

# The Austrian writer Peter Handke, European public opinion, and the war in Yugoslavia

Bernd Reinhardt  
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Although many German-speaking artists took cover during the war in Kosovo, the Austrian writer Peter Handke stood out by sharply criticising NATO's actions from the very beginning as criminal.

"Morality is the new word for despotism", is how he countered all those—such as writers Günter Grass, Stefan Heym, Hans Magnus Enzenburger; the cabaret artist Ellen Tiedtke, or Wolfgang Niedekken, the lead singer of the German rock group BAP—who either supported the bombing for moral reasons, kept quiet, or who argued for UN intervention (Handke's interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 15, 1999).

"Pictures and words can be used to create the greatest deception, and earn great amounts of money," is what he said elsewhere about official media reports of mass slaughter being carried out by the Serbs. "No one knows what is going on in Kosovo, because no one can get in.... The refugees are all saying the same things. Why should that make it more credible?" [1]

Handke turned the tables on the official justifications for the bombings, saying NATO had not prevented a new Auschwitz, but had rather created one. "In those days, it was gas chambers and shooting squads, today it is computerised killers from 15,000 feet." [2]

Just two days after the first bombs had fallen, Handke issued his first open letter, which spoke of "Green slaughterers". [3] He demanded that the "German Minister of Death" (Defence Minister Rudolf Scharping), who just months before had sent him birthday wishes, "should return my books to me." [4] Handke attacked the sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas for lending the war his moral support. He undertook several short journeys to Serbia, and returned the Büchner Prize (the highest award for a German-language author) that he had been awarded in 1973.

The response of the media was to shower him with abuse. It was not only German-speaking colleagues who turned their backs on him. "There are intellectuals who, after hearing his utterances about the war in Yugoslavia, have sworn never to pick up another of his books", wrote Susan Sonntag in New York. The French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut saw in Handke an "ideological monster", whose utterances were based on a "Germanic guilty conscience" and the "conviction that he was an invulnerable genius".

This campaign reached a climax when, in mid-May, the actress Marie Colbin spoke out in an open letter. She told of private arguments, which apparently became violent, from an earlier time when she lived with Handke, with the aim of portraying him as a violent, power-hungry man, and a "vain author ... who enjoyed depicting himself publicly as the 'voice in the wilderness'." She drew the conclusion that he was "an ideologue of modern Balkan fascism". [5]

The *Berliner Zeitung* pointed to Handke's Olympian outlook and naiveté, criticising the literary work of this internationally recognised author as "narcissistically wrapped up in itself", as the attempt to work on a "poetic parallel universe", which he had "increasingly sought to construct as an impenetrable castle against the real world". [6] The Swiss writer Laederach called Handke's statements on the war in Kosovo a case

of "advanced mental fog". The German-Swiss PEN Centre saw in him the "blind inhabitant of an ivory tower", whose "pro-Serbian derailment", as the PEN general secretary put it in the *Berliner Zeitung*, reveals a "particularly unpalatable cynicism". [7]

There is, however, nothing in Handke's public statements to indicate that he is a supporter of the Serbian nationalist Slobodan Milosevic, or his politics. Anyone who has followed his writings over recent years can see this clearly. His latest play, about the war in Yugoslavia—*Die Fahrt im Einbaum oder Das Stück zum Film vom Krieg* (*Journey in a canoe, or the play about the film of the war*)—which premiered in June at the Vienna Burgtheater, likewise contains no trace of pro-Serbian sentiment.

Handke told the Austrian magazine *News* that Milosevic was the "country's elected president" and had to "defend his country's territory". He added, "Anyone in his position in the last ten years would have acted the same way he did. He was left no choice." [8]

In the interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quoted above, he said clearly, "I am with the Serbian people, not Milosevic. Anyone who is not a pronounced anti-Serb is despised as being 'pro-Serb'. Whoever mentions Milosevic's name without immediately adding 'slaughterer', 'Balkan Hitler', 'God protect us', is accused of taking sides with Milosevic." He added, polemically, that "to be called pro-Serb today is an honour."

A few years before, Handke had argued against the demonisation of the Serbs in the Bosnian war. In autumn 1995 he travelled to the "land of so-called aggressors" because all the newspaper articles had unleashed an urge to "look behind the mirror".

"Who can really tell," he wrote, "what such a thing is like, if one has only been shown a picture?" [9] When the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in January 1996 published the report of his visit, "Justice for Serbia", he was violently attacked in the media and accused of having a "pro-Serbian" attitude.

The opposite was the case. Anyone who bothered to read his text carefully could not fail but notice that even in his dispute with the young French writer Patrick Besson, Handke expressed concern that in rejecting any generalised media prejudice against Serbs, one had to avoid going over to the opposite extreme, an equally generalised "defence of the Serbs". Such arguments "contained the danger of expressing something which could be likened to the glorification of the Soviet system by certain visitors from the West in the 1930s." [10]

One reason for the unceasing vilification of Handke is plain to see. Comparing NATO's intervention with that of the Nazis is both a provocation and a withering criticism of all those anti-fascists from the 1968 generation whose moral appeals for decades stressed that war must never again be permitted from German soil. Now, having themselves called for war, they had to conjure up a second Hitler to justify their about-face.

