

# Readers respond (I)

## While Yugoslavia Burned, the Left Looked the Other Way

Peter Lippman

2002

**Editors' note:** In the following pages, we feature two essays by readers. The first is Peter Lippman's "While Yugoslavia Burned the Left Looked the Other Way," a response to Bob Myers' "Ethnic Cleansing in the Former Yugoslavia" (published in FE #356, Spring 2002).

Second, we're printing "Marcos: The Zapatistas' Unknown Icon" by a subscriber in England. Written last year, this piece may appear dated, but those of us who read it found it inspiring. From time to time, we hope to feature more writing by our readers—when space allows it and the quality of your work demands it.

### While Yugoslavia Burned, the Left Looked the Other Way

Very few Westerners paid much attention to Yugoslavia before its decline in the late 1980s. When then-president of Serbia Slobodan Milosevic gained prominence, Western liberals began to criticize his drive to carve out a "Greater Serbia" from parts of Yugoslavia. But for most people Yugoslavia was far away; it was Europe's problem, not ours; and anyway it was too complicated. Some leftists even believed the talk show hosts who spouted, "It's an ancient ethnic hostility; there's nothing we can do about it."

But the dissolution of Yugoslavia was terribly relevant, as people have since been forced to realize. Like the Spanish Civil War, it heralded the development of a new set of power relationships in Europe and throughout the world. Coming on the heels of the Gulf War, the Yugoslav dissolution was a second key signpost in the unfolding of post-Cold War geopolitics.

The response of Western governments was to let the conflict fester, and then propose map-based plans for its settlement. But such plans only encouraged the warring parties to fight harder to grab territory that they then would control in any peace agreement. Eventually, after the deaths of more than two hundred thou-



Linocut by Richard Mock

sand people, NATO intervened in 1995 and forced the belligerents to the negotiating table at Dayton.

Western critics of foreign policy did not succeed in using the occasion of intervention to sort out the origin of the conflict. If they paid attention at all, they reflexively criticized Western intervention (or in some cases agonized about the massacres), and left it at that.

It was as if those who were not paying attention during the decline of Yugoslavia in the 1980s woke up on the eve of NATO's interventions (in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999), consulted their book of slogans, and said, "Thou shalt not intervene." The most penetrating radical analysts of our time repeated the call, as the blood was flowing, for further negotiations with Milosevic. Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn, and even Subcomandante Marcos chimed in, fitting the reality of Yugoslavia into their own paradigms, rather than staying alert for new models of analysis.

This comment is not meant as enthusiastic support for U.S. intervention, but as a criticism of the lack of deeper examination of the Yugoslav conflict. Chomsky has often written astutely of the totalitarianism governing mainstream thought in the West. Unfortunately, the blind impulse to explain all the world's ills as stemming directly and exclusively from Western imperialism has reinforced a similar intellectual strait-jacket among leftists.

Bob Myers' story of the brave work of Workers Aid (see the Spring 2002 Fifth Estate) helps to clarify that the real aggression in Yugoslavia was perpetrated by a fascist elite against the supporters of multicultural society. His article rightly places the biggest part of the responsibility for the wars on the regional power-mongers who used ultra-nationalism as a way to set people off against each other, and thus, to control them. In making this point, it is important to clarify, as does Myers, that there were aggressors and victims in this war. The extreme nationalist impulse that initiated the dissolution was conceived and festered in Serbia, and from there, it infected the rest of the country.

The essence of the war—and the dissolution of Yugoslavia was a series of episodes in one war—was an assault by elites against the rights of the ordinary people who had created the wealth of post-World War II Yugoslavia. This elite, a gangster/profiteer criminal class composed of old communists and new nationalists, won the war. They defeated the defenders of multi-ethnic society, pillaged and ruined the country, enriched themselves, and impoverished the majority.

This is not to deny that nationalist aggression precipitated the war. But for many of the leaders, this nationalism was in fact just an excuse to create new positions of wealth and power for themselves. Unfortunately, some of those who started out as defenders of multiculturalism ended up in the elite. In many parts of Bosnia, the warlords are still in power, fulfilling their war aims through other means, slowly privatizing the wealth that they did not create, and cementing their control over society.

## **Western Policy: Complicity, or Negligence?**

Bob Myers amply describes the assault of the elite against multiculturalism in Bosnia; he also portrays the recklessness of Western diplomacy in its habitual negotiations with the warlords, and Western diplomats' legitimization of the separatists' aims through recurring proposals for one or another variant of ethnic cantonization of the country. However, in refuting the conspiratorial theories of confused or ill-intentioned leftists, he ascribes more intention and foresight to Western policymakers than they actually merit. His characterization of the intention of the international community as complicity in a conspiracy to destroy Yugoslavia is not far from the position of many people in the region, especially some Serbs, who have searched for an explanation outside the realm of their own responsibility. It is not unusual in the former Yugoslavia to hear that the West worked to destroy their socialism. It is much more accurate to say that Western governments coldly observed the atrocities, and let the dissolution take its course.

The international community's response to the breakup of Yugoslavia furthered it along through the cantonization proposals, as well as through the arms embargo that only affected the greatest victims. But Myers repeatedly characterizes the international reaction as a direct collusion with nationalist aggression, which it was not. The bumbling policies of Bush I and Clinton were reactive; they fit well within the stock repertoire of superpower responses, but they did not display the kind of foresight that Myers ascribes to them.

