

# Bosnian film: no finger-pointing?

## No Man's Land, written and directed by Danis Tanovic

Joanne Laurier  
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Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovic has written and directed *No Man's Land*, a film about the Bosnian war of 1993-94. Tanovic, who was a photographer on the front lines in 1993 and ran the Bosnian army's film archive, has drawn from his experiences to develop certain realistic situations and characterizations. The film was awarded the prize for best screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival. It has been described as a model anti-war film, which refuses to point fingers at either side in the Balkan conflict. Unhappily, this is far from the truth.

During a fog a Bosnian relief squad accidentally finds itself close to Serbian lines. When the fog lifts the Serbs open fire and all but one member of the squad, Ciki, are apparently killed. Although wounded, Ciki manages to hide himself in an abandoned trench in "no man's land" between the two armies. Two Serb soldiers are sent to the trench to check for survivors. After inspecting the trench, they set a booby trap under the body of an apparently dead Bosnian. Ciki comes out of hiding and kills one of the Serbs. Now confronting each other in the trench are one wounded Bosnian, Ciki, and one wounded Serb, Nino.

It turns out that the booby-trapped Bosnian soldier, Cera, was unconscious, not dead, but any attempt to move him now will detonate the mine. Nino and Ciki, left on their own, attack one another verbally and, ultimately, physically. Each blames the other's side for starting the bloody war and wreaking havoc on his life. However, not only do they speak the same language, but when tensions temporarily diminish, they discover they had common acquaintances before the break-up of Yugoslavia. One is left wondering how they became such bitter enemies and what this apparently irrational war was all about. (Director Tanovic explains in an interview with the French web site, *Cinopsis*, that he brought together Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian actors that he had admired before the war.)

Eventually Ciki and Nino work together to get their respective armies to send for UNPROFOR, the United Nations' "peacekeeping" force. When UNPROFOR and the international media arrive on the scene, "no man's land"

turns into a circus. The self-serving media types act like vultures, Ciki and Nino end up killing each other, and UNPROFOR's supposed "neutrality" is held responsible for the bloodshed. The film ends with a lingering shot of the booby-trapped Cera left to die alone in the trench, symbolic of the futility and inhumanity of the war, with the further implication, however, that the Bosnians were the real victims.

In the *Cinopsis* interview Tanovic elaborates on one of the film's major themes: "The word neutrality does not exist, to do nothing is to make a choice ... UNPROFOR was never there for us [the Bosnians]. It was there solely to protect the image of the great western powers, but never to regulate the conflict. If you want I can speak to you about Srebrenica and the UN soldiers who played footsy with the Serbs while they killed 9,000 Bosnian civilians."

At its core *No Man's Land* has an irreconcilable contradiction. Tanovic's self-proclaimed intention was to create an anti-war and anti-communalist work: "I did not want to make a war film, on the contrary, I wanted to make an anti-war film that denounced the violence of all wars."

This rings true to a certain extent on the personal level, where among the soldiers there is a genuine feeling of protest against the absurdity of their predicament and of war in general. (One of the Bosnian soldiers stationed on the front comments, while reading a newspaper, "What a mess in Rwanda!") The film is the product of a talented cast and crew all of whom have experienced wartime trauma. Camera pans remind us how supremely criminal was the devastation of the country's amazing natural beauty.

But on the global level, the director reveals himself to be unresistant to the poisonous effects of nationalism and the reactionary fantasy that the great powers are at best problem-solvers and at worst "neutral" bystanders.

The director's false notions pollute whatever authentic anti-war sentiment the film contains. Sandwiched in between the dramatic events in the trench is a British news program's telecast of a segment on the history of the war. Within a matter of minutes one becomes acquainted with the

filmmaker's politics: Serbian leader Radovan Karadzic is shown threatening the Bosnian Muslims with extinction. The war's origins and "ethnic cleansing" are entirely blamed on the Serbs. The continued misery of the Bosnians is blamed on an "international community" which has refused to intervene. Former French President François Mitterrand, "who was received by the Bosnians as a savior," is shown arriving in Sarajevo for talks with Karadzic. According to the logic of the film, the great powers' "non-intervention" policy and a UN arms embargo have prevented the Bosnians from exercising their right to defend themselves against their Serb aggressors.

The film, contrary to its admirers, does point fingers. If the Serbs as a people are depicted as primarily responsible for the catastrophic war, second in line, by implication, come the other peoples of the region. The UNPROFOR troops, particularly the French, are portrayed as a civilizing force intervening to prevent the native "madmen" and "lunatics" from springing at each other's throats. This is the sort of argument trotted out by apologists for imperialism to justify every intervention from Haiti to Somalia to Afghanistan. Culpability for the region's present suffering and its history of suffering is never laid at the doorstep of the biggest villains. The film, intentionally or not, falsifies the history of the war and the role of the great powers.

"Ignorance of history is indispensable if one is to accept as legitimate the hypocritical denunciations of 'aggression' and declarations of support for Bosnian 'self-determination' and 'national sovereignty' which echo through the statements of the [US] State Department, the United Nations, NATO..." (*Marxism, Opportunism & The Balkan Crisis*, Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International [Labor Publications, 1994]).

In 1990 the breakup of Yugoslavia and the move to declare Bosnia an independent state saw the coalition government comprised of three communally-based parties—Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian—disintegrate. Bosnian Serbs, forming nearly 30 percent of the population, boycotted a 1992 referendum on secession. Local Serb leaders made it clear they would quit the Bosnian regime and seek unity with Serbia if independence were declared. Bosnian Croats supported independence in order to break with Serbia and orientate towards Zagreb. The rival cliques of ethnic chauvinists had no fundamental programmatic differences; they were equally reactionary and equally responsible for dragging the working class into a bloody civil war. Izetbegovic (in Bosnia), Karadzic, Tudjman (in Croatia), Milosevic (in Serbia) were cut from the same cloth, communalist thugs who desired to arrange their own direct deals with globally mobile capital.

Far from being benevolent "peacekeepers" as the film

suggests, the great powers played a central role in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. After the collapse of Titoist Stalinism and the reestablishment of market economies, the major powers demanded the break-up of nationalized industries and the imposition of austerity measures that exacerbated simmering ethnic tensions. They deliberately encouraged separatist and chauvinist tendencies. From 1991 onward the breakup of Yugoslavia was insured by imperialist intervention; first with German recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 and then with US approval for Bosnian secession in 1992.

Recognition of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia transformed the Yugoslav army, in the eyes of the imperialist "international community," into an aggressor that threatened the independence and sovereignty of the new states. The Serbian army and paramilitary carried out terrible crimes, but only their actions were described as "ethnic cleansing," while atrocities carried out by Croatian and Bosnian Muslim forces were largely viewed as legitimate measures of national self-defense. When Serbian dissatisfaction with the result of the carve-up of the Balkan peninsula proved disruptive to Washington's strategic aims, the US responded by launching a devastating bombardment in 1999. Throughout the history of the Balkan region, imperialist intervention has had the objective impact of escalating the scale of communal violence.

To make an anti-war and an anti-communalist film, one must have an historic perspective. Without such a compass, all attempts at psychologizing about the impact of war and violence on humanity are simply impressionism. There is an international milieu of middle class moralizers who don't care to make any serious analysis of complex historical and class processes and end up absolving the great powers and their local representatives of the major responsibility for the breakup of Yugoslavia and its tragic consequences. *No Man's Land*, despite its humanistic ambience, ends up neither exploring nor illuminating the harsh realities facing the Balkan peoples.



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