

THE BALKANS

We are all Serbo-Croats

If we label whole ethnic groups as "good" or "bad," then we ourselves are infected by nationalism and are no longer in a position to stop it.

By Diana Johnstone

In the inevitable debate over how to stop the fratricidal war in what used to be Yugoslavia, we are all joined together in a community of perplexity. We are all aghast at what is happening and fear that worse is to come. Given that the "worse to come" is likely to be hastened by misguided efforts to solve the problem, appalled speechlessness is as honorable a reaction as any to this tragedy.

Things have already gone so far wrong that both decision and indecision carry great risks of error, injustice and catastrophe. Admitting there are no easy answers, I would like to suggest the following set of principles to help evaluate proposals aimed at making peace.

First and foremost, outsiders seeking to promote peace must be rigorously fair to all the people and peoples caught up in the conflict.

This principle must never be forgotten.

I suggest the slogan, "We are all Serbo-Croats," meaning that we reject all claims to ethnic cleanliness or collective moral purity and remain conscious of the instability of collective identities and of the contradictory potentials in each individual. To be peacemakers, while clearly condemning all the ghastly crimes committed, we must care for all the peoples plunged into this tragic conflict. If instead we label whole national or ethnic groups as "good" or "bad," then we ourselves are infected by nationalism and are no longer in a position to stop it.

Every nationalism stimulates others. Even the momentarily "good" nationalism—because it's relatively harmless—stimulates both its rivals and its own worst side, which may emerge later on.

Peacemakers on the outside must give priority to supporting peacemakers on the inside.

This follows logically from the first principle. It is the course that has been pursued by a number of peace movements in Europe (such as the Helsinki Citizens Assembly) and those European Greens (notably the Italian Alexander Langer and the Austrian Marijana Grandits) who have supported the "Verona Forum." This support urgently needs to be broadened and intensified.

Each course of action should be examined with this in mind: will it strengthen the peacemakers or deepen their isolation?

Historical analogies should be drawn with caution and never allowed to obscure the facts.

Since most people outside the region know more about the rise of Nazism and World War II than about the recent history of the Balkans, there is a strong tendency to fall back on analogies with the former when discussing the latter. It has become common to compare Milosevic to Hitler and Serbia to Nazi Germany. This arouses the emotions of people both inside and outside the countries involved in ways more likely to perpetuate than to end the conflict. Indeed, seeing everything in terms of World War II helped trigger the conflict. Serbian nationalists identified Croatian separatists with the fascist Ustashe who ran the murderous Croatian puppet state sponsored by the Nazis, and interpreted insistent German backing for Croatian independence as a step toward the Fourth Reich.

For outsiders, the analogy pushes to one side many crucial facts, such as the role of Tito's last constitution in dividing Yugoslavia into republics that became separate Communist Party fiefdoms, whose leaders converted to nationalism to save their power bases from the collapse of communist ideology. If Serbs themselves want to compare Milosevic to Hitler, that is fair enough. But exaggerated polemics from

relatively ignorant outsiders risk pushing Serbs toward a shared sense of desperate, misunderstood isolation. Equating little Serbia to Germany, the industrial powerhouse of Europe, as a threat to the world is necessarily overdrawn. There is a madness loose in Serbia that risks spreading far and wide, but to grasp the nature of this danger it is better to look eastward today than back to Germany in 1939.

The outside world should help find a settlement that takes into account the future welfare of all the peoples of the former Yugoslavia.

The application of this principle is the most difficult of all, of course, because it cuts to the heart of the matter. If, a mere two years ago, the European Community (EC) had thrown its prestige and economic weight behind an overall settlement, it is quite possible that the catastrophe could have been averted. Many people in the Yugoslav republics hoped "Europe" would come to the rescue. What was needed was sponsorship of negotiations to revise the whole Yugoslav Federation on a new political basis, sweetening the sacrifices required with an economic association package provided by the EC for all the new secession states.

