

Bosnia: the crime of appeasement

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Marshaled by guards brandishing their machine guns, our ramshackle convoy of 1,600 Muslim deportees lurched forwards, only to be stopped yet again, while the police picked another young woman from the car at the back, helping themselves roughly to her money, what might be left of her jewellery—and sometimes to her as well. At a village called Vitovlje, Serbian women and children had come streaming towards us across fields that flanked the ragged road, screaming ‘Zaklacio vas! Zaklacio vas!’—slaughter them!—using a Serbo-Croat verb applied to animals, not humans. Sunset turned into a heavy twilight—fighting time. Men were moving across the fields; we were close to the front lines now, and shots were echoing through the dusk. Some were fired just a little over our heads. We still had no idea where we were, what our destination was, or whether it was intended for us to see either liberty or indeed tomorrow morning when we got there.

Before long, they had taken all of the cars, trucks and buses that had brought these people and what few belongings they could muster from their homes that morning and sent us out on foot across a perilous no-man’s-land, above which a perfect arc of tracer fire briefly illuminated the landscape. An hour later, our comfortless procession was clambering over a pile of rocks across the road, which marked the ‘border’, around which was a carpet of mines. We heaved them over—the very young, the very old, their wheelchairs, crutches, babies and teddy bears—and carried on. One old man tried to shuffle the remaining miles in his slippers—all he had had time to put on when the thugs came for him that very morning. I learned later that he had died on the mountain path, ‘of exhaustion and a broken heart’. We were certainly not the first along this wretched road. The tarmac was sticky in places, and there were human remains scattered here and there along the lane. At one point I stepped on a severed hand. By now, the shooting around us was heavier and a village in the valley below was coming under shellfire. A man emerged from the darkness and mustered us into single file, to limit the damage if a mortar hit us, and told us to be

quiet if we valued our lives. We moved on, under the moon, like some phantom parade. Even the little children were dumb with fear and resolve.

These people, the 'ethnically cleansed', were the lucky ones—deportees spewed out by the Serbian pogrom and headed for the crammed floors of Travnik, where they would find a bit of space to make their homes, under artillery bombardment. Far worse was to be left behind in the place where I had been only ten days previously—in the camps.

Nothing could have prepared us for the sight that met us as we entered through the back gates of the former iron ore mine at Omarska; it belonged to some other time. A column of men emerged from a door in the side of a vast rusty-red hangar, blinking into the sunlight. They were drilled across the yard in single file towards the 'canteen', by the barked commands of uniformed guards and under the watchful eye of a beefy guard in reflective sunglasses atop a machine-gun post. As they came closer, we could see their condition: some of them skeletal, their heads newly shaved.

They devoured their watery bean stew like famished dogs, clutching their spoons in rangy fists. They were horribly thin, raw-boned, some of them cadaverous—the bones of their pencil-thin elbows and wrists protruded like pieces of jagged stone through parchment skin. Their complexions had been corroded; they were alive, but decomposed, debased, degraded and subservient. They fixed their huge, hollow eyes on us with stares that cut like the blades of knives. There is nothing so haunting as the glare of a prisoner who yearns to tell some terrible truth, but dare not, with the guards swinging their machine guns, strutting to and fro, but listening carefully.

We had seen little, but enough, and when we tried to see more we were ignominiously bundled out of the camp and moved on to another vile place: Trnopolje, and the famous figure of the emaciated Fikret Alic behind barbed wire—just arrived from another camp, Kereterm, where, he told us, he had witnessed the murder of 200 men in one night. We knew that we had stumbled upon something diabolical that day, but only gradually did the full horror behind what we had seen come to light, with the testimony of survivors across a by then wretched diaspora.

Fragments of that diaspora gathered for breakfast at a hotel beside a Dutch ring road in summer 1996, in order to testify at The Hague against one of the sadists who had roamed Omarska, torturing, mutilating and killing: Dusko Tadic. These people had not seen each other since the day after we discovered Omarska and the camp closed down, its inmates herded on to buses and dispersed, before the prying eyes of the world and the media circus could focus on its horrors. Now the conversation returned to the place they all knew.

Omarska had been a place where a prisoner was forced to bite the testicles off a fellow inmate who, as he died of pain, had a live pigeon stuffed into his mouth to stifle his screams. The guards responsible for this barbarism were described by one witness as 'like a crowd at a sporting match'. Another man was forced to bark like a dog and lick at motor oil on the ground while a guard

jumped up and down on his back until it snapped. Prisoners, who survived by drinking their own and each other's urine, were constantly being called out of their cramped quarters, by name. Some would return caked in blood, bruised black-and-blue or slashed with knives; others would never be seen alive again. Special squads of inmates were ordered to load their corpses on to trucks.

A survivor called Rezak Hukanovic described the arrival of new prisoners: 'There was a truly horrible sound—a skull being smashed, the bones splitting and breaking... intermingled with shouts and screams'.¹ He describes the slashing with knives of a man who refused to strip: 'The poor man stood up a little, or tried to... He was covered with blood. One guard took a water hose from a nearby hydrant and directed a strong jet. A mixture of blood and water flowed...his cries were of someone driven to insanity by pain. And then everyone...saw quite clearly what had happened: the guards had cut off the man's sexual organs and half of his behind.'² And all of this a couple of hundred miles down the road from Venice, in August 1992.

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The camps were just the beginning of what came to be called the 'civil war' in Bosnia. The flavour of the persecution described above changed little between August 1992 and the débâcle at Srebrenica in May 1995, when some 8000 men were taken from a UN-declared 'safe haven'—which had surrendered its weapons to the United Nations in return for its protection—and were shot, butchered, buried alive or crammed into factories or farm buildings and blown up. 'Scenes from hell', said Judge Riyad from the bench of the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, referring to an old man being forced to eat the corpse of his infant grandson, 'written on the darkest pages of history.'³ But, disastrously, that was not how the Western diplomatic community saw these terrible things.

