

Bosnia

By Florence Hartmann

The conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which began in April 1992 and ended in November 1995, has come to be seen as the model for wars of ethnic cleansing throughout the world. This was the most violent event Europe experienced since World War II, and the devastation of the small multiethnic state recalled the ruins of Germany after the Allied bombing. The methods of ethnic cleansing, used for conquest of territory were a repudiation of the lessons of World War II as codified in the Geneva Conventions. Practically the only saving grace in Western policy making during the three-and-a-half-year war was the decision to launch an international war crimes tribunal to indict and try some of those responsible.

Everyone knows by now that the war was both the result of Yugoslavia's collapse and the event that ensured it could never be reconstituted. Long before the war began, Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and, following his example, Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, had turned their backs on the Yugoslav ideal of an ethnically mixed federal State and set about carving out their own ethnically homogeneous States. With Milosevic's failure, in 1991, to take control of all of Yugoslavia, the die was cast for war.

Flatly rejecting proposals for a loosely based federation, refusing to adopt the democratic and Western market reforms that had swept the former Soviet bloc, and facing challenges in the streets from students, Milosevic opted for a military contest. He had effective control of the federal army and police, an aroused Serbian diaspora in the republics heading for independence, with ultranationalists at the fore, and the ability to manipulate all the key institutions in Serbia—the academics, the media, the Serbian Orthodox Church. Thus the wars over the succession to multinational Yugoslavia illustrated perfectly Clausewitz's idea that war is a continuation of politics by other means.

To strengthen his hold on the domestic power base, Milosevic made it his mission to set Yugoslavia's ethnic and national groups against one another. In the end, he succeeded in chasing out of what remained of Yugoslavia all those national groups that refused to submit to the hegemony of the Serb people and of Milosevic's Socialist Party (the successor to the League of Communists).

The Serbian political project, first in Croatia, then in Bosnia-Herzegovina, envisioned the creation of ethnically homogeneous States, fashioned by seizing territory from other States. [Ethnic cleansing](#) meant using violence and deportations to remove any trace of the other ethnic communities who had previously cohabited with Serbs in the coveted territories. This "cleansing" was the goal of the war, not the unintended consequence. It was not the inability of the different ethnic groups to live together that brought on the conflict, but rather the political aim of separating them.

The violence unleashed grew directly out of the artificiality of the political agenda, which stood in total contradiction to the centuries-old multiethnic history of the Balkans. Simply put, achieving ethnically homogeneous States in a region of historic mixing could not be achieved except through extreme violence. In Bosnia, cleansing clearly took the form of [genocide](#), for it was aimed to eliminate enough of the population, starting with the annihilation of its elite, so it could no longer form a plurality. For the Serbs, war crimes served as a force multiplier—a means to achieve greater effect from other resources. They did not have enough military assets to achieve their ambitions otherwise.

Western governments, starting with the United States, chose not to intervene for three and a half years. In response to the atrocities reported by the media, relief organizations, and even their own diplomats, and to quell the public outcry over the haunting images of starved [concentration camp](#) inmates behind barbed wire, the Security Council passed resolutions its members then failed to implement and, in conjunction with the European Community, set up a diplomatic process which neither would back up by force. To evade their obligations under the 1948 Genocide Convention, which requires parties to prevent and punish genocide, Western leaders took frequent recourse to the term used by Serbian officials, ethnic cleansing, and then stated that all parties had committed the practice. They did not use the term genocide until the war had ended. The major powers recognized Bosnia-Herzegovina as a sovereign State, admitted it as a full member of the United Nations, and established diplomatic relations, meanwhile suspending the UN membership of the rump Yugoslavia and imposing sanctions on it for supporting the war. But they refused to identify the conflict as an international armed [aggression](#) and instead characterized it as a [civil war](#) and an ancient ethnic feud, a posture that permitted them to avoid their collective security obligations under the United Nations Charter. They also refused to document from their intelligence sources the links between the Serbian and Bosnian Serb Armies—an integrated command structure, a single logistical infrastructure, and a common paymaster. A top American diplomat called the international failure to respond the worst crisis in European collective security since the 1930s.

The evidence of concentration camps, systematic rape, massacres, torture, and mass deportation of civilians was undeniable, and in February 1993, largely at American behest, the Security Council set up “an International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia Since 1991” (ICTY) in The Hague. But the major powers did not get around to naming a chief prosecutor until July 1994, and they gave no support to the Bosnian government when it brought a case for genocide against Serbia at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and West-ern governments instead have repeatedly urged Bosnia to drop that case.

Prosecuting primarily lower-level officials, the ICTY was unable to unmask the silence of the West on the real nature of the enterprise. It was not until July 1995, when NATO intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina was at hand, that the tribunal indicted political leader Radovan Karadzic and military commander Ratko Mladic for genocide. And when Dusko Tadic was put on trial in 1996 for crimes committed at the Omarska detention camp and elsewhere in Prijedor County, the tribunal, working with such evidence it was able to obtain from open sources, victims, and ever-balking major powers, analyzed the atrocities as if they had occurred during a military campaign and a civil war rather than in an international conflict. The tribunal had ample jurisdiction to indict him for an internal conflict, but the tight focus of its charges effectively shielded Serbia, which had organized the genocide in which Dusko Tadic took part, from direct accountability.