But the EC never offered any carrot, instead brandishing the stick in a dilatory fashion. In rushing to recognize Croatian and later Bosnian independence over protests from Serb inhabitants, the West seemed to forget that secession without negotiation is usually a *casus belli*, as the U.S. Civil War illustrated. The EC has lost credibility as the situation has become ever more hopeless. Nevertheless, something that should have been done long ago remains paramount: A process of consultation and negotiation to find territorial and political solutions enabling the inhabitants of this complicated region to live side by side, as they have always done and will always have to do short of exterminating each other.

Interim or final settlements should look to the future rather than be used to settle scores with the past. This means that acts of war should neither be rewarded nor punished by territorial settlements. Punishment of war crimes should be pursued on the basis of individual or hierarchic responsibility. The purpose of territorial and political solutions must be to allow people to go on living

where they choose and to ensure future peace, not to exact collective punishment. Otherwise, the cycle of vengeance will continue.

Policy decisions must determine the choice of means to enforce them, not the other way around.

After the first principle, this needs to be stressed most urgently, since public debate has centered much more on whether or not to use military means than on what such means would be intended to accomplish.

In fact, from the start, outsiders have neglected the search for solutions in favor of debate over means: recognition, sanctions, military force. The upshot of this is intervention with no clear concept of its outcome. Since nothing seems to work, more means are called for.

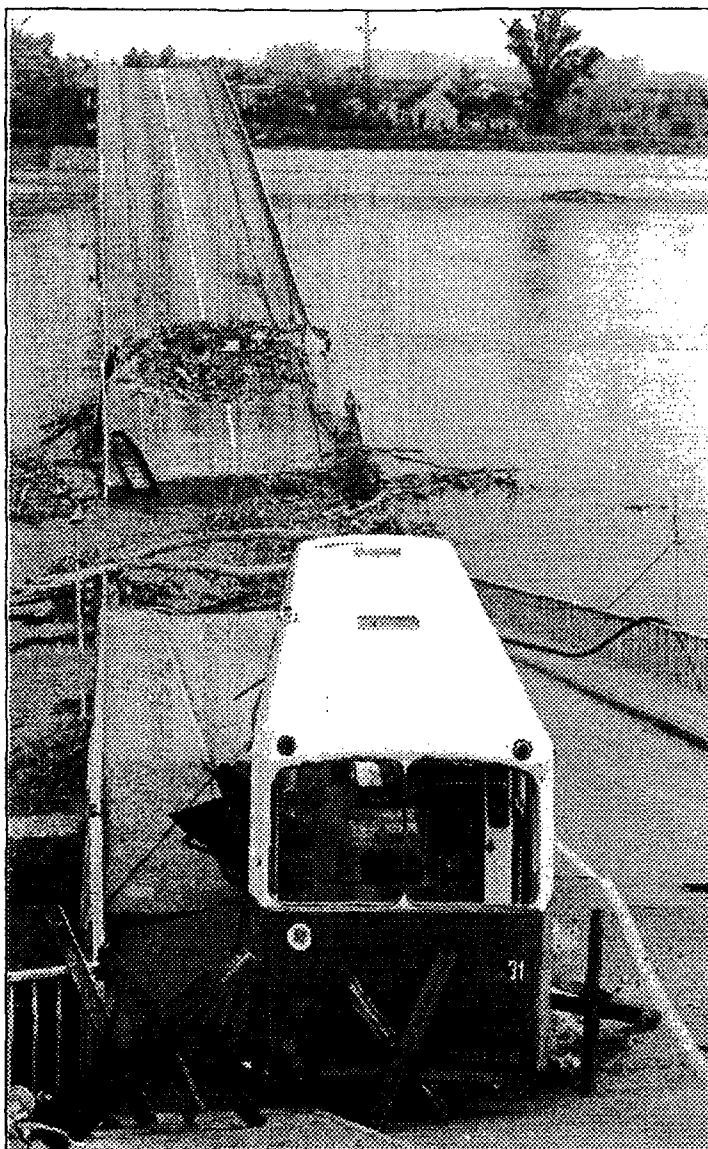
Thus policy is being determined by the choice of means rather than the other way around.