'Appeasement' is a pejorative and historically tendentious term but it seems a good enough word to describe three years of diplomat-to-diplomat barter between the leaders of the democratic West and Radovan Karadzic—now a fugitive wanted for genocide—beneath the chandeliers of London, Geneva and New York; or the matey soldier-to-soldier dinners of lamb and suckling pig shared by successive United Nations generals with their opposite number, General Ratko Mladic—likewise now fugitive and wanted—whose death squads perpetrated the Srebrenica massacre, on his personal orders and in his presence.⁴ After so much handshaking and negotiation while these two men were very publicly engaged in their foul pogrom, it is curious to see the international establishment baying for their capture, now that it is too late and their work is done.

¹ Rezak Hukanovic, *The tenth circle of hell*, (New York: New Republic Books, 1996).

² Ibid.

³ Judgment on the Rule 61. Hearing against Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, The Hague, June 1996

⁴ David Rohde, *A safe area* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), pp. 298–9, 373–5.

If the term 'appeasement' offends, then 'toleration' and even 'reward' can hardly be contested. The Bosnian Serbs do, after all, have the 'Muslimfrei' state which they set out to secure, but which the West assured them they would never win through violence: 'The Bosnian Serbs need to realize that they are not going to gain what they have grabbed by force', promised Douglas Hurd, then British Foreign Secretary.⁵ But if the Bosnian Serbs did not gain what they grabbed through force, then how did they gain it? And what are the implications of the fact that they have gained it?

The Serbs gained what they grabbed through a happy convergence of interests between their force and a school of diplomacy with illustrious traditions, the diplomacy of neutrality. The quintessence of neutrality during a hurricane of violence such as that which blew across Bosnia in 1992 is obfuscation—the political complication of things that are ethically simple.

There were a few genuine complications, to be sure. There was a second, spin-off persecution by Croats of Muslims in Herzegovina and central Bosnia. This brought about one of the most horrible massacres of the war, at Ahmici, where Croat gunmen locked Muslim families in their cellars and incinerated them; and also the most unrelenting siege of the war, of the Muslim pocket in East Mostar by Croatian guns. Then there was the expulsion from their ancestral home in the Croatian Krajina of tens of thousands of Serbs, most of whom are now wretched refugees in Belgrade. Also, the government army—which was ethnically mixed at the start of the war but almost exclusively Muslim by its end—did manage to turn itself from a small, sneaker-wearing 'Home Guard' with neither guns nor ammunition into a battered guerrilla force; and this body did commit a small number of atrocities, against both Croats and Serbs. The most appalling of those atrocities is just now coming to light, in Sarajevo: a mass grave of possibly hundreds of Serbian civilians murdered by the soldiers of a Muslim warlord called 'Caco', who was finally executed by the government authorities on his own 'side' for committing such acts (in contrast to the Serbs sponsorship and reward of their equivalent, the infamous 'Arkan'). Appalling things were done to Serbian prisoners at a Bosnian government camp at Celibici in central Bosnia, the managers of which are currently on trial at The Hague.

But these were counter-currents against the otherwise uncomplicated undertow of a Serbian pogrom. And yet these apparently 'complicating' episodes—and others like them—are relished by adherents of the diplomatic and geopolitical view which has dominated and still dominates the international response. To construct an argument for neutrality, one has to equate the perpetrator and the victim of violence, thus removing any ethical imperative. It is important that neutrality talks not about 'genocide' but about 'warring factions'—even if those on one side, in this case the Muslims, are assaulted out of the blue, have barely any weapons for two years and are very nearly obliterated. The triumph of neutrality has institutionalized the lie of equivalence between perpetrator and victim in a defiled but 'official' history of the Bosnian war and in doing so

⁵ BBC Radio Four, 23 May 1993.

it has sabotaged the prospect of lasting peace. For in its wake, there can be no reckoning, no counting of the cost, no staring history in the face; and without reckoning, there can be no peace.

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The word 'genocide' was first used in the Yugoslav context by the Serbs, as it happens, in connection with the assignment by Tito of partial autonomy to the Kosovo province of Yugoslavia. This reform, and the small movement of Serbs back to Serbia that followed it, was described by the Belgrade media as 'genocide' against the Serbs in the late 1980s, as President Milosevic resurrected the persecution complex and the 'Cult of Death', betrayal and revenge that is the hallmark of Serbian history.⁶ The first task facing any group intending to inflict genocide on someone else is to convince its own people that they are about to be the victims of genocide themselves—in this case at the hands of Albania.

In their survey of the 'pyromaniac intelligentsia' of Belgrade and the documentary origins of the doctrine of ethnic cleansing, Grmek, Gjidara and Simac conclude that 'ethnic cleansing is only "abnormal" or even "sorrowful" in Serbia when it is directed against the Serbs.'⁷ Very oddly, this language was echoed by people outside Yugoslavia who sought to equate what the Serbs did to others in Bosnia with what was done to the Serbs—the foundation stone in the establishment of neutrality. Thus, for instance, the horrible Bosnian camp at Celibici is equated with and compared to the Serbian gulag of concentration camps which stretched right across northern Bosnia and down the Drina valley. This is at best absurd and at worst very nasty indeed: the scale and nature of the violence, as everyone knows, are incomparable. Similarly, the vile ethnic cleansing of Serbs from the Croatian Krajina is likened to the violence that ravaged north-western Bosnia and the Drina valley in 1992. Again, the scale, extent and ferocity of the killing are incomparable—but the comparison is essential, indeed fundamental, to the grotesque and disastrous way in which the West responded to the Serbian pogrom and has rewritten its history.

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Let us return to, and be clear about, the simple origins of this war. They have been articulated across hundreds of thousands of words, but nowhere more simply than by Vladimir Srebou of the Serbian Democratic Party: 'The plan was for a division of Bosnia into two spheres of influence, leading to a Greater Serbia and a Greater Croatia. The Muslims were to be subjected to a final solution—more than half were to be killed, a smaller segment converted to Orthodoxy while a smaller segment still, those with riches, could buy their lives and leave. The goal was to cleanse Bosnia-Herzegovina completely of the Muslim people.'⁸

⁶ Tim Judah, *The Serbs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), ch. 8.

