

Correspondence on Bosnia-Herzegovina

20 April 2001

World Socialist Web Site correspondent Tony Robson replies to a number of letters criticising our analysis of the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Reading your report titled "Bosnia-Herzegovina faces dissolution" of March 28 one can't but determine intentional and tendential (sic) effort to present a falsification of factual truth. I can accept that your organization has certain agendas yet I can't see the necessity not to portray the truth. I read the Croatian "manifesto" and the very first sentence stated that any action by any one toward dissolving of Bosnia and Herzegovina is illegal and that it will be prosecuted. Such a statement can hardly be presented as an intention to dissolve The Federation. They protested someone's forceful ignoring of national election results where 86 percent of votes were given in accordance to Dayton's Agreement to Croatian nationals to represent Croats, and by decree appoint individuals that received 168 (one hundred and sixty eight) votes to be representative of national group.

Frankly I don't expect your reply, because I lived under socialist dictatorship for over 30 years and have yet to experience socialist's love for truth. (I dare you to surprise me.)

Best wishes,

H.D.M.

8 April 2001

You disagree that the Croat nationalists have been working for the break-up of BiH and the creation of an ethnically based mini-state. Although you do not mention them by name, your remarks amount to a defence of the HDZ-BiH. Your contention is that they have respected the constitution of the BiH and that the latest moves to establish a separate entity are a "protest" aimed at upholding the democratic rights of Bosnian Croats.

Your attempt to deny the separatist agenda of the HDZ hinges on a document you refer to as the "Croatian manifesto", which recognises the sanctity of the BiH constitution. You describe how "the first sentence stated any action by any one toward the dissolving of Bosnia and Herzegovina is illegal and that it will be prosecuted."

Such a criteria for determining the attitude of the HDZ is at best naïve.

Since its creation, all the contending nationalist factions—Croat, Muslim and Serb—have paid lip service to a "multi-ethnic" Bosnia. This official position has been maintained in order to guarantee further financial investment from the Western powers. To date, the West has been willing to perpetuate this fiction in order to justify NATO's military intervention and its establishment of the protectorate. However, five years on from the signing of the Dayton Accords, the state remains divided into three distinct entities. Proof of this is indicated in the number of displaced people. The article explained, "...to this day the number of minority returns—i.e., those returning to their original homes in places where they constitute an ethnic minority—was as low as ten percent."

All the rival nationalist political parties have obstructed this process. For the Serb and Croat nationalists, the maintenance of ethnically homogenous enclaves is viewed as critical to their ultimate goal of annexation or confederation with larger neighbouring states. Your suggestion that there has been no attempt to establish a mini-state, until now, is barely credible. The entity set up by the Croat National Assembly in March is not an entirely new invention. As the article explained, it

corresponds to the state that existed before the Muslim-Croat ceasefire was signed in 1994. Known as Herceg-Bosna, it functioned as an annex of the Republic of Croatia.

While the late President Franjo Tudjman was one of the main signatories to the Dayton Agreement, the goal of a Greater Croatia was never formally renounced. Paternal ties between Zagreb and Mostar persisted through a number of economic and political ties. These transgressed the regulations of Dayton that made allowances for "special parallel relationships with the neighbouring states consistent with the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Hercegovina".

The Western powers were content initially to turn a blind eye to this, as their attention was concentrated on preventing ties between Republika Srpska and Yugoslavia, in order to enforce the latter's international isolation.

With the death of Tudjman and the electoral defeat of the ruling HDZ, efforts were stepped up to clampdown on the separatists in BiH. A raid by S-For in October 1999 uncovered evidence of how Croat forces were functioning as a separate entity within the Federation with the assistance of Zagreb. Similar raids were carried out last year in Vares, Livno and Orasje. Recent raids of the premises of the Hercegovina Bank represent the culmination of this S-For offensive. The bank was established in 1998 and is controlled by the HDZ BiH. It has served as the financial conduit for transactions between Zagreb and Mostar. The Croatian state budget provided funds for pensions, social assistance and veteran's payments for Croats in Bosnia. Rather than pay this money directly into the accounts of the intended recipients, it has been deposited in the bank for the HDZ to distribute as it sees fit. The HDZ thus obtained the means to manipulate an estimated 54 million German marks. While such practices are presented as the hallmark of the Tudjman era, it should be noted that the last contribution from Zagreb was deposited only one week before the HDZ's declaration of self-rule.

