

BOSNIA: TAKING SIDES IS NOT "PEACEKEEPING"

BY ZOLTÁN GROSSMAN

The recent events in Bosnia-Herzegovina have again brought out simplistic questions from the media. Should the U.S. intervene militarily to "save" Bosnian Muslims? How do "we" stop the Serbs? Supporters of the Muslim cause are automatically assumed to be supporters of U.S. intervention. Yet I both support the Muslims and oppose U.S. military action.

As a Hungarian-American Jew, I feel very comfortable supporting a Muslim people. The Ottoman Turkish occupation was considered a golden age for European Jewry. When the Turks left, Christian pogroms (a forerunner to "ethnic cleansing") were directed at Jews and Muslims alike. Modern Bosnian cities, such as Sarajevo, Travnik, and Tuzla, have been islands of diversity, where Bosnian Muslims and Jews lived side-by-side with Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs. These cities are being shelled by militias driven by a hatred not only for ethnic diversity, but by a Khmer Rouge-like hatred of urban people and values.

Yet given my support for Bosnian Muslims, I feel very uncomfortable with the parallels made to the Holocaust, and with the calls for U.S. military intervention. Both do a disservice to history and to the present.

U.S. military action could easily result in disaster for everyone in the Balkans, including Muslims. The closest parallel is Lebanon, where the U.S. not only got involved in a messy civil war, but took sides with the Christian government by bombing and shelling Muslim forces. Once the U.S. took sides, the Muslim bombing of the Marine barracks was inevitable. Do we really want a conflict with the Serbs, who are historically Europe's fiercest guerrilla fighters? Serbian nationalists (like Israeli nationalists) use the atrocities of World War II to justify modern repression, and lay claim to their "historic" lands (such as Kosovo) even though they are now populated by other peoples.

NATO bombing of Serb forces would also give the green light to Albania, Bulgaria, and Hungary (all wanting a foreign diversion from domestic economic problems) to annex the pieces of Serbia where their ethnic group predominates. The war could draw in Greece and Turkey, or even Russia and Germany, on opposing sides. Why isn't NATO talking about a more even-handed intervention, keeping apart the militias rather than attacking one of them?

The parallels to World War II are strong, but they are different parallels than what we read in the media. Bosnia is being partitioned between Croatia and Serbia, much as Poland was divided between Hitler and Stalin in 1939. Croatian President Franjo Tudjman (through the Bosnian Croat leader Mate Boban) is no less an aggressor than Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic (through Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic). Most of the "eth-



nic cleansing" has been committed by Serb forces, but that is because Bosnian Serbs have a larger population in a larger territorial area, and the Croat forces wisely waited until now to attack their former Muslim "allies."

Not only are Croatia and Serbia now openly advocating the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but Serb and Croat forces in central Bosnian towns such as Zepece and Maglaj are starting to team up against the Muslims. Belgrade and Zagreb now back a partition plan under which Bosnian Muslims would be confined to two virtual "reservations" around Sarajevo and Bihac. ("Croat," "Serb," and "Muslim" are ethnic/religious terms; "Croatian," "Serbian," and "Bosnian" pertain to nationality. That's why someone can be a Bosnian Croat, a Croatian Serb, or a Serbian Muslim).

Even the popular nicknames of the militias hark back to World War II, a replay of the Serb nationalist Chetniks fighting the Croat Nazi Ustashi, with the multiethnic Bosnian forces somewhat playing the role of Marshal Tito's Partisans. And that's why the Holocaust parallels seem so misplaced. The concentration camps in the region were run by the Nazi puppet state of Croatia, not by the Serbs. The Croatian state (upheld as a model of independence by many in Tudjman's party) horrified even the Germans in its brutality toward Serbs and Jews. Yet one pamphlet put out by the U.S. Croat group last year included a history that skipped from the 1919 founding of Yugoslavia to the 1945 reestablishment of Yugoslavia,

with no mention of World War II!

So if U.S. troops are sent in as part of an anti-Serb coalition, they may find themselves fighting alongside Croat Defense Council (HVO) militiamen wearing Iron Crosses. The proponents of U.S. intervention fail to explain why they want to bomb only the Serbs. There's a difference between an intervention where you protect "good guys" from "bad guys," and one in which you recognize there are no "good guys." The Serbs would be more likely to agree to a ceasefire if they see Western pressure applied equally to the Croats. Sometimes a bully will stop fighting only if his rival bully is punished too. Western influence—whether diplomatic or military—would have been more effective if it had been even-handed from the start. Now it is almost too late, and neither Europe nor the U.S. cares what fate befalls the Muslims.

One question is whether Western European states have the ability to aid the Muslims. The answer is yes, but they refuse to even allow the Muslims to buy arms. One explanation is in the European "New Wall" that is starting to separate the predominantly Catholic and Protestant nations of the West from the mainly Eastern Orthodox and Muslim nations of the East. The wall is not at all "new," since it dates back to the Crusades and the Great Christian Schism; what's new is the recognition that it never went away.

It isn't surprising that Russia, Greece and Romania are tacitly backing their Serb Orthodox brethren in ex-Yugoslavia. It also isn't surprising that Western countries have been

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reluctant to intervene in Bosnia, because it rests on the eastern side of the wall, and or that they are reluctant to question the role of Croatia, which is on the western side. To spill Western European blood in Bosnia would create a precedent for intervention in the former USSR, and would imply that Muslims are welcome to join the new united Europe, just at a time that Muslim immigrants are being attacked throughout Europe.

The only countries that will be probably be allowed into the European Community are Poland, the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and the ex-Yugoslav states of Slovenia and Croatia. The Christian Orthodox and Muslim countries to the east would become sources of cheap labor and resources for the new European superpower, leading to future decades of resentment and reaction in countries like Turkey, Serbia, and Russia.

One can almost predict upcoming conflicts by looking at religious minorities who are stuck on the wrong side of the wall. They include not only the Orthodox populations on the western side (Serbs in Croatia, and Russians in the Baltic states and Kaliningrad enclave), but Catholics and Protestants on the eastern side (Croats in Bosnia, Hungarians in Ukraine and Romanian Transylvania, Poles in Ukraine and Belarus, Uniate Catholics in western Ukraine, and Karelian Finns in Russia). In a sense, the war in Yugoslavia was inevitable, not only because of the downfall of Communism in Eastern Europe, but because of the lure of unification in Western Europe.

The other unresolved question is whether the U.S. has the moral authority to intervene in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The U.S. has its own history of "ethnic cleansing," including the Cherokee Trail of Tears and the forced removal of many other Native nations. U.S. foreign policy has actively backed (not opposed) "ethnic cleansing" in Guatemala, East Timor, Western Sahara, Sri Lanka, Turkey, the Philippines, Kuwait, Angola, Israel, Liberia, and other countries. The Balkans is one of the only messy areas of the world where the U.S. has not been directly involved in making it messier. Let's keep it that way.

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