⁷ Mirko Grmek, Marc Gjidara and Neven Simac, *Le nettoyage ethnique* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

⁸ From an interview in *Vreme* magazine, Belgrade, 30 October 1995.

The pogrom was explicable in familiar social, rather than ethnic, terms. There was a sizeable Muslim peasant class in the Drina valley, and a Muslim industrial working class in central Bosnia. But all over the country, and especially in the Bosanska Krajina region where Omarska and the other big camps were established, the Muslims were over-represented in the bourgeoisie. In most of the towns and villages, the architect, headmaster, doctor or small businessman was more often than not a Muslim, and more often than not quietly resented or even loathed by the Serbian proletariat or peasantry. Comparisons with the Jews of central Europe or the Asians of Idi Amin's Uganda are irresistible.⁹ The explanation for this is simple enough: the Muslims had been the governing class under the Ottoman empire and had been dispossessed of much of their land by 'reforms' under the Yugoslav monarchy during the 1930s. Accordingly, they urbanized, taking high standards of education and experience of travel to Cairo or Istanbul into the urban centres of Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Travnik and Mostar.¹⁰ The Muslims became the backbone of an ethnically tolerant urban society which took advantage of what economic freedom was afforded by Tito's Yugoslavia. But during the 1950s there followed another wave of urbanization, into new tower blocks around these urban centres—this time involving the movement of Serbian peasants into Banja Luka and Sarajevo and of Herzegovinian Croats into Mostar, bringing with them old rural ways of separateness and ethnic pride. They thought differently from the established, secularized and more tolerant Muslims.

Society came to be divided along hidden fault-lines between what Bosnians call *raja* in the cities, and *papak* from the fields. Most, though not all, *raja* were Muslims: most, though not all, *papak* were Serbs or Croats. Radovan Karadzic, very much a *papak*, felt rejected in the cosmopolitan Sarajevo to which he moved from Montenegro.¹¹ He urged his compatriot Serbs to join him in laying siege to the city in April 1992. But of the 150,000 Sarajevan Serbs, some 60,000 remained—mainly those who had lived in the city before the 1950s influx and who considered themselves *raja*. Many were ready to fight, and did so bravely, alongside the Muslims against the barbarians in the hills, whatever their race. This would change in time, but it remained hard to explain to outsiders how it could be that the second-in-command of what they insisted was the 'Muslim' army, General Jovan Divijak, was a Sarajevan Serb. In the eyes of the nationalists, however, Divijak was a race-traitor.

What we found at Omarska and Trnopolje was in every way consonant with Vladimir Srebrov's 'final solution'. The West professed outrage, for a few days—but the real response had been worked out long ago. Revelations from Omarska and Trnopolje came as no surprise along the corridors of power. In May 1992 a Bosnian government agency had provided the first accounts of

⁹ For a portrait of the social status of Bosnia's Muslims, see Mark Pinson, ed., *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Francisc Friedman, *The Bosnian Muslims* (Boulder, CO, Oxford: Westview, 1996).

¹⁰ For a full discussion of this movement, see Fred Singleton, *A short history of the Yugoslav peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹¹ See Tom Gjelten, *Sarajevo Daily* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), introduction and ch. 3.

'detention centres' being established. José Maria Mendeluce of the UNHCR recalls that the first he knew of the camps came 'before the main flux of refugees, during late May...We were saying, confidentially, that we were being told about concentration camps.' The International Red Cross—whose Yugoslav affiliate had given Omarska a clean bill of health—was informed. By June, the ICRC was briefing 'concerned diplomats', and a Mr Henry Kelly at the US Embassy in Belgrade was sending regular wires to the State Department about the camps. One of those receiving his cables called it 'a flood of information. It was clear that we seeing only the tip of the iceberg.' The cables proliferated 'all round the building' at the State Department, but still no whistle was blown. On 19 July Roy Gutman published the first revelations about a camp at Manjaca, into which the International Red Cross was admitted.¹² The article went around the State Department 'like Samizdat', recalls one of those involved. On 2 August Gutman published more, now on the existence of Omarska. There was panic in Washington.¹³ The ICRC report that had been 'tossed over the fence' in mid-June was now put around the building by people determined to break the government's 'no confirmation, no information' public line. Nevertheless, Tom Niles, Assistant Secretary of State, went up to Capitol Hill and told the House Foreign Relations Committee—twice—that he had 'no information' about the camps. The next day, we went into Omarska.

All this time, the Americans had decided they were not going to do anything about what they knew. Late in July, a team from the Pentagon and the CIA briefed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the siege of Sarajevo, which was plunging into ferocious depths of violence against the innocent. The committee was shown aerial photographs of dense forest which would hide artillery, and 'those present were told', recalls one of them, 'that air strikes against the Serbs would be impossible on such terrain'. It was a barefaced lie. A few weeks earlier, a satellite image analysis team from the National Security Agency and CIA had offered to give a briefing to anyone who would listen at the State Department, on what they had found in the hills around Sarajevo. One diplomat turned up.¹⁴ 'There were three or four of them,' he recalls, 'and one of me. They had done this in the Gulf war, the guys who tell the air force what can or cannot be done. They know what they're talking about.' They produced 'a pile' of photographs showing unprotected, uncamouflaged, unrevetted guns. 'I said, "Gosh, this stuff looks vulnerable,"' recalls the diplomat. 'It was sitting in fields or parked beside the road. They said yes, it sure did. And on the basis of their experience in the Gulf, 95 per cent of it could be destroyed in one single day of air strikes.' The diplomat wrote up his briefing in a report to Tom Niles. There was no response.

The then ambassador to Sarajevo, Victor Jackovitch, recalls that by the time the camps were revealed, there was 'a head of steam' building up on the

¹² Roy Gutman, *A witness to genocide* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1993), p. 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁴ Interview, May 1996.

