

Book Review

Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans*. New York: Continuum, 1994. 248pp.

If Yugoslavia's descent into disaster had been an airline crash, Paul Mojzes would be the chronicler who gives us the detailed account from its "black box." While other writers can make us feel that the Balkan situation is too remote, obscure and complex to be understood, Mojzes brings the deadly struggles to light in painstaking explanation. With the scrutiny of a responsible scholar, the diligence of the best journalists, and the empathy of an insider, the author draws on his vast network of colleagues and dialogue partners to weave an account which is at once evaluative and fair, discriminating and accessible.

Yugoslavian Inferno is the book to answer many questions left dangling in coverage of Yugoslav calamities by ordinary journalism. Which kind of war is this, really? Where do the ethnic hatreds come from? How can people who seem so much like us be plunged into such desperate hostilities? What kind of people are driven to commit such heinous atrocities? Have the religious communities and their leadership played any significant role, for better or worse, in the mounting crisis? And most poignantly, is there any informed observer who can still attempt an objective assessment of each side in the struggle?

Outsiders reduce the equations to simplicity in the absurd. Insiders engage in such partisan rivalry and mutually exclusive claims that there seems to be no central ground, even for cautious observations. The areas of agreement shrink more quickly than safe havens under so-called "UN protection." I have personally participated in numerous international conferences where the unspoken rule for organizers was: "don't let the insiders get to arguing with each other." At Oxford, I saw such a note passed to the "moderator." And so we are left with a dilemma: outsiders know too little (just enough to be dangerous and confusing) and insiders know too much (and we lose patience with their endless wrangling).

Thus what Paul Mojzes can do is doubly enviable: speak like a native, which he is, and pose as a foreigner whenever he wishes to make almost anonymous observations. Leaving Yugoslavia in his early years during the first freedoms of post-Stalinism in the 1950s, he nevertheless avoided the kinds of emigre behaviors which made it impossible for many others to return for visits prior to the relaxations of the 1970s. As a scholar, his journeys have always been investigative and personal at the same time. Colleagues, conferences and correspondents help him to refresh and extend his own observations.

One can imagine, however, that few of his informants will be completely satisfied by the picture that emerges from his composite drawings. The attempt at objectivity is perceived as impartiality, even neutrality in the face of atrocity and aggression. Many were the objections to Yugoslavia itself in years gone by, against its policies of non-alignment under President Tito during the Cold War. Morality required a clear-cut choice, the critics

declared: U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in the 1950s denounced the non-aligned movement as immoral.

Yet one has to earn the right to make cultural critiques as stringent as Mojzes does in his discussion of *prkos* (as obstinacy, spite and defiance, pp. 50-52), along with revenge (50), horrors (45f), and rage (53). Of lies and allies, in the resurgence of ethnic hatred manipulated in time-worn fashion by local Balkan potentates, any political scientist will predictably write (and write in weary clichés, no doubt). But only an insider could dare to broach the analysis of "primitivism" which Mojzes launches in his review of the "destructive uses of memory" (Chapter 3). He insists that the patterns are not unique to Yugoslavs alone, but it is hard to include in this dark portrait within our own larger picture of humanity itself. Anyone who hopes to celebrate the revival of myth, symbol and ritual (including religious) must hereby take warning. Retrieval of memory and the cultures of our past cannot be done without discernment; there is no guaranteed cure for the bleakness of modernity or post-modernity in revival alone.

It is precisely because this portrait of Yugoslavia is also our own that we must pay such attention to the gory details, and even more to the conditions that led up to the fatal crash. Because we and they are human, condemned to life together on a perilously small planet, it is also our story. The inferno of our calculations and mistrust, our availability for manipulation based on greed and hate, our cynical consumption of other people's ills disguised as "news" (especially the reduction to sensationalism of tabloid and headline condensations) will otherwise burn on into our next millennium unchecked, erupting whenever we abandon the hope of miracles, the longing for God's kind of healing for our human condition.

I personally wish that all my colleagues committed to pacifism would take up the challenge Paul Mojzes addresses in his 12th and almost final chapter, "Ending the War." His various scenarios project another 3-10 years of incessant carnage, at best, with up to a million further lives lost. His impassioned argument for intervention may put Mojzes at risk, not least from armchair experts at various removes from the fray, but he faces directly into the wind with his insistence that, "in the case of the Yugoslavian inferno, not to intervene is to permit the ethnoreligious warfare to go on indefinitely" (174). Furthermore, the indecisive dithering over it by various regional and global powers leads directly to the indictment that, "regarding Yugoslavia, there is no international community" (173). Anyone who must in principle reject the idea of military interventions designed to reach a balanced, reasonable solution should be compelled to provide a better proposal or else refrain from criticism in all humility when others take cautious steps in this direction.

What Mojzes actually proposes is already somewhat familiar to those who follow his work in the *Christian Century* or even the pages of this journal. Coercive diplomacy, backed up with military strikes if needed, should impose a solution which is reasonably fair to the vital interests of all sides, and which puts a rapid end to the slaughter and punishes any further warfare. Mojzes is confident that decisive yet proportional moves could compel all sides to come to the peace table for serious negotiations. This is the only

adequate framework for hammering out the complex issues of mixed populations in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, he urges. An international response to end the social psychosis of war, and to ameliorate the economic and public health catastrophes would leave the task of detoxifying society to the religious communities, uniquely qualified to mediate healing among the nations.

Unless we study this "black box" carefully, other crashes are sure to follow. There, but for the grace of God, go we all.

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