The process is all too clear. The horrors of this war are visible to people in Europe and America on their nightly newscasts, and the clamor to do something is rising. Political leaders consult their military commanders, who warn them that ground intervention would mean heavy casualties.

So there remains the good old American option of aerial bombardment. There would be few U.S. or NATO casualties. Military spokesmen could announce the success of their missions. The public would know that we didn't just stand by and do nothing.

This would result in a policy of utmost simplicity: identify the "enemy" and then wipe him out.

There is a curious psychological parallel between the



A destroyed bridge
across the Drava River in
Osijek, Croatia.



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**Unearthing a mass
Muslim
grave in Bosnia.**

nationalist madness in ex-Yugoslavia and the reaction in the West. The link is television.

As Yugoslavia was breaking up, the newly nationalist authorities in both Serbia and Croatia began using their state television to whip up fear of their neighbor. Serbian television trotted out images of the massacres perpetrated against Serbs by the fascist Ustashe during World War II. Once the fighting began, each side used gruesome images to portray the other as barbarians. Fear and loathing were created and fanned.

The startlingly archaic nature of this ethnic Balkan war should not blind us to the very contemporary features that can make it a harbinger of more to come. TV images move people to demand action (by others, usually) that can also be transmitted by television. There is something built into the media form that begs more for spectacular retribution than for long-term justice.

This dismay aroused by the suffering in Bosnia is such that even longtime peace movement leaders are calling for various forms of military intervention. Personally, I am not absolutely opposed to any and all military intervention, but

I would strongly caution against any intervention whose political purpose is not crystal clear and in harmony with the principles listed above.

Two recent proposals do not, in my opinion, stand up to close scrutiny.

The first, advocated by Joanne Landy and Thomas Harrison of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy (see "Letters," April 19), proposes lifting the arms embargo to enable the Bosnians to arm themselves for a "just defense." "We think the Bosnians still have a fighting chance to win; but even if a Serb victory were inevitable, Bosnians would still have the right to defend themselves," they wrote in a recent "War Report." Helping them exercise their right to resist genocide is a "moral imperative," according to Landy and Harrison.

What does it mean to say that "the Bosnians have a fighting chance to win"? Landy and Harrison know that Croats, Serbs and Muslims who live in Bosnia are all "Bosnian" and always have been. Indeed, until 1971 Serbs were the largest single ethnic group in Bosnia. There is absolutely no linguistic or racial difference between the Serbs and the Muslims. They have shared towns and villages for centuries, although

the Serbs tend to be more rural than the Muslims.

So when Landy and Harrison call for arming the "Bosnians," I assume they mean all the people of Bosnia who reject its division into ethnic ghettos. The problem is that such people are largely concentrated in urban centers from which they can scarcely expect to recapture the Serb- and Croat-held rural areas. In fact, arming "the Bosnians" is likely to strengthen not the non-sectarian men, women and children, who never wanted to fight in the first place, but rather the Muslim militia. It would be more in line with the aims of peacemaking to provide outside protection to the remaining multi-ethnic centers than to contribute to militarization along ethnic lines.

Moreover, there is plenty of weaponry already in Bosnia, which was the arsenal of the former Yugoslavia, designed to be the center of guerrilla resistance to any invasion. Therefore, lifting the arms embargo would mean not merely a quantitative but, above all, a qualitative escalation toward more destructive weapons. Even so, the Bosnian Muslims would be unlikely to "win" without outside help. Recognizing this, Landy and Harrison suggest that, in addition to providing weapons, the U.S. and others could, "if asked by the Bosnians, bomb Serbian artillery positions."

