

Letter to the Editor

May 1995

Dear Editor:

As a journalist for various Franciscan peace and justice newsletters, I visited the front lines of the war zones in Osijek and Karlovac, Croatia, in early 1992. Then on a similar assignment, I went inside enemy lines, this time via an Unprofor tank, to Central Bosnia (25 miles NW of Sarajevo) in June of 1993.

For the last four years I have read a great deal about the Balkans in an attempt not only to understand the present horror, a part of which I had personally endured, but also to come to an understanding of myself. I needed to know where I stood--as a long-time, religiously-oriented activist--in relation to both the war in former Yugoslavia, and to some possible future war in which I might have to take a formal moral stand. People in the U.S. are de-sensitized to war, believing that it could never happen here. The isolationist in us tells us we are safe from what is happening in the Balkans. But the seeds of war are buried everywhere inside the human spirit. Peaceable seeds must be planted and nurtured, and the weeds of war pulled out wherever they emerge. And if these weeds should take over the garden, what do we do then, what do I do?

One of the most profound books I read during this period was Rebecca West's great discourse on former Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Even then (in the mid-thirties), West said, Europeans were going to Yugoslavia, finding themselves drawn to a favorite ethnic group, and returning home full of stories as to why this nationality was the most abused and put upon by the others. That scenario continues even today, and I confess to having fallen into the nationalist sympathies trap in relation to the Croats who were my guides, and who, in some cases, became my friends. Perhaps if--at the time of my visits--I had had in my hand the new book by the editor of this publication--*Yugoslavian Inferno*-- I might have avoided at least part of this entrapment.

Professor Mojzes's book has challenged me to think about the Balkan situation with a great deal more clear-headedness than I had been able to bring to it before, despite an attempt to read books that seemed to be quite objective. The light of his understanding of the mythos that he was born into, refracted through the prisms of his scholarly objectivity and a passion for the gospel, has been a great help to me in understanding not only what I had seen, but also much of what I had failed to see during my hectic and frightening visits. I am still sorting through all this, but I am now using *Yugoslavian Inferno* as a primary compass and a much-needed torch.

In neither of my journeys into the war zones was I introduced to anyone who was "enemy." This was understandable, perhaps, in that villages were burning as, crouched in my armored shell, I travelled in and out of Vitez, Bosnia. Muslim's were sniping at us (or could have been at almost any moment). And there was no doubt that "good" Croat men were returning the favor through the various peepholes on "our side" of the green line that

separated Muslim Slavs from Croat Slavs in most of the Central Bosnian towns. Although I was not an enemy to the Muslims, I felt a helpless kind of horror at being under attack, and huge anger at the fact that the Muslim "enemy" was visiting death upon the good Croat people of Vitez, and in many other towns in Central Bosnia.

Even now, I become weepy as I write about interviewing the fathers of seven children who were killed when their little playground was targeted by Muslim artillery three days before I arrived in Vitez. Even if there were no such thing as "ancient hatreds" in the Balkans, an act of such heinous brutality (which went virtually unreported in the West) would be unforgivable anywhere in the world, including the peaceable little midwestern town in which I now live. The notion of reconciling neighbors who have done such horror to one another seems an impossible task. I confess that I doubt if I could be brought to love and forgive my enemy, if my own children had been brutalized in this manner. The miracle of grace would be essential.

Perhaps a few other observations might help explain why--in my limited way--I have become an advocate for the Croats of Bosnia.

The Croat people I talked to were more afraid of the Muslims' wrath than they were of the Serbs', believing that the Muslims could be more vicious toward them than the even Serbs had been. But it was clear to me that they hated the Serbs much more than they hated the Muslims; even some of the friars manifested these sentiments, convinced as they were that the whole mess had been started deliberately by the Serbs in order to claim their medieval "right" to a Greater Serbia.

Anyway, my experience was all-out war between the Muslims and the Croats, but in my interviews and conversations I could hear much more hatred and disdain for the Serbs than for the Muslims. The reason--I think--had less to do with "ancient hatreds" than with ongoing experiences with and among the Serbs that had culminated in this war that no one still can quite believe is happening, and that everyone absolutely believes should not have happened, (although the Croats certainly do not accept much blame for contributing to the climate in which it did happen).

I read recently that until the war some 72% of the bus drivers in Zagreb were Serbs. This is by way of an example of the dominant pre-war situation in former Yugoslavia. A friar from Northern Bosnia lived with me in Cincinnati for a while last year. He told me that, although there wasn't a single Serb in his village, the gradeschool principal had been--for as long as he could remember--a Serb. Fr. Mirko Matausic, the Provincial of the Zagreb Franciscan province listed copious statistics about how high and medium level positions throughout Croatia had fallen, in the vast majority of instances, to the Serb minority. The friars' belief--echoed, in other interviews, elsewhere in Croatia--was that Serbians and Serbs had been receiving the lion's-share of the jobs and the benefits from productivity that had come primarily from the Croats and the Slovenes of former Yugoslavia. One friar quoted me an (apparently) old adage that the Serbs would rather "rat" than "rad", those two words being the Croatian for "war" and "work".