A key factor in [incitement](#) of ethnic hatreds, first in Serbia, and later in Croatia, was a media under the thumb of the political leaders. This psychological conditioning disguised the conflict in civil and ethnic terms by using the supreme alibi, namely the impossibility of the people of the former Yugoslavia to live together on the same territory. But it also awakened that barbarity which sleeps in all of us, and pushed the people to commit these massive atrocities.

Historically, in conventional conflicts, defeating the enemy’s army on the battlefield and seizing territory are usually each side’s principal war aims. The killing and wounding of civilians, the destruction of property, and the creation of refugees or displaced people are

often by-products of these aims. While much of this devastation is legal under international law, since the codes of war offer no complete guarantees for the safety of civilians caught in zones of combat, the essence of the laws of war is that suffering must be minimized. This makes it imperative that the civilian population should not be made the object of attack. Soldiers from proper armies who contravene these laws are subject to trial for war crimes. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the killing of civilians was not a by-product of war, for the goal of ethnic cleansing was the annihilation of civilians.

By the time Yugoslavia collapsed, the reputation of the Yugoslav Federal Army was irreparably stained, for under Milosevic's guidance the army coordinated and supported many of the militias who did the dirty work.

These were not the isolated, sporadic acts committed by militia factions running amok. To the contrary, the manner in which they were perpetrated, their ritualization, duration, and the pattern of commission across the territory under army control all testify that they were the product of a systematic policy, planned and coordinated at the highest political and military levels of the Yugoslav government.

To accomplish the war aim, there was probably no other way. In a multiethnic society like the former Yugoslavia before 1991, the annexation of territories while necessary could not be sufficient. Too many members of rival ethnic communities would have remained, and the more territories were conquered, the more difficult, paradoxically, it would become to occupy and administer. Only ethnic cleansing, that is, the elimination of the other ethnic communities present in the coveted territories, could bring to fruition the war aims of the Serbs, and, later, of the Croats as well. Both Milosevic and Tudjman realized this from the start. The horrors and the goals of the war were one, or, more precisely, the success of the war depended on its horrors.

The war began on April 6, 1992, with the assault on key cities such as Bijeljina and Zvornik on the Bosnian-Serbian border by the Yugoslav Army and its allied paramilitary groups, followed by the siege of Sarajevo. Though planned over a long period, the order to activate the impressive military might secretly put in place around the Bosnian capital was held until the recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina's independence by the Europeans and Americans.

From the very beginning of the conflict, [terror](#) was the method used to separate the communities. The violations of international humanitarian law testify to the determination to reach this goal. Bombardments of the civilian population, first of Sarajevo, then of besieged villages; massacres during the conquest, then the forced evacuation of civilians to modify the ethnic structure of the particular area; illegal internment of the civilian population in concentration camps; torture; systematic rape; summary executions; appropriation and pillage of civilian property; systematic destruction of the cultural and religious heritage with the sole aim of eliminating any trace of non-Serbs in the conquered territories; using detainees as human shields on front lines and in minefields; and starvation of civilians who resisted—these were only some of the violations of international humanitarian law and the laws of war of which the Serbs were guilty.

Violence breeds violence. In 1993, emboldened by Milosevic's campaign of terror against the Muslims and the Western powers' consistent denial that genocide had taken place, the Croats entered the war against their former Muslim allies, using many of the same methods as the Serbs—terror, deportations, concentration camps, indiscriminate bombardments of civilians, massacres, the blocking of humanitarian aid, destruction of religious shrines, and appropriation of property.

They were encouraged by Slobodan Milosevic's support for a Greater Croatia (which would include western Herzegovina and a part of central Bosnia, where a majority of 800,000 Bosnian Croats lived). These grave breaches of the laws of armed conflict were always on a smaller scale than those of the Serbs.

Victims of a double aggression, the Muslims certainly committed violations of international humanitarian law. But the Sarajevo government never made ethnic cleansing their cardinal policy, as had their enemies. This does not excuse the acts of certain special units of the Bosnian Army, the summary executions of some Serbs in Sarajevo, and the establishment of several concentration camps in which sexual assaults, assassinations, and torture were reportedly regularly practiced.

In an exhaustive report to the United Nations, a special Commission of Experts, chaired by Cherif Bassiouni of DePaul University in Chicago, concluded that globally 90 percent of the crimes committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina were the responsibility of Serb extremists, 6 percent by Croat extremists, and 4 percent by Muslim extremists. These conform roughly to an assessment drafted by the American CIA.

Whatever the apportionment of blame, what is tragically clear is that the ethnic cleansers were all too successful in their work. Whether bringing the architects and perpetrators of these crimes to justice can reverse any of this remains to be seen.

(See [international vs. internal armed conflict](#); [NATO and the Geneva Conventions](#); [UN and the Geneva Conventions](#).)