In short, lifting the embargo would be a step toward U.S. and NATO involvement, via a tacit alliance with Muslim forces who would call for further help. Meanwhile, it would prolong the killing between ethnic communities, piling up more causes for vengeance on all sides.

The second proposal was advocated by *In These Times* Eastern European correspondent Paul Hockenos last October 28. He wrote that "a full-scale, international military intervention ... is the only alternative that remains to halt the barbarism enveloping the entire Balkans. A quick decisive invasion of Bosnia-Herzegovina—on the scale of Operation Desert Storm—is an option that the left should rally around as forcefully as any issue since opposition to the Vietnam War."

This proposal has the advantage over the first of assuming full responsibility from the start for the military action deemed necessary. The trouble with it is that it is based on a misleading fantasy about how such a war would be played out.

Reasonable opposition to the use of military force is founded not only on the view that war is immoral, but also that it is an extraordinarily unpredictable and messy method that usually causes more trouble than it resolves. Peacemaking is a much more fragile and understaffed activity, and this is no time to abandon it to join the ranks of the champions of military means.

At this stage, the conversion of peacemakers to the use of force in order "to win" would only be interpreted as a sign of unanimous popular support for whatever the U.S. chiefs of staff decide is feasible. What they would decide is clear: bomb.

Leaving aside the myths about "surgical strikes," the imprecision of aerial bombardment is notorious and always

has one extremely significant political effect: it unites the bombarded population against those doing the bombing. By the same token, the decision to bomb entails identifying the targeted country as "the enemy." Since bombing is an activity with enormous support in industry and the Pentagon ever since World War II, the military industrial complex has consistently overrated its strategic effectiveness and underplayed the adverse political effect of uniting the bombed "enemy" and prolonging its resistance. We know this was the case with the British when bombed by the Nazis; we are less aware that this is always the case.

It is highly likely to be the case with Serbs, who have a cherished self-image of heroic resistance against great odds, and who recall that, because of their resistance, Belgrade was bombed by the Nazis. The fact that the Western allies chose the anniversary of that bombing to recognize the independence of Bosnia—thus, in Serb eyes, partitioning their homeland only a couple of years after celebrating the end of the partition of the homeland of the Germans—and that German forces have chosen the skies over Bosnia for their first military operation since World War II, will only make it harder for the Serbian peace movement to oppose Milosevic and even more dangerous nationalist extremists such as Vojislav Seselj.

Once begun, the bombing would likely escalate because it wouldn't end the sort of conflict tearing Bosnia apart.

Because the war in Bosnia is a civil war, it cannot be stopped as one would stop a foreign invasion. Aside from the volunteer assistance of pathological killers flocking to join the bloodshed from other regions, much of the Serb militia in Bosnia is made up of rough local men with a proud tradition as armed farmer-soldiers guarding the frontiers of Christendom from the Islamic Ottoman Empire. They are incomparably more at home than were Sherman's troops when they went marching through Georgia. They are even more at home than the Croatian army that openly invaded southwestern Herzegovina to carve out a Croat "republic" in traditionally Croat-populated areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The sight of NATO forces, with German participation, bombing Serbian targets, inevitably maiming Serbian women and children, would start the image-indignation-retribution spiral turning in Russia. Given the current state of moral confusion of that humiliated great nation—with its superpower status eliminated except as an arsenal of nuclear weapons it can't afford to dismantle—there is no telling

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where this would lead. World War III could still begin, like the first one, in Sarajevo.

This is another important reason to insist on the political clarity of any military action undertaken. It must not appear to be "taking sides" but rather be a precise and even-handed move to protect the innocent and promote long-range reconciliation between populations. One military action that might fit these criteria would be to send United Nations ground forces (without Germans) to protect the main surviving multi-ethnic centers in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Sarajevo and Tuzla. Tuzla never voted for any of the three ethnic parties, Serb, Muslim or Croat, but has maintained a laic spirit of equal citizenship for all.