American side. But it blew into the unyielding and devilishly clever diplomacy of the one country that was consistently certain it would never do anything to help Bosnia—Britain.

As luck would have it, a conference was scheduled to meet in London soon after the discovery of Omarska. This is how Ambassador Jackovitch recalls the event: ‘The temperature was rising, and we had difficulty finding out what London was trying to do. But when we got there, we realized what was happening: a pressure valve. Allow the Serbs to make promises, and accept them knowing that they had no intention of keeping them.’¹⁵ Radovan Karadzic promised he would withdraw and register his artillery from around Sarajevo, Bihac, Gorazde and Jajce. Pleased as Punch, Mr Major was ‘confident’ Karadzic would keep his word, and ‘confident’ that the camps would be closed ‘unconditionally’. The promises were worthless. The slaughter continued.

This happened over and over and over and over again. The history of appeasement of the Serbs is the history of the entire war. There were countless moments when the Serbs were told not to cross a line, and that they faced dire consequences if they did; and every time the bluff was called, the West climbed down, and the handshakes resumed. Some of the Serbs’ more infamous ‘last chances’ may be briefly recalled: the fall of Jajce in 1992; the revelations of systematic mass rape in December; successive water- and bread-queue massacres in Sarajevo; the shelling of orphanages and hospitals; the first débâcle at Srebrenica and the farcical establishment of the ‘safe havens’ that came out of it; the Serbs’ pretence of accepting the Vance–Owen plan; two bloody crises in Bihac and two even bloodier ones in Gorazde.¹⁶

What should the West have done?

The option of hitting Serbian artillery positions above what later became the five ‘safe havens’ was discussed early in the war. It was not a fringe option; it came to be vociferously shared by the then Secretary General of NATO, Manfred Wörner, and the commander of NATO South, Admiral Jim Boorda. The two men tried their utmost to use air strikes as they believed these would stop the war. The former UN spokesman Michael Williams describes a dramatic moment during the Gorazde crisis of April 1994, when the sick Wörner ordered what he argued should have been decisive air strikes, only to be foiled by the UN’s special envoy Yasushi Akashi.¹⁷ Admiral Boorda, based in Naples, became so frustrated by the UN’s filibustering of any attempt at serious military action that he commandeered an F-16 himself, and demanded to be flown low enough over the Bosnian Serb capital of Pale to break several windows. No one knew at the time of this eccentric piece of bravado that NATO’s number two was aboard the plane.

¹⁵ Interview, March 1996.

¹⁶ Rohde, *Safe area*.

¹⁷ Interview with Michael Williams, *Guardian*, 27 April 1996.

The idea of air strikes was not to destroy the Bosnian Serbs' armed forces, but to neutralize the artillery that was pounding the enclaves senseless, to wreck the communications system and to browbeat the Bosnian Serbs to coming to the table to talk peace seriously, instead of simply playing a pipe for the UN to dance to. When the moderate air strikes did begin in earnest, in September 1995, the Serbs jumped to attention with astonishing speed.

Our argument was (and by 'our' I mean almost all journalists covering the war's duration and most senior UNPROFOR military officers, privately) that such air strikes would and could have stopped the war at any of the junctions detailed above; the camps, the Bihac and Gorazde crises, the first Srebrenica crisis, the Vance–Owen farce. It would not have been so apocalyptic—all the allies needed to do was to keep their word. At the peace table, the Serbs would have been required to dismount the sieges and to accept international supervision in a complete reversal of ethnic cleansing. This would have been infinitely easier in 1992 than the imposition of the Dayton plan—with its pledge to return all refugees—is now. Non-compliance would have been met with further—carefully targeted but ruthless—displays of air power until compliance was secured.

This could have been achieved without ground troops other than signals, scout and intelligence units, such as were deployed by the SAS alongside UNPROFOR. However, had the air strikes not brought the Serbs to serious peace talks, then the allies would and should have debated the deployment of an international peace enforcement force, with a military brief rather than the disastrously conceived humanitarian one which was deployed. This force would have had to regard the ethnically cleansed territory much as it did occupied Kuwait in 1991, established a military authority and put what is now the 'Republika Sprska' under international military tutelage—a scale model of Berlin in 1945. Knowing the Serbian army, I genuinely believe that this would have been a quick and simple operation. All the talk about the mountain guerilla Serbs was hogwash—their might depended only upon the fact that the other side was unarmed, and that the West never called their bluff.

Hindsight tells us that such a land operation would probably have been unnecessary. But it had to be an option. That way at least the West would have retained its credibility, its honour. It would have stopped a monster in its tracks and saved an inestimable number of lives—rather than appease the monster and facilitate the creation of a monoethnic state built on horrible violence, which was the price of inaction. The Muslim victims would have been the main beneficiaries of military intervention, of course—that would have been the whole point—and the Serbs would have screamed blue murder. But if the war had been thus stopped in 1992, the mass grave of Serbs murdered by Caco's killers in 1993 would not have been filled; there would still be Serbs in Knin and the Croatian Krajina. The Serbian-majority cities of Bosnia-Herzegovina would have scars across their memories, to be sure, but they might have resembled their agreeable, mixed Yugoslav selves, more than the drab, accursed, monoethnic police statelets they are now.

But eventually, after three long years, came the bloodbath at Srebrenica—where UN soldiers not only stood by while Mladic's men massacred up to 8,000 people, but had wheeled and dealed the Serbs into town in the first place, and then given them the fuel they needed to drive the bulldozers that ploughed the corpses into the ground. It was miserable, pathetic, despicable—almost tragi-comic, had the consequences not been so bloody. The Serbs, certainly, found the circus act hilarious. The impish Professor Nikola Koljevic, Vice President of the Republika Srpska, took me to tea one day in Belgrade after we discovered the camps and laughed, squeakily, a great deal: 'Took you a long time, didn't it? Ha ha! All *that* happening so near Venice! And all you could think about was poor Sarajevo! None of you ever had your holidays in Trnopolje, did you?'

