

Breaking Yugoslavia

interview

By [Diana Johnstone](#)

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In-depth Report: [THE BALKANS](#)

Diana Johnstone is the author of 'Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions'. She spoke to NLP on the wars in the former Yugoslavia, western involvement and the trial of Slobodan Milosevic.

What was your view of Yugoslavia before its dissolution. What was admirable about that society? What was not so admirable?

Every society has its good and bad points, and I am not qualified to make an overall judgement of such a complex society as former Yugoslavia.

From my personal experience, what was not admirable was that in Tito's lifetime it was a personal dictatorship. Tito didn't run everything, but he had the right of final decision in case of conflict. The harshest repression was reserved for communists loyal to the Soviet Union after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948. But repression is not all that is wrong with a dictatorship, a system which encourages hypocrisy and lack of recourse for unfair or unwise measures. Nevertheless, despite the undemocratic regime, it was always easy to find critical intellectuals in Yugoslavia who thought for themselves and said what they thought.

Yugoslavia's "self-managed socialism" was certainly an improvement over the Soviet model. It provided full employment, which is what people most acutely miss today. It is noteworthy that many former critics of the socialist system today declare that the so-called free market democracy they have now is much worse.

As the only European member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia enjoyed privileged relations with Third World countries, notably in the Arab world. The Yugoslav passport was welcome everywhere, and Yugoslavs enjoyed their freedom to travel throughout the world as citizens of a country whose international prestige was great for its size.

Tito's policy toward the great ethnic diversity of Yugoslavia had been to give considerable cultural and linguistic rights to each group, a policy which is pursued today by Serbia – although not by Croatia and Slovenia. (For example, Serbia provides bilingual schools using the mother tongue of Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Albanian and Slovak minorities.)

If, in 1990, there had been a national referendum on the subject, I have little doubt that an overwhelming majority of Yugoslavs would have voted to maintain the federation. But elections were held only within the various republics, enabling the bureaucracies of Croatia and Slovenia to promote their secessionist projects.

You argue that Western governments bear significant responsibility for the wars in the

former Yugoslavia by encouraging the secession of the constituent republics. Was the West not merely supporting those states in their struggle for self-determination?

There is nothing in international law or diplomatic practice that justifies secession from an existing state on grounds of “self-determination”. There is great confusion and hypocrisy on this point. First one can point to comparisons: Why did the United States not support the struggle of the Basques against Spain, which has been going on much longer? Why did they not support Corsicans against France, Scottish nationalists against Britain, the Kurds against Turkey – a violent struggle with deep historic roots, including Western promises to Kurds after World War I? Why did they not support the separatist “Padania” movement that was growing about the same time in northern Italy, seeking separation from the poorer south of Italy – a movement that had a great deal in common with the Slovenian separatist movement? The answer is obvious: the United States does not support separatist movements in countries they consider their allies. The targets are either countries they consider rivals, like Russia or China, or countries that are too weak to resist, and where they can obtain totally dependent client states from the breakup – which is what happened with Yugoslavia.

Second there are the simple facts of the matter. History, to start with. Former Yugoslavia was not formed by conquest, but by a voluntary association after World War I as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The Croats and Serbs speak essentially the same south Slavic language, and Slovenian is quite similar. This association was sought by Croatian leaders who wished to leave Austro-Hungarian rule and who actually coined the word “Yugoslavia”, meaning land of southern Slavs. Since Serbia already existed as an independent country, Serb leaders were wary of this union, but accepted it under urging from the Western powers, France and Britain.

After Tito’s death in 1980, Yugoslavia entered an extremely clumsy phase of political transition, which was distorted by severe economic regression caused by the debt crisis. Since Tito’s method of rule had been to respond to unrest by decentralization rather than by democratization, the local Communist parties in each republic of the federal state, as well as the autonomous provinces within Serbia, enjoyed considerable autonomy. Rivalry between the party bureaucracies undermined national unity. The dynamic thus tended toward dissolution rather than democratization. This trend was encouraged by outside forces (German and Austrian organizations represented by the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Otto von Habsburg, who was very active in this phase) which supported secession of the parts of Yugoslavia which had belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I, Croatia and Slovenia.