The Vance-Owen negotiations, like the West in general, have neglected the non-sectarian citizenry in favor of the ethnic warlords. The massive influx of

Muslim refugees into Tuzla is putting terrible strains on the city's interethnic harmony. Keeping the city safe, providing for its refugees and showing political recognition for the multicultural nature of Tuzla would be a constructive and symbolic action.

Such a military action would be limited, precisely defined and carried out on the ground. This is the catch: there is no effective military help that does not involve sharing the risk. It can't be done by arming others, or from the air.

Meanwhile, American peace activists should work with Americans of Serb and Croat extraction to keep alive the idea that "we are all Serbo-Croats" in order to counter the rightist exile groups that have heavily funded extreme nationalists in Croatia.

The potential for constructive American intervention may hinge on its own success as a multi-ethnic society. ◀

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E N V I R O N M E N T

Clinton's burning issue

W

aste Technologies Industries (WTI) took its new East Liverpool, Ohio, hazardous-waste incinerator for a driver's test in March. It failed one of three key tests on whether it could adequately destroy chemicals designated for the "trial burns" that are required before incinerators can operate. Yet in early April both the U.S. and Ohio Environmental Protection Agencies gave the plant conditional approval to begin commercial operations.

This was merely the latest in a long line of questionable moves by regulators during the conflicted 13-year history of a plant designed to burn 60,000 tons of hazardous wastes each year. Environmental laws and regulations have been bent or ignored entirely dozens of times to permit WTI to build a \$165 million incinerator that is not needed and badly sited. It sits on the banks of the Ohio River, near a school and residential

area, in a valley where emissions could often be trapped by climactic inversions.

Yet fights against WTI, as the subsidiary of the Swiss firm, Von Roll, is known, as well as a Jacksonville, Ark., incinerator have spotlighted new evidence showing that such incinerators pose a greater health hazard than previously thought. That evidence was strong enough to persuade federal district court judges in Ohio and Arkansas to order halts to operations of both incinerators, although their injunctions have for the moment been lifted by federal appellate courts. The Vertac incinerator in Arkansas is licensed to burn only waste from a polluted Superfund site, but WTI can burn waste from nearly any source.

Despite this new information and hopes that Bill Clinton and Al Gore would usher in a new day of environmental responsibility, the administration is continuing the permissive Reagan-Bush policy on hazardous incineration. Clinton spokespersons portray

themselves as bound by decisions of their predecessors, but they could easily shut down either plant if they wanted to. The test failures, along with the federal district court decision, alleged improprieties in the permit process and unanswered questions about the risk to nearby communities, all offered legitimate reasons to put WTI operations on hold. For some of the same reasons, the Arkansas incinerator operation could have been suspended.

Speculation abounds that the president's position tolerating dubious incineration projects, despite a campaign pledge to support a moratorium on hazardous-waste incineration, has been heavily influenced by Arkansas investment banker Jackson Stephens, an original investor in WTI—although reportedly no longer involved—and a prominent bankroller of Clinton campaigns. Many government officials also appear sympathetic to the use of incineration as a central waste disposal technology and fear that the current lawsuits could undermine the technology. U.S. EPA administrator Carol Browner has said that she supports municipal-waste incineration, but has been less clear about burning hazardous waste.

Clinton may simply be unwilling to pick a fight with big business on this issue when he's courting their support on economic policy and health care. The *Wall Street Journal* published four editorials defending WTI's incinerator in the weeks leading up to the president's inauguration. In December Vice President-elect Gore had called for an investigation of WTI and said the incinerator should not begin operations until serious questions were answered. Hazardous-waste incinerators are required to destroy 99.99 percent ("four nines") of most wastes but 99.9999 percent ("six nines") of extremely hazardous wastes, such as those that contain dioxins and related immensely toxic chemicals. During

*The president
could ban
dangerous
toxic-waste
incinerators.*

*But does he
have the will?*

By David Moberg