On the Dalmatian Coast (of Croatia) in mid-June, 1993, the new Croat refugees from Central Bosnia were furious. Most of their fury was directed at the Croatian government, because many of the hotel rooms and available apartments were filled with Muslim women and kids (leaving thousands of Croats from Travnik and Ovcarevo standing for days in a park near the Stadium in Split, or finding themselves hauled back out into the grindingly poor areas of Hercegovina where they stood the distance possibility of being "cleansed" yet another time). All this, the refugees said over and over again, "while the Muslim men are out in the hills of Central Bosnia killing Croats."

This must be one of the strangest wars in history, what with the enemy still living among his and her enemies, except where the enemy has been "cleansed." As I have said in numerous articles, published and unpublished since my last trip, I prayed for those enemies with Franciscan priests in Central Bosnia even as the shells were falling and the guns were firing, and even as the names of the newly dead were being entered in the parish "book of the dead." I have absolutely no doubts about the deep sincerity of those prayers. Nor do I doubt the validity of those Croat people (or the Muslims either) fighting in desperation to keep their ancestral homes out of the hands of those who would--in the name of nationalistic sentiments--steal them. I know that if I lived there, I would almost certainly be fighting alongside them.

But what was most clear to me from the Croats was their sense of being an oppressed minority in former Yugoslavia. Whether they were about to become the oppressive majority within Croatia is, I suppose, likely under the above-mentioned, real and perceived, circumstances.

My primary point here, which may be in variance to some of the conclusions in Yugoslavian Inferno, is that the Croats (as well as the Muslims, I'm sure) may themselves be "trapped by ancient hatreds", but their experiences of living under the oppressive thumb of the Serbs in former Yugoslavia, right on up until the unthinkable happened, would lead them to believe that there is no choice but to fight on for separation and independence, so that those experiences will not repeat themselves.

Although I know that the truth is never as clean as my own Catholic upbringing led me to believe it should be, and that there are two sides to every disagreement, and that one's moral choices play themselves out on a battlefield that is almost always tilted against the weaker, and that moral subtlety is often lost on the powerful, I still believe that there is a bottom line in determining the answer to the question raised by the old spiritual anthem: Whose side are you on? Sitting on a hillside overlooking the Adriatic at Baska Voda, Croatia, a tired Sarajevo refugee doctor in a sleeveless T-shirt asked the question, "Are we the kind of people who want to suffer because of our faith?" Rebecca West accused Christianity and Western Liberalism of failing totally in what should have been (and still should be, or so my idealism tells me) their primary mandate: to protect the works of innocence.

As professor Mojzes makes clear in his book, the religious leaders of all three major "ethnoreligions" have failed to hear or to heed the voice of God calling them to shepherd

their people toward love and justice in this situation. But why should I, or anyone in the U.S., be surprised and troubled by this? During the Gulf war, most of the parish priests of my faith became hard and fast supporters of our national security state the moment the war for cheap oil actually began. As did ministers of most of the mainline Protestant denominations. They cheered our one-sided victory, barely conscious (even now) that 200,000 of "the enemy" had to die in the process. We people of the U.S. were, of course, never even under siege, as are those ministered to by the priests and Imans of former Yugoslavia. Who are we to judge them for taking sides with their people?

Over and over again, the world's "Great Religions" fail in heeding their gospel mandate to call their people to be peacemakers. From my own viewpoint as a Catholic, nurtured in the spirit of St. Francis, I find myself especially disappointed in the worldwide Franciscan order, as well as in the millions of Medjugordje "converts" for having failed to respond to the all but unmistakable calling of the Saint of Peace and the Queen of Peace to truly lead us in the world community toward demanding a peaceful and just resolution to this conflict. I believe that these religious groups should have inspired and inspirited thousands of us worldwide to put our bodies and our selves on the line in order to see to it that "never again" really means "never."

As a religious leader himself, in the best sense of the word, Paul Mojzes bravely concludes Yugoslavian Inferno with a specific plan for ending the war and trying to heal its many wounds. Those of us who are drawn to follow his lead might consider putting his book, or its ideas, into the hands of our own political (and religious) leaders.

If I know anything from my personal experiences in Central America, Croatia, and Bosnia, it is that war is the worst disaster that can befall any people. Describing war as "hell" is a gross misstatement, because no one knows what hell is unless he or she has experienced war. To stop existing wars and to prevent other wars from happening seems to me to be a real possibility on this shrinking planet, where global communication enables us to see the places where war is happening, and to anticipate those places where it could. To try to do so is the mandate given to all those who would call ourselves followers of Christ. Blessed indeed are the peacemakers.

Sincerely,

Jim Lukens,
Ohio