From the United States came the odd attempt at robust action to stop the war. The advent of the Clinton administration brought with it a few individuals who refused to swallow the nonsense about lion-hearted Serbian warriors whose tail should not be pulled, and believed that careful air strikes against offending gun emplacements and their drunken crews would bring the perpetrators of this nightmare to the table in earnest. Leading this group were the foursquare Madeleine Albright and the US ambassador to Zagreb, Peter Galbraith, who probably did more than any other individual to prevent the total annihilation of Bosnia's Muslims. But there were two problems, and the first was Britain. 'I learned to treat Britain as a hostile power,' said one former senior official at the State Department,¹⁸ 'it was like having the Russians around. Britain was prepared to block *anything*...your guys were usually so refined, but they were going crazy on this. Dammit, someone even collared me in Safeway on a Saturday about the arms embargo!' The other problem was Clinton himself, whose pronouncements on Bosnia came to resemble a church spire weathercock spinning in a hurricane. At least with the British, the Bosnians knew what not to expect; Clinton, however, made promises that played hard with people's hopes and fears on the ground, as the butchery went on.

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'Reckoning' is probably the harshest word in the English language. The *Oxford Modern English Dictionary* defines it as 'the act or an instance of counting or calculating', or else 'the settlement of an account'. In the wake of calamity, however, it means staring history in the face, asking not only what happened but *why*. For the victim, it means a bitter counting of the cost; for the perpetrator, it means an acceptance of responsibility—and it requires truth. It is a painful and cathartic process which the Germans, by and large, underwent during the 1950s, enabling that country to grow into a European democracy.

¹⁸ Interview, May 1996.

What about reckoning over the carnage in Bosnia? Not only has there been none, but the tapestry of deception continues to be woven. Rewriting the history of the war began while it was still raging. United Nations officials in New York, Zagreb and Sarajevo suggested to journalists that some of the bloodiest massacres in the streets of the Bosnian capital were the work not of the Serbs at all, but of the government side—killing their own people in order to secure military intervention. I was myself called in for two such briefings, in Zagreb, by different officials. It was manifestly obvious where the idea was coming from, as Alan Little and Laura Silber show: Radovan Karadzic. He had been ‘quick off the mark’, they write, after the marketplace slaughter of 5 February 1994.

He denied responsibility, as he always did when civilians were killed in large numbers...Only later did he develop a series of hypotheses that the bomb had been planted ‘by the Muslim side’ or fired from ‘Muslim positions’ or, more bizarrely still, that the bodies were rushed to the market square from the city morgue for the benefit of television cameras. Karadzic’s denials always bore fruit. General Lewis McKenzie had first given credence to the idea that the Bosnian government...had taken to bombing its own people...the allegation was never made publicly, because it would have required evidence. If there was any evidence, it never came to light.¹⁹

Indeed, when there were ballistic investigations into these bloodbaths, they came to the unsurprising conclusion that the mortars causing them came, like the hundreds of thousands of others, from the Serbs. But the UN strategy worked beautifully. Newspapers loved the idea of the Muslims slaughtering their own people,²⁰ from the bread-queue massacre of May 1992 to the marketplace massacre of September 1995 which did, finally, produce the air strikes that ended the war. It was perfect for neutrality.

In the war’s aftermath, the lies progressed to the matter of the camps. It seemed inconsequential that an obscure pro-Serb Trotskyite magazine called *Living Marxism* should publish an article by a German communist called Thomas Deichmann, who had testified in defence of the now convicted war criminal Dusko Tadic, accusing ITN and myself of fabricating the story of the camps. But when ITN quite rightly sued these revisionists for libel, *Living Marxism* and Deichmann became a *cause célèbre*. A campaign was waged to support them by such figures as Noam Chomsky, Auberon Waugh,²¹ Stephen Glover,²² the National Union of Journalists—and even the distinguished Harold Evans, who wrote that the matter of the camps was a ‘complex situation’ which warranted a ‘television confrontation’.²³ None of us could work

¹⁹ Laura Silber and Alan Little, *The death of Yugoslavia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

²⁰ *Independent*, 22 August 1992: ‘Muslims slaughter their own people’.

²¹ Letter to the *Spectator*, 3 May 1997.

²² *Spectator*, 17 May 1997.

²³ *Guardian*, 21 May 1997.

out what was so 'debatable' or 'complicated' about concentration camps. The damage is limited, but it takes very little arsenic to poison the groundwater of truth. An official from the Human Rights Watch organization went to present her credentials at the United Nations office in Banja Luka last year, only to be given a copy of Mr Deichmann's article by an official and told that she 'would find it very interesting'. These are hardly symptoms of a reckoning on the international stage. More importantly, what about a reckoning among the perpetrators? Three and a half years after finding Omarska, I decided to go and find the managers of the camps, the middle-managers of genocide who in 1992 had introduced themselves to us as responsible for Omarska and Trnopolje.

It had taken five putrid summer days to argue our way into Omarska back in 1992, but now the road was empty. There it was: Rudnik Omarska—Omarska Mine—now buried beneath a sheet of ice and lies. Flakes of snow, which muted all sound and draped the mine in virgin white, had overlaid what happened there. Children played on sledges in the yard that had been a tarmac killing ground. A couple of stray mongrels frolicked in the jaw of the hydraulic door that leads inside the great rusty-red hangar where the prisoners were packed like battery hens. Three sentries stopped us. Two of these lads were from the village of Omarska, and had worked at the mine. 'Nothing happened here', asserted a bright-eyed 28-year-old. He had worked here in 1992 as a technician: 'It was a mine, up to the end of the year. So how can it have been a camp in August of that year? I know, I was here.' I believed he was there, at least. 'I blame the journalists', said his friend, aged 24; 'the Muslims paid the media, and they forged the television pictures.' There is a fascination with deception. 'Anyone could do that.' We asked them their names. The answer from the mine technician, suddenly harsh, was unexpected. 'We had a nice chat, but no names. They are a secret. The Muslims know me, and I know them. But they have to produce evidence of what I did. These days, they can just pick you up and take you to The Hague.' 'Did you know Dusko Tadic?' we asked. 'Not well. He had a nice cafe... There was no camp here.'