There may, however, be another, more important consideration. Handke has rejected the prevailing opinion in Europe (and especially in Germany) that supports, in the name of national self-determination, the formation of

numerous petty states in the Balkans. He has called this policy "absolutely childish", according to one German Internet newspaper which indignantly quoted Handke's views on the "liberation struggle of the Kosovo Albanians". [11] Is this perhaps why Handke has been labeled "pro-Serb"?

Handke clearly sees nothing positive in the division of the Balkans. In 1991, in his book *Abchied des Träumers vom Neunten Land* ( *The Dreamer's Farewell from the Ninth Land*), he spoke against the separation of Slovenia from Yugoslavia.

In the account of his travels, entitled *Justice for Serbia*, to which his critics continually return, his regret over the dissolution of Yugoslavia is evident. In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Handke expressed his sorrow over the "tragic failure" of what he called "reform-communism" in Yugoslavia. [12]

His book ends with an extract from the suicide note of a former Tito partisan who, in desperation, killed himself in 1992. "The betrayal, the decline and chaos of our country, the difficult situation into which our people have been thrown, the war ... in Bosnia Herzegovina, the extermination of the Serbian people and my own illness have made my further life senseless." [13] About his wife, who was Handke's host, he wrote: "Until the end of her life, she would remain a thoroughly convinced Yugoslavian—not Serbian—communist ... even today this is the only possibility she sees for the south Slav people. Before the German invasion in 1941, under the monarchy, there were a few who owned everything. Next to them was only howling poverty. And now, in this special Serbian state—where the powers that be are 'traitors', as in the other new states—this is repeated, with avaricious war profiteers alongside of half-frozen have-nothings." [14]

As Handke writes in his conclusion, *Justice for Serbia* is not only directed at a German-reading audience, but is "also for those in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia". [15] Handke wants to remind the people of the former Yugoslavia that they have a common past. To this end, he is not so concerned with the current theatres of war. He calls to mind unspectacular, inconspicuous, everyday events shared by the various peoples—events which previously would not have been given a second thought.

For example, he recalls how, early in summer, swimmers would swim backwards and forwards between the Bosnian bank and the Serbian; that many people had Muslim friends; how cosmetics from Slovenia were popular, as was Bosnian fruit and vegetables that were shipped over the Drina; that at one time, the buses used to go from Bajina Basta to Tuzla and Srebrenica, and this was nothing special; in contrast to today, it was not unusual to see a car from Skopje/Macedonia parked on the street.

The reader is given an impression of how natural it was that the various languages and dialects existed alongside each other in the Balkans, and how this unconsciously penetrated everyday life—until today. When Sladko, Handke's Serbian travel companion from Germany, visited his parents' village, "despite straining to listen, I suddenly understood nothing—were they even speaking Serbian? No, the family had naturally started speaking Romanian, the conversational and private language of most villagers. Porodin was renowned as such a linguistic island. But did they even consider themselves to be Serbs? 'Of course — what else?'" [16]

"Why had there been such massive slaughter?" Handke asked. "Who were the aggressors? Were those who provoked a war the same as those who started it? And what did 'starting it' mean?" [17]

In contrast to the official media reports in Western Europe, he was unable to discover any "Serbian paranoia". He suggested that it was not present on the territory where "three ethnic peoples ... intermingled, not simply in the 'multi-cultural' capital, but rather from village to village, and in the villages themselves, even from house to shack, living side-by-side and in between one another..." He concluded that "legendary grains of sand... were blown up and became as big as rocks" thrown in the anger of

war. That happened in "our darkrooms". [18]

"How could this be compared to any violent dreams of 'Greater Serbia'?" he asked.

"In the end, wasn't it rather a 'Greater Croatia' that proved to be something more real, or more effective, or more massively determined and conclusive, than the illusory grains of sand of Serbian legend, that nowhere and never became a unified concept of power and policy?"

In biting words, he wrote of the new independence of the Slovenian state: "Now... I arrived at the Hotel 'Zlatorog' ... at the valley's end, everything arranged for German speakers, and in the entrance the framed photos of Tito's visit had been removed—not a pity really—and replaced with those of Willy Brandt.... On state television—almost nothing other than German and Austrian channels—over and over again a foreign trade or economic delegation was having native folk songs sung to them. Then the Slovenian President would enter the scene. Wasn't he once a capable and proud functionary? But now he behaves like a waiter, almost like a lackey, who serves up his country to the foreigners who visit, as if he wanted to satisfy every wish of a German employer or customer: the Slovenians aren't this or that, but rather a 'hard working and willing Alpen people'." The first question that Handke heard a customer in the new supermarket ask, was: "Has the *Bild* [German newspaper] arrived?" [20]

On his journey in April of this year, Handke lashed out against "the fat German, courtly mendacious French and expansionist American" language of the negotiations, which he followed on the hotel television, and the logic of the NATO attack, "which could bomb both a corn field and a chicken coop, because corn, chicken and eggs could nourish an enemy soldier".