Now, assuming that “self-determination” would lead to dissolution of the federation, there was the crucial issue of how this would be done. The Serbs interpreted the constitution to argue that Yugoslavia was a political union of three peoples – Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, who would have to negotiate the terms of secession. The Slovenes and especially the Croats maintained that the constituent units were the “republics” in the boundaries set for them by Tito during World War II, which left sizeable Serb populations in both Croatia (about 12%) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (a relative majority up until the 1971 census). Germany persuaded the United States and the European Union to accept the Croatian claim without ever seriously considering the Serbian argument. This was unacceptable to the Serb minority in Croatia who had been persecuted by Nazi-sponsored independent Croatia during World War II, and whose “self-determination” was thereby denied. This was the cause of the civil war in Croatia.

Both Slovenia and Croatia enjoyed full equality and autonomy within Yugoslavia. In no way could they be considered oppressed minorities. Tito was a Croat as was the last functioning prime minister of Yugoslavia, Ante Markovic, not to mention a disproportionate number of senior officers in the Yugoslav armed forces. As the richest part of Yugoslavia, Slovenia's desire to secede was based almost solely on the desire to "jump the queue" and join the rich EU ahead of the rest of the country, which it succeeded in doing. The Croatian secessionism movement was nationalistic, with strong racist overtones, and was strongly supported by a Croatian diaspora with crucial political influence in Germany and in Washington (in the office of Senator Bob Dole). In the absence of any legal justification for unnegotiated secession, nationalist leaders in both Slovenia and Croatia provoked units of the Yugoslav army stationed in their territory and used the inevitable response as their justification for seceding. This succeeded only because it was supported by Western governments and media - otherwise the Yugoslav army would have held the country together. Instead, the collapsing Yugoslav army effort to preserve the federation, as it was supposed to do, was denounced as a "Serbian invasion". Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic handled this crisis badly, but he did not, as accused, instigate the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

You have suggested that there are certain continuities between the policies of the German government and the objectives of the Third Reich in the Balkans. Can you describe those continuities for us?

Even before the Third Reich, the government of Kaiser Wilhelm and even more the democratic Weimar Republic supported self-determination of ethnic minorities, and the Federal Republic of Germany continues to do so today, for reasons of national interest and ideology. The "revenge" against Serbia, and detachment of former Austro-Hungarian territories within Yugoslavia, harks back to World War I. Of course, the Third Reich cut Yugoslavia into pieces, and on that point the 1991 German policy was more than disturbingly reminiscent, it was essentially the same. Germany has reasons for wanting to bring Slovenia and Croatia into its own sphere of influence. In a sense I am more critical of Western governments which followed the German policy without bothering or daring to evaluate the situation clearly for themselves. As this turned out to be disastrous, they had to blame the devil Milosevic for everything, in order to cover their own mistakes.

Why did the United States so strongly support Bosnian secession?

I think this support was the product of a number of factors. One, pointed out by former State Department official George Kenney, was the influence of media reports, in turn heavily influenced by a propaganda campaign run by Ruder Finn public relations agency on behalf of the government of Croatia, and later the Bosnian Muslims, which succeeded in presenting the Serbs as "new Nazis". This public relations campaign was hugely successful with the public and politicians alike. American foreign policy-making can be vulnerable to the propaganda of lobbies, and the Croatian lobby was active and influential. The Bosnian lobby was smaller but very well connected, notably through Mohammed Sacirbey, the American son of a colleague of Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic who chose him to be Bosnia's ambassador to the United States. There was a natural class affinity between American officials like Richard Holbrooke and the Bosnian Muslims, who had been the upper class under the Ottoman Empire and presented themselves as more anti-communist than the Serbs.