Next to the mine is the Wiski Bar, in the shadow of the accursed hangar, alongside the railway lines. Prisoners were brought here in boxcars—and there they were, rusting and idle on the tracks. If the music had not been too loud, these people, sipping coffee and chatting, would easily have heard the screams.

Mayor Milomir Stakic of Prijedor, a bulldog of a man, turned out, unnervingly, to be a doctor. In 1992 he had introduced himself as being in charge of Omarska. Now he said there had been no camp at all; ITN's pictures were of 'Serbs in Muslim camps', he said. Then came an immediate, illogical negation: 'Omarska was for Muslims with illegal weapons. Omarska was not a hotel'—and he managed his only smile, which was not an agreeable one—'but Omarska was not a concentration camp.' This nonsensical blend of denial and vindication was pretty typical in Prijedor—indeed, of all Republika Srpska. Then I found Milan Kovacevic.

Kovacevic was Stakic's deputy, whose job had been the day-to-day running of Omarska and then to explain to the media circus what a 'collection centre' was—the day after our visit, when the camp had been closed. Horribly, Kovacevic also turned out to be a medical man: director of Prijedor hospital, where we found him early in the morning. In 1992 his eyes had been fiery with enthusiasm. They were still fiery now, in 1996, but from some other, more haunted emotion. He has a taste for homemade plum brandy, and extracted a bottle from his cupboard. It had been a good year for plums, he explained; shame to let the fruit go to waste. I did not say that we had met before. He started to relate the extraordinary psychodrama of his life story. It turned out that he was not—as he had said in 1992—born in the Jasenovac concentration camp set up by Croats in the Second World War for Serbian prisoners, but had been taken there as a child. Having been brought up to believe that 'all Germans are killers', he elected to go to—of all places—Germany, to study—of all things—anaesthesiology. He returned to his native Yugoslavia to practise anaesthetics, became a fervent Serbian nationalist, deputy mayor, architect of ethnic cleansing, and the creator and manager of Omarska, Trnopolje and Kereterm.

His certainty about the ends at first concealed his doubts about the means. What about all those burned-out Muslim houses along the road? we asked. Was that necessary, or a moment of madness? Kovacevic proceeded cautiously, emboldened by a glass of brandy. 'Both things. A necessary fight and a moment of madness. People weren't behaving normally.' This came as a surprise. Bosnian Serbs, let alone their leaders, do not usually talk like this. Was it all a terrible mistake, then? 'To be sure, it was a terrible mistake,' said Kovacevic. A second glass, and suddenly, unprompted: 'We all know what happened at Auschwitz and Dachau, and we knew very well how it started and how it was done. What we did was not the same as Auschwitz or Dachau, but it was a mistake. It was planned to have a camp, but not a concentration camp.' Usually it is only 'enemies of the Serbian people' or 'media liars' who invoke the shadow of Auschwitz when discussing the Serbian gulag; but here was the man who created that gulag initiating this language. With the help of a third glass, the anaesthetist ploughed boldly on. 'Omarska was planned as a reception centre. But then it turned into something else. I cannot explain this loss of control. I don't think even the historians will explain it in the next 50 years. You could call it collective madness.' He admitted that he had never had this conversation before except with himself. In fact, no one in Bosnia had ever had this conversation before. After another glass to steel the spirit, unsurprisingly his own childhood in Jasenovac came back to mind. 'Six hundred thousand were killed in Jasenovac,' he mused, a little quieter for a moment. 'I was taken there as a baby by my aunt. My mother was in the mountains, hiding. We remember everything, history is made that way.'

But Jasenovac was run by Croats, we said; why did the Serbs now turn on someone else, the Muslims? Kovacevic straightened himself. 'They committed

war crimes, and now it is the other way round'. In Omarska, he said, 'there were not more than 100 killed, whereas Jasenovac was a killing factory'. Only 100 killed at Omarska? We suggested that was a low figure. 'I said there were 100 killed,' he specified, a little desperately, 'not *died*. You would have to talk to the doctors about how many *died*'. But you are a doctor, we replied. How many died? Suddenly Kovacevic threw off all caution. 'Oh, I don't know how many were killed in there. God alone knows. It's a wind tunnel, this part of the world, a hurricane blowing to and fro.'

So who planned this madness?

'It all looks very well planned if your view is from New York,' he replied. 'But here, when everything is burning, and breaking apart in people's heads... This was something for the psychiatrists. These people should all have been taken to the psychiatrist. But there wasn't enough time.'

In 1992, Kovacevic did not hide his role in operating Omarska, Trnopolje and the other camps. But, we asked, what about now? The Hague tribunal, we said, is becoming a serious business. Were *you* part of this insanity, doctor? 'If someone acquitted me,' he replied, with surprising calm, 'saying that I was not part of this collective madness, then I would have to admit that would not be true... But then I would want to think about how much I was a part of it... We cannot all be the same, even within the madness... If someone said did I kill people like Dusko Tadic killed people, then I would say I was not guilty... But: if things go wrong in this hospital, then I am guilty.'

He said he had left political life 'because I saw many evil things. That is my personal secret... If you have to do things by killing people, well... Now my hair is white; now I don't sleep too well.' We asked if he had ever met anyone who had been among his inmates. He remembered a call to the front lines, to administer his medical skills, where enemy soldiers baited each other from trench to trench. He was recognized by one of his former prisoners. 'God help me,' said the doctor, 'he had been in Omarska.'

* * *

Did neutrality—the appeasement of the Serbs—work? If it did, then perhaps everything we wrote from Bosnia was hot air, the wailing of what appeasers on the political left and the political right who have never been near a war call 'bleeding-heart liberals'. Did the appeasement of the Serbs bring about a peace which military intervention would have scuppered? One has to concede that there is, for the moment, a peace of sorts—or at least an absence of war—in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But it is the peace of the grave. It is a peace in which people like Jasmin R do not know what to do.

