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WSJ:  
9-21-93

# In Defense of the Serbians

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Following is the text of an open letter to President Clinton written by eight Yugoslav-American scholars:

Now that an agreement on Bosnia seems so close at hand, we hope that this time the opportunity for an accord will not be missed. Twice before, proposed workable cantonal divisions acceptable to the warring parties were torpedoed by outside intervention based on the contention that the conflict in that agonized land is a war of aggression, and that the hurriedly proclaimed new state should be protected by the armed might of Western nations.

The same thesis was advanced on this page in an Open Letter to the President by an international group of concerned public figures headed by the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ("What the West Must Do in Bosnia," Sept. 2). This contention, however, is in error because the Bosnian turmoil represents a struggle for national self-determination of distinct nations. It is a civil war, pure and simple. Attempts to dictate its outcome from the outside can only prolong and exacerbate the agony. A brief review of the recent history of the area can very readily establish these facts.

When certain ethnic groups within the sovereign nation of Yugoslavia—a co-founding member of the League of Nations and the United Nations—decided to opt out of the common republic, they did so employing, in pursuit of their goals, even violent means against the legitimate authorities. At some point, for example, the local Slovenian authorities engaged the former Yugoslav army in multiple armed combats. At the time, such conflicts in pursuit of ethnic separation were not considered "aggression against a U.N. member state" by the international community and the Slovenians ultimately succeeded in establishing a separate national entity. The Croat and Bosnian authorities followed suit.

Having noticed these events, the sizable Serbian population in Bosnia assumed that what is good for the goose should be good for the gander. If the Slovenes and Croats had, in the name of their national self-determination, a right to opt out of Yugoslavia and thus break up a sovereign state of long historical standing, then the Serbs in Bosnia must have the same right to opt out of the just-declared state of Bosnia. They wanted to form, precisely as the Slovenians and Croats had, their own distinct and separate territorial entity.

Even without such comparisons, the Serbs, as well as the Bosnian Croats, have, as a matter of principle, the rights to maintain their ethnic identity and to practice their own religion. The implementation of these rights seemed of particular importance in the self-proclaimed and initially ill-defined Muslim-dominated state of Bosnia. This was resisted by the Bosnian authorities, and the pressing need for ethnic and religious self-determination associated with territorial integrity has subsequently led to the current three-sided civil war in Bosnia.

It is worth noting that the currently proposed U.N. solution envisaging three separate provinces in a loosely bound Bosnian state is similar to the successful model of coexistence of the different nationalities and groups found in Canada, Belgium, Switzerland and elsewhere. On the other hand, there is not a single instance, now or in the past, where a state dominated by the ethnic or religious preference of one group

has not resulted in the blatant oppression of others.

In addition, Serbs had good historical reasons for their course of action. During World War II, they were subjected to systematic extermination within the Nazi-promoted puppet state of Croatia by the Bosnian Muslim armed units and the Croatian Fascist Ustashi. The Germans formed out of Bosnian Muslims two Waffen SS divisions. These troops first massacred indigenous Serbian populations in Croatia, Bosnia and occupied Serbia and later joined the German army in the battle of Stalingrad. Consequently, Serbs refused to become once again subjected to dreaded alien rule. They did not want to see repeated, under any name, what they vividly remembered as 500 years of slavery under Muslim Ottoman rule.

This was, in spring 1992, the historically perceived reality for the Serbian population in Bosnia. It impelled them to seek the establishment of a distinct Serbian national home and evolved into a painful process within the political power vacuum left in the wake of the collapse of communism. An early accord crafted and signed in Lisbon in March 1992 by the local Bosnian Croats, Muslims and Serbs

*In Bosnia, the quest for self-determination is a valid one, and the Serbs there are no more "aggressors" than the local Muslims, or, for that matter, the Croats.*

was sabotaged by the U.S. State Department, which hastily bestowed recognition on a Muslim-dominated Bosnia. The Muslim head of state, Alija Izetbegovic, then rescinded his Lisbon signature, whereupon Bosnian Serbs decided to opt out of such a Muslim-dominated state, and the civil conflict was on.

Transgressions and atrocities were committed by all the warring factions. Although the reported number of victims may be exaggerated, such acts should be condemned in no uncertain terms. Still, these acts during the current lawlessness of a civil war in Bosnia are no different from what happened at other times in My Lai, Bataan, Jasenovac or Beirut. While those responsible for any criminal misdeed should be apprehended and tried whenever possible, the blame should not be extended to entire nations. In particular, not so in the case of Bosnia because the quest for self-determination is a valid one, and the Serbs there are no more "aggressors" than the local Muslims, or, for that matter, the Croats.

Our finding Margaret Thatcher's name prominently among the signatories of the open letter the Journal printed has caused us an additional degree of sorrow. For her brutally to denounce the most faithful ally of the British in times of mortal peril during World War II is as incomprehensible as it is painful. Lady Thatcher must have heard Winston Churchill on March 27, 1941, tell his nation that the Yugoslavs under Serbian leadership had overthrown the government that had signed an agreement with Nazi Germany and that "the Yugoslav nation found its soul."

Churchill noted in his memoirs that

Hitler was so enraged by the Serbs aligning Yugoslavia with the valiant struggle of the British that he immediately issued orders "to destroy Yugoslavia militarily and as a national unity." Churchill wrote: "On the morning of April 6 German bombers appeared over Belgrade. Flying in relays from occupied airfields in Rumania, they delivered a methodical attack lasting three days upon the Yugoslav capital. From rooftop height, without fear of resistance, they blasted the city without mercy. This was called Operation 'Punishment.' When silence came at last on April 8, over seventeen thousand citizens of Belgrade lay dead in the streets or under the debris."

Belgrade endured another series of bombing raids between Easter 1944 and the liberation of the city in October. These were carpet-bombings of supposed German military targets by the U.S. Air Force. The bombers, however, more often than not, missed their assigned targets, and the damage to the city was enormous; the number of Serbian civilian casualties from such "friendly fire" was in the thousands. Strangely enough, however, the enemy of our allies in Zagreb, Ljubljana, Skopje or, for that matter, in Sarajevo had no need to be worried about being bombed. Now that Lady Thatcher advocates yet a third round of airborne destruction of Serbia, we are at a loss to fathom her motives, the "surgical precision bombing" tale notwithstanding.

In summary, Serbs in Bosnia (and Bosnian Croats, alike) are not asking with respect to Bosnia for anything more than what Slovenes, Croats and Macedonians asked for earlier—and have been granted by the international community. As it happens, this has embroiled Bosnia in a full-scale civil war in which, by the nature of such conflicts, individuals and groups of individuals do commit acts of violence that violate norms of civilized behavior. As a rule, partial outside support only prolongs the pain and suffering. Such a situation is truly tragic and should invite efforts toward mediation and remediation by persons of good will.

Instead, however, we see an inflammatory open letter whose timing and content could not have been more unfortunate and misdirected. It appeared during the final hours of the Geneva negotiations. Instead of looking for ways in which to iron out the minor procedural problems that were holding up a peace accord, the letter proposed, most undiplomatically, that one party be given arms so that it can annihilate the others. We are deeply chagrined to witness this one-sided and partisan anti-Serbian outburst of most bellicose rhetoric. This is pouring the fuel of hate on a fiery inferno when the greatest need is for an understanding and compassionate brigade of firefighters.

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