Myers writes, "No one wanted to help us because we were taking food to people resisting ethnic cleansing." The implication is that the United States and its allies specifically opposed multiculturalism in Bosnia, and were willing to collaborate with Milosevic (and Croatian President Tudjman) in its eradication.

The truth is something much coarser: Western governments simply did not care about the suffering of millions of Yugoslavs. They were willing to wait the war out with backs turned, as long as it did not threaten to spread across international borders. The guiding principle was “Make anguished pronouncements and take no risks.” Thus, the dozens of sham cease-fires, and the elevation of negotiations with war criminals into an honorable policy.

This was not purposeful complicity, but the carelessness of arrogant power that believes that it can allow all kinds of disasters to happen with no damage to itself. This approach is the result of the political philosophy that leaves out all human considerations, only caring for the functioning of international business.

Put differently, international diplomacy is comfortable with peace without justice or, often; war without justice, just as long as business can go on. Illustrating this principle, the West promotes “stability” in the Middle East, always and forever, without the least thought given to the dignity of millions of suffering people. It was this same imperative for a bankrupt kind of stability that eventually prompted the United States and its allies to intervene in the Balkans.

This coarse imperative does not require a conspiracy. The international system of business and war simply functions this way. If hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslims are under threat of extermination, it is a negligible misfortune in the higher scheme of things. But if, as happened in Kosovo, the conflict threatens finally to spill across international borders, draw two NATO members in on opposite sides, and disrupt the smooth functioning of the European Union, then there must be intervention.

An important episode in this unprincipled drive for stability in ex-Yugoslavia was the NATO intervention after the August 1995 Croat/Muslim offensive that expelled Serb nationalist forces from part of the territory they had conquered in Bosnia. In the middle of this offensive, Western diplomats pressured the allied Croat and Muslim troops to halt, as their advancing forces would have liberated the rest of the northern half of the Republika Srpska.

The West did not want this to happen for two reasons: it would have caused several hundred thousand more Serbs to become refugees; and it would have created a power imbalance between the Serbs, Muslims, and Croats in Bosnia, with the latter two dominant. This was not permissible, but the international diplomats were unable to conceive of a way to

re-establish stability without partitioning the country into two equally powerful entities. Dayton did this; instead of establishing democracy, it legalized the divisions achieved in war.

Myers exalts the class-consciousness of Bosnia's defenders by describing Tuzla as a mining town where the masses organized to defend multiculturalism. But Tuzla was at once more and less than this description implies. Tuzla has a progressive tradition reaching back a hundred years before the Partisans fought the Nazis. It grew under Austro-Hungarian influence from a mining center into a cultural bridge between central Bosnia and Central Europe. Technology, education, and unionism flourished there.

At the same time, it is not accurate to depict Tuzla as a place where the socialist masses rose up as one in response to Serbian aggression. First, socialism as an ideal had been quite battered by the end of the 1980s, by which time the Yugoslav standard of living had experienced ten years of precipitous decline. (This was, after all, the context for the development of fascism.) Secondly, during the war, Tuzlans were much more concerned with surviving a day-to-day endeavor than with preserving Tito's Yugoslavia.

By the end of the war, there was precious little vestige of socialism or multi-ethnicity remaining, even in Tuzla. And as the only municipality that retained an anti-nationalist government throughout the war and beyond, Tuzla was indeed relatively progressive and relatively lucky. In Sarajevo and other Muslim-controlled areas, a nationalist infrastructure had developed that had only a declarative interest in multiculturalism. Of course, political criminality and hardships for ethnic minorities were much more extreme in the areas under Serb and Croat control.

Moving to the post-war period, Myers calls the U.N. troops the "new masters" of Bosnia. But there is much less intent and coordination on the part of the international community's representatives in Bosnia than this implies. The only program implemented effectively by the international community has been the separation of the belligerents and for this, most Bosnians on all sides are appreciative. But the "controllers" of Bosnia have not prevented the warlords-cum-politicians from solidifying the division of Bosnia. Again, this is more through carelessness and risk-avoidance than intent. It is simply not important to Western representatives (with a few exceptions) to take the measures necessary to ensure dignity for ordinary Bosnians.

As long as they are not fighting, we can call it “stability.” Due to the systemic constraints described above, this is the only policy of which the international community is capable. But it will backfire, just as it has in the Middle East.

The theory of Western collusion in the breakup of Yugoslavia is understandable. It is intuitively attractive: now Western European influence and American military presence in the Balkans are vastly greater than they were ten years ago. But these things are the fringe benefits—and sometimes liabilities—to the United States and its allies, resulting from their bumbling through one crisis after another. They can bumble and still win, because they have enough weapons to be very careless, and still remain in control.

FE note: Peter Lippman works for the Advocacy Project ([www.advocacynet.org](http://www.advocacynet.org)). He did relief work and human rights research in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1997 to 1999. He has since returned to the region regularly and is currently preparing a campaign to aid non-governmental organizations working for refugee return and reconstruction in Srebrenica, Bosnia. For some of his writings on Kosovo and Bosnia, see [www.glypx.com/BalkanWitness/](http://www.glypx.com/BalkanWitness/).

# fifth Estate

Peter Lippman  
Readers respond (I)  
While Yugoslavia Burned, the Left Looked the Other Way  
2002

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/357-summer-2002/readers-respond-i>  
Fifth Estate #357, Summer 2002

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**