I last saw Jasmin when he was one of the lucky refugees to flee another UN-declared 'safe haven' at Zepa after that same UN had handed it over to the Serbs in July 1995. He was evacuated to a mental hospital in Dublin. That was in 1996, and he was only 17 years old—which would have made him barely 13

when the war began and Zepa was sealed off from the outside world, the noose of Serbian artillery around its neck. Jasmin admitted sheepishly that he had been deemed too young to fight, assigned instead to spend the war down by a creek in the Drina river, 'to get the bodies out, and to give them a decent burial'. For three years, Jasmin and a colleague, Mersud C, used to take a little rowing boat out midstream and haul the bloated—sometimes headless, sometimes child-sized—corpses out of the river and bury them, often under fire, in a makeshift cemetery sanctified by a local mullah. Where did the bodies come from? 'From the bridge.' He meant the great Ottoman bridge that spans the Drina at Visegrad, Bosnia's emblem and the title of a great work of literature by the country's most celebrated, and Nobel prize-winning, writer, Ivo Andric. I followed this trail, only to discover that the Serbs had turned the bridge into a human abattoir.

'That bridge will drive me mad' shudders Hasena Muharenovic. This is a peace in which she has no idea what to do either. Now living in Sarajevo, she recalls watching a squad come for her mother and sister, cut them up with knives and throw them off the bridge along with a truckload of others. She was later captured and spent the war in a camp with her two little daughters, doing forced labour and—as the euphemism goes—'making coffee for the Chetniks'. Now, in the peace, she does not know whether to wait in Sarajevo in the hope that one day her missing husband will be one of the tiny trickle that occasionally appears or to leave, thereby killing him in her own mind.

There were 14,000 Muslims in Visegrad in 1992; now there are none. Some have fled, most are dead. At the Ivo Andric memorial library, the librarian Stojka Mijatovic offers a copy of *Bridge on the Drina* as a gift. It seems right to keep it in the library. No, no, she insists, 'we have so many books from the Muslim houses, we don't know what to do with them.' It turns out that this edition was presented to the library by one of its 'favourite readers, he was always in here'. Macabre intimacy was always the hallmark of this parish-pump genocide, and the dedication turns out to be to the dead brother of a refugee we were talking to just the night before in Sarajevo. 'Would you like me to cross out this Muslim name for you?' offers Mrs Mijatovic. Peace of the grave, indeed.

There are moments in history when the only peace neutrality can produce—if any—is that of the grave. Switzerland and Portugal were neutral thus, over the atrocities of the Third Reich. We must always be careful not to compare the Serbian pogrom to the Holocaust, which is without parallel, but the echoes are loud enough. There are moments in history when neutrality is not neutral at all, but is complicity in the crime. We, in our newly expanded Europe, in our new union of democracies, in our satisfaction at having been reared during the half-century of peace that followed the Holocaust, have just allowed such a moment to come and go.

The repercussions are enormous. From a perspective limited only to Bosnia, the West's initially bogus insistence that to back Sarajevo was to allow Islamic

influence into Europe has backfired and become a cruel, self-fulfilling prophecy. At the onset of war, the Bosnians turned to the West for help because they saw themselves as Westerners. Bosnian Muslim culture was a complex crossroads: a Muslim father might chastise his children for playing the Catholic Croatian game of 'egg-knocking' (to see which was the strongest egg) at Easter,²⁴ but only 3 per cent attended mosque. These were in the main bacon-sandwich-washed-down-with-plum-brandy Muslims, to a degree that appalled and amazed charity officials from religious Islamic countries. But not for long.

One of our convoy over the mountains was a girl called Nura Celic, who liked rock music and had prewar photographs of herself in bars with her Serbian friends. Within a year Nura outraged her mother by framing her face with the Islamic scarf. Her indignant self-defence was impressive: 'Look what has happened to me; I have lost everything, I am living on the floor of a school. I have been sent into the arms of my religion.' She would be one of many. Even innocent men need guns to defend their villages and womenfolk from armed thugs and artillery bombardment. Not only did the West refuse to defend those men with guns, it tied their hands behind their backs and stopped them from defending themselves. It was a vacuum—military, political and cultural—into which appeasement invited, even begged, militant Islam to step.

Appeasement sends out reassuring signals to any other dictator in the post-communist countries, or anywhere else for that matter, who wants to imitate the troika of Milosevic, Mladic and Karadzic. Radovan Karadzic himself admitted that had NATO sent 20,000 troops to Yugoslavia during the war against Croatia, the entire Serbian project would have been stopped in its tracks.²⁵ Any future ethnic cleanser knows that too, and knows that those troops will not come, except perhaps to hand out baby milk. The soft-handling of the Serbs in the aftermath of war—apart from a brief, robust burst by British troops in summer 1996, arresting Dr Kovacevic and killing another accused war criminal—can encourage future tyrants even more than wartime appeasement. At the London conference on the imposition of the Dayton Agreement early in 1996, British Prime Minister John Major pledged that from then on, financial aid under the Dayton Agreement would be strictly conditional on compliance with its terms. But aid from the British Overseas Development Administration and elsewhere continued to pour into the 'Republika Srpska' despite the fact that barely a single clause in Dayton was being complied with—certainly not the most important by far, pertaining to the handing over of indicted war criminals and the return home of refugees.

There was a particular sting in the tail for the ODA: it turned out that the organization managing and allocating tens of thousands of pounds' worth of aid in Prijedor was the all-powerful 'Crisis Staff' (Krizni Stab), made up of none

²⁴ Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian way* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 69.

²⁵ *The death of Yugoslavia*, produced by Norman Percy (Brian Lapping Associates for the BBC, 1996).

other than police chief Simo Drljaca and Milomir Stakic—the managers of Camp Omarska. A report by Human Rights Watch found Stakic and Drljaca using publicly owned municipal companies under their control to win contracts which would attract aid money, and looking after their own interests in the calculations.²⁶ When the IFOR authorities diverted money to private companies, their employees were intimidated and their premises burned down. ‘Republika Srpska’, states Phil Schwarm, ‘has fallen into a sort of anarchy. The only real authorities are the local feudal lords...these days anything is possible in the Bosnian Serb republic.’²⁷ And we are paying for what neutrality tolerated.