Even the supporters of Dayton concede that the state it gave rise to is dysfunctional. The Western think-tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), comments on Mostar, the city situated 25 miles from the Croatian border: "Mostar, as the Federation itself, remains essentially divided between Bosniak and Croat institutions. In Canton 7, where Mostar is located, the Bosniak and Croat authorities retain separate budgets, with revenues collected from different sources, and Croat and Bosniak civil servants have different salary levels. Such parallel institutions cut through the entire Federation."

For this reason the ICG describe the March 3 Assembly declaration by the HDZ as a bid to have "its separatist aims openly rather than quietly tolerated."

As for your point about the HDZ being motivated by the desire to protect the interests of their respective ethnic groups, this is the mantra used by the rival nationalists to justify all their actions. The actions of the Office of High Representative (OHR) are certainly undemocratic. The article is written as a critique of Western foreign policy in Yugoslavia. It explains how the Western powers acted to ferment ethnic divisions and then utilised the subsequent conflict to extend their economic and political influence in the region. We describe the establishment of the Bosnian mini-state as a protectorate, where unprecedented powers are concentrated in

the hands of the West.

The Western powers no more represent democracy than the rival nationalists protect the interests of the different ethnic communities. This does not mean that we defend electoral rules, which were initiated by the very same Western powers at an earlier period, to cement ethnic divisions. In addition, your defence of democracy appears very selective, as you remain silent on the measures that have been taken by the OHR against the elected representatives on the Serb and Bosniak side.

The politics of ethnic hatred and the economic dislocation brought about by the fragmentation of Yugoslavia with its attendant social misery is hardly conducive to democracy. While this chaos has been fortuitous to varying degrees for the rival nationalist cliques through smuggling and embezzlement, it has been retrogressive for the great majority of people. Thus Bosnia today has a lower per capita GDP than Albania, previously ranked the poorest country in Europe.

Tony Robson

The article published in WWSW on "B-H dissolution" witnesses of your poor knowledge of the situation. The war in Croatia did not start because the Serbs felt diminished to second-class citizens. If this was indeed the case, then how do you explain the Bosnian war? In my opinion, the chaos in the Balkans started with Milosevic having "Greater Serbia" in mind and his propaganda turning Serbs against their neighbours. Serbs had killed and driven away thousands upon thousands of Croats and held a third of the country, where they proclaimed their own republic before the Croats had gathered themselves. However, I'm not defending the Croats but the lack of professionalism in your article amazed me.

Sincerely yours,

BF

9 April 2001

By condemning the nationalist politics of the HDZ, we are not condemning the whole Croatian people. For the WWSW the two are not synonymous.

Your main contention is as follows: "In my opinion, the chaos in the Balkans started with Milosevic having 'Greater Serbia' in mind and his propaganda turning Serbs against their neighbours."

You seem to reject any analysis of the crisis that has enveloped Yugoslavia over the past decade, which does not attribute the blame solely to Milosevic in particular, and the Serbian people in general. For such a simplistic interpretation you cannot claim any originality. It has been the staple diet fed to the public by the mass media and governments in the West.

The article explained the present crisis in Bosnia from the standpoint of the origins of the state whose constitution was drawn up in Washington. The view promulgated in the Western media was that its creation represented the birth of democracy and an end to ethnic conflict. In opposition to this, the WWSW explained that the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the creation of the Western protectorate were a return to a "Balkanisation" policy—the carving up of the region into a series of mini-states through which the major powers would have greater economic and political leverage. The consolidation of these states through what has been euphemistically termed "ethnic cleansing" by rival nationalist cliques, including that led by Milosevic in Serbia, was the logical culmination of Western policy in the region. "Multi-ethnic Bosnia" to date remains divided into three entities and the main decisions taken at state level are enforced by the un-elected representatives of the Western powers. This state of affairs is not even disputed by the sponsors of Dayton.