He mused: "It's their own fault? The guilty, isn't it the people of this land themselves.... What does the country say? The country says absolutely nothing, it only becomes quieter, much quieter, and thereby doesn't say anything—which is more enduring. It means: no, we're not to blame." [21]

Last year, the Austrian cultural journalist Sigfrid Löffler delivered a speech to the Goethe Institute in Montevideo entitled "Peter Handke and the controversy over his text, *Justice for Serbia*." She supported Handke and traced the origins of the incessant, malicious press attacks back to a fundamental question that Handke had provoked: "Who will really do justice to the war in Yugoslavia?"

"The storm of disapproval that arose in the press following the publication of *Justice for Serbia* ... can only be understood if one keeps in mind the really audacious provocation that the poet was undertaking, legitimised by nothing other than the artist's sheer self will. The poet is not only seeking to criticise the predominant media practices and place a question mark over them. He wants to counterpose his poetic experience, his poet's eye, to the picture of the Serbs that the media paints world-wide. Against the superior power of media opinions about this war, he counters with his poetic voice. A single individual opposes the world's entire press: the poet, in and for himself. And he has the nerve to pose the question anew: Which side bears the guilt for the Yugoslavian war of secession?" [22]

Handke declares that the majority of war journalists "confuse their role as journalist with that of judge, or even demagogue, and ... are just as nasty as the dogs of war on the battlefield." Their words are kept "on the taut leash they are given." Instead of research into the origins [of the war], what counts is only "the sale of naked, randy, market-oriented facts, or bogus facts". [23]

For Handke, the truth about the war is not one-dimensional, and does not run in a straight line, as the media would have us believe. "The problem—is it only mine?—is more complicated, complicated by many levels of reality, or degrees, and in trying to clarify it, I am aiming at something quite thoroughly real, in which all of the swirling threads of reality enable some sort of context to be vaguely grasped." [24]

The two film directors in Handke's *Journey in a Canoe* also experience this. In the end, they abandon their joint film project regarding the war in Yugoslavia. They find the events on the ground too confusing and alien to make a simply drawn story that would move the public, using the tried and tested formula, as they had originally intended, where everything "unfolds nicely according to plan".

At one time, students in Berlin (before they later became writers, lawyers and politicians) occupied the media headquarters of Axel Springer, publisher of the gutter newspaper *Bild*, in protest "against total manipulation". That was in 1968. Today they look back at their fight against the "power of the media" with some nostalgia, but also with mounting incomprehension. For today they are, above all, more tolerant.

Handke clearly does not belong to this group. He goes his own way, critical and unimpressed by the prevailing opinions. The high standards he has set himself as a "traveller in the cause of truth"—as a journalist from the *Berliner Zeitung* condescendingly remarked—thereby throwing his international authority as an artist into the balance, deserves respect.

The fact that he presently provides the portrait of an isolated fighter underscores the rapid right-wing development of the intellectual and political milieu from which Handke himself comes, and which in past times brought forth such critical spirits as Jürgen Habermas, Stefan Heym and Gunther Grass. The accusation that he has assumed the role of the "voice in the wilderness" out of pride or to seek publicity is levelled against Handke only because, in reality, the writer is holding the fort alone.

#### Notes:

1. Burgenland-Online, <http://www.burgenland.com/Tmh/Zrlokal/Kultur/news-17380.asp>
2. SZ 15. May 1999, interview
3. Online-Archiv Munzinger, Peter Handke p. 5
4. SZ 15. May 1999, interview
5. *Tiroler Tageszeitung* Online 21. May 1999, [http://www.tirol.com/tt/Welt/Politik/article\\_34300.html](http://www.tirol.com/tt/Welt/Politik/article_34300.html)
6. *Berliner Zeitung*, 3 April 1999
7. *Berliner Zeitung*, 31 March 1999
8. Vienna Online, [http://www.vienna.at/pubs/news/lokalviol/1999\\_05\\_11\\_14\\_16\\_wnn\\_33.asp](http://www.vienna.at/pubs/news/lokalviol/1999_05_11_14_16_wnn_33.asp)
9. "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" (Part 1), SZ 05. January 1996, culture pp. 1, 2
10. Ebenda, P. 3
11. Burgenland-Online, see Note 1.
12. SZ 15. May 1999, interview
13. "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" (part 2), SZ 13. January 1996, culture p. 4
14. Ebenda p. 3
15. Ebenda p. 4
16. Ebenda p. 1
17. "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" (part 1), p. 2
18. Ebenda, pp. 3-4
19. Ebenda, p. 4
20. "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" (part 2), p. 3
21. "Der Krieg ist das Gebiet des Zufalls" SZ 05. June 1999
22. Sigrid Löffler "Peter Handke und die Kontroverse um seine Streitschrift ,Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" unter <http://www.goethe.de/hs/mot/votra/loef-1d.htm>
23. "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" (part 2) p. 4; (part 1) p. 2
24. "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" (part 1) p. 2



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