The peace of the grave presents the West with harder choices than those confronting it in 1992. Troops are deployed on the ground, mandated to implement a treaty that requires the return of the ethnically cleansed deportees, and the arrest of all those accused of war crimes—those are Dayton’s foundation stones. And the spinelessness that infused the wartime years also infuses the so-called peace. Raodvan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic cruise through SFOR checkpoints with impunity, lesser indictees hold posts at police stations and government buildings sometimes only yards from SFOR premises. The soldiers are regarded by their governments more like a troupe of ballerinas to be kept out of harm’s way at all costs, rather than professional military men. It is perfectly clear what has to be done: first, Karadzic and Mladic, at least, must be delivered to The Hague. The tribunal’s first chief prosecutor Richard Goldstone was right when he said that ‘Justice being done, and being seen to be done, is the difference between a lasting peace and an interval between hostilities’. The tribunal at The Hague is an important valve in the process of reckoning—it is ready and willing, but its readiness to try the accused is endlessly frustrated by the usual pussyfooting on the ground. The liberty of the accused not only ruptures the peace process but it also makes the West look impotent and ridiculous. If the international community cannot deliver these people, then why in the first place did it say it was going to? The humiliation is not so different from that which characterized the war. The amazing thing is that the international community does not seek to care; indeed, it makes itself at home with the humiliation that neutrality brings.

Second, the return home of the refugees, accompanied by whatever military protection is necessary to accompany the political deals and ‘swaps’ which would no doubt be involved. The Muslim vote in the ethnically cleansed areas was decisive at the recent ‘Srpska’ election, and the voters must now follow the votes. In return, pressure must be put on the Croatian and Bosnian authorities to allow the return of Serbs—and on the Serbian authorities to let them go home. (The biggest difference between ethnic cleansing by the Serbs and ethnic cleansing of the Serbs was that in the latter case the exodus was overseen by Serbian militias who refused to allow Serbs to stay in areas they did not con-

²⁶ Diane Paul, Human Rights Watch Bulletin, February 1996.

²⁷ Phil Schwarm, ‘Twilight of a government’, in *War Report*, March 1996.

trol.) There is a movement on university campuses in the United States which advocates an acceptance of monoethnic separation, and even that this should have been done before the war in order to prevent it.²⁸ Such an argument is not only morally obnoxious, it is a prescription for disaster. The process of going home in peace is the only way of stopping another war, in which people fight to go home.

* * *

Mount Treskavica, July 1995

The commander had finished playing his accordion and packed it away in its case. The flames that had danced to his sad music were now smouldering low, although the wholesome scent of woodsmoke still hung over the camp. The plastic cup of brandy we had passed around was empty, and most of the soldiers had retreated into the shadows of the trees, moving like ghosts between their huts and tents in the forest clearing. Up here, in the savage interior, it looked like a scene from a long-past war—Crimean or Napoleonic. Weary packhorses tethered to the trees exhaled noisily from time to time.

It was a rotten life being a packhorse in this war, dragging green boxes of ammunition up to the front all day. One of the men around the fire tonight was a man called Sabahudin who told a tale about a packhorse he saw committing suicide by taking a running jump off the mountain the other day. For some reason we all laughed heartily. These men had come from the savagely 'cleansed' town of Foca three years ago, and been encamped here ever since, thousands of them, in the forest glades. 'We are the wild animals of the war,' said a soldier called Hizmo. Men clomped in heavy boots down a rocky track from the medical huts, where they had been visiting the day's wounded, hauled piggy-back from the line. Zijad Anđelića, a fireman in his other life (who had seen his house burned down), could not sleep; we stood watching the moon as the guns thudded in the middle distance.

'You know,' said Zijad, 'there are only two things left in this war.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yes, home and time. Home because that is where we have to be in the end. And time, because that's what it takes to get there. They burned our houses, but they can't burn the land. They can fight us, but they can't fight time. This is the war to go home. Home and time, that's all that's left.'

This is not mere sentiment; it cuts to the heart of the Serbian pogrom, to the resistance to it, and to whether or not the West wishes to appease or resist it. There can be no middle ground. The Serbian programme to eliminate the Muslims from Bosnia was a matter of removing not merely people, but their

²⁸ Robert Haydon, 'Schindler's fate: genocide, ethnic cleansing and population transfer', *Slavic Review* 55: 4, winter 1996. Delivered to the Forum on post-Yugoslavia, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC, July 1997.

history too; and, as Norman Cigar has written, ‘any memory of their linkage to the land, not least as a means to help ensure that ethnic cleansing was irreversible.’²⁹ Hence the destruction of memory—mosques, libraries—so quickly and conclusively. One mosque, in Zijad’s native Foca, was turned into a pigsty.

Foca is still an all-Serbian town, for all Dayton’s hollow promises. It even has a new Serbian name: Srbinje. But the peace of the grave has promised Zijad and his comrades they can go home. It is up to the West as well as to these people to decide whether the ethnic cleansing is ‘irreversible’ or not. These men are young, and may try to go anyway; it is still up to the West as well as to the men themselves whether they go home armed, trained and in anger, or unarmed and with some attempt at peace and reckoning. It should be too late, but it isn’t—yet.

Most important, the language and practice of appeasement and neutrality defies any Aristotelian philosophy that tries to link politics and ethics, upon which civilization is supposed to be founded. The appeasement of the pogrom in Bosnia betrays the world-view of a generation—to which I belong—which grew up following the defeat of the Third Reich, and which was fooled into believing that the bullies of history need not triumph.

²⁹ Norman Cigar, *Genocide in Bosnia: the policy of ethnic cleansing* (Houston, TX: Texas University Press, 1995), pp. 60–61.