One of the main aspects of the article was to explain the responsibility of the Western powers for military conflicts and social misery that dominated the Balkan peninsula. Did the rush to recognise independence for Croatia and Slovenia in 1991 prepare the way for armed conflict or not? The internationalisation of internal borders meant that overnight, the federal army, which was stationed in these republics, became an

occupying force. What of the constitutional status of the ethnic minorities in these new countries? As the article explained, Europe and the US after initially resisting demands for recognition out of fear for the destabilising effects, carried out a U-turn under pressure from Germany—without any of these issues being resolved. Wasn't it foreseeable that this policy, which had already led to fighting in two other republics, would have an even more disastrous effect in the more ethnically diverse Republic of Bosnia?

In the Western mass media these issues were not even posed, let alone answered. The reporting dovetailed the pronouncements of NATO, whose subsequent military intervention escalated the conflict, leading to the loss of many more lives. Your concerns over journalistic integrity could be more aptly applied to this quarter.

The article does not attempt to explain the conflict in Croatia as solely the product of Serbs being discriminated against, but identifies this as a contributory factor. After all, the last time Croatia had existed as a separate entity was as a puppet regime of the Nazis. The head of the newly recognised independent state in 1991 was HDZ leader Franjo Tudjman who based his political reputation on the promotion of right wing nationalism. This included his attempts at historical revisionism regarding the atrocities carried out by the fascist regime of Ante Pavlic during World War Two. That regime put to death more than 700,000 Serbs and 30,000 Jews in the only concentration camp in Europe not directly run by the Nazis. Yet the Croatian President described Pavlic's regime as "an expression of the historical aspirations of the Croatian people" and played down the number of victims claimed by the Ustashe regime. The state symbols from the period of fascism were reintroduced, along with new discriminatory laws against Serbs and other minorities.

The point that the article made was that, for this reason, the HDZ was one of the most effective recruitment agencies for Milosevic, the SDS and other Serb nationalists.

This in no way detracts from the reactionary perspective of the SDS for a "Greater Serbia" and the atrocities that they carried out in Croatia and Bosnia. However, it seems by your comments that you only think that it was Serbia that had designs on Bosnia. This flies in the face of documented evidence.

Allow me to quote from recently released tapes of conversations between the President of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tudjman and the President of the rump state of Herceg Bosna, Mate Boban.

On November 28, 1993 Tudjman tells Boban, "If we get the borders Novi Travnik, Busovaca, Bihac and if we cleanse Baranja we can give up majority of areas around the Sava."

Before the conflict began in Bosnia tentative talks had been held between Tudjman and Milosevic to partition the republic. What this conversation shows is that even after the war had begun, Tudjman was still interested in a trade off based upon ethnic cleansing. Other recordings include a meeting of the Croatian HDZ in February 28, 1992 at which a decision was made to annex parts of Bosnia to Croatia.

The reason why Tudjman kept such copious records was because he felt that future historians would give him pride of place as the founder of a Greater Croatia. The new Croatian regime only released the tapes after Tudjman's death, but his aims were well known by the Western powers, particularly America.

While you qualify your comments by stating, "I'm not defending the Croats", you are not critical of any of these actions and in effect justify the crimes of the Croatian nationalists as retaliation for Serb atrocities. Based upon such logic, there is no way out of the cycle of ethnic conflict. The WWSW is not selective in its outrage over the atrocities carried out by any of the contending sides. The point is to understand the reactionary role of nationalism and the retrogressive role it has fulfilled, particularly in the Balkans, and advance an internationalist alternative for the working class based upon the demand for a socialist federation of the entire Balkan region.



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