And now the United States and the European Community, struggling to cope with their shortsightedness, have rushed further down the political and moral pitfalls, one would think that caution, prudence, and fairness would govern the search for a solution that is at once moral and practical. Among the most vocal critics of "the Serbs" in the Western governments and media, however, these virtues have been conspicuously lacking.