A second element was that since Germany was emerging as the sponsor of Croatia, the United States could have its own client state by supporting the Bosnian Muslims. Some US leaders thought that siding with the Muslim party in Bosnia would make a good impression in the Muslim world, counterbalancing US support to Israel. The late influential Congressman Tom Lantos, who was chairman of the House foreign affairs committee, called US support for the Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo independence “just a reminder to the predominantly Muslim-led governments in this world” that “the United States leads the way for creation of a predominantly Muslim country in the very heart of Europe.” Support to Bosnian Muslims was strongly advocated by the pro-Israel neo-conservatives. It is hard to believe that neo-con guru Richard Perle served as advisor to Muslim leader Izetbegovic at the Dayton peace talks with no private agenda of his own. The Clinton administration found it natural to do a favor to the Afghan mujahidin (which then included Osama bin Laden), whom they had supported and used against the Soviet Union, by helping them fight the Orthodox Christian Serbs in the Bosnian civil war.

But perhaps the main cause should be seen in the main effect: to reassert United States supremacy in Europe. The August 1995 NATO bombing “marked a historic development in post-Cold War relations between Europe and the United States”, wrote Richard Holbrooke in his memoirs, citing columnist William Pfaff who alone seemed to get the point: “The United States today is again Europe’s leader: there is no other.” (Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*, Random House, 1998, p.101.) By the policy of an “even playing field”, the United States created a stalemate between the Bosnian parties which allowed Holbrooke to take charge of what he called “the Bosnian end game” at Dayton. The United States was able to pose as “the indispensable nation”.

Some have accused you of downplaying or even denying the Srebrenica massacre. How do you respond to such accusations?

First of all, I think these accusations are designed primarily to distract public attention from the main focus of my writing on Yugoslavia, and in particular my book, *Fools’ Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions*. That focus is political. As the title indicates, my book is not about Srebrenica. It is about the historical and political background, and the deception and self-deception involved in media coverage and Western policy-making that led to the illegal NATO war of aggression in 1999. The only reason I wrote about Srebrenica at all is that I could not very well avoid the subject, but I stated from the start I was not writing about what happened at Srebrenica (on which I claim no special knowledge) but about the political uses of it. I am not a war correspondent but a political analyst. The trouble is that some people do not welcome political analysis of the Balkan conflicts, and use Srebrenica to ban it. If mothers are weeping, how can anyone engage in such a heartless exercise as political analysis? Judging complex events solely on the basis of images and emotions, which are often deceptive, is infantile. But we are living in a period of infantile regression.

For instance, the wives and mothers of the men who were killed deserve sympathy, but is their individual grief any greater if their son was one of several hundred or one of several thousand? Why this insistence on a particular number, which has not been clearly proved? Isn’t it possible, and even likely, that the genuine grief of mourning women is exploited for political ends? How many people are in a position to know exactly what happened at Srebrenica? Where are the documents, where are the photographs? Yet people who know nothing are ready to consider it scandalous if someone says openly, “I don’t know exactly what happened.”

I do know that from the very start of the Yugoslav tragedy, there were significant massacres of Serb civilians (for instance, in the town of Gospic in Croatia) that were studiously ignored in the West. But I do not care to engage in competitive victimhood.

As for Srebrenica, certainly any execution of prisoners is a war crime and deserves punishment, even if the figure of 8,000 is certainly exaggerated, since it includes men who died in ambush while trying to escape, or even men who actually did escape. But whatever the number of victims, a single massacre of military-age men while sparing women and children cannot in my opinion be correctly described as “genocide” – unless the term “genocide” is redefined to fit the single case of Srebrenica. And this is precisely what was done by the International Criminal Tribunal on former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague. In order to convict General Radislav Krstic (who was not even present at the scene) of complicity in “genocide”, the ICTY judges ruled in August 2001 that killing a large number of Muslim men from Srebrenica was “genocide” because of the “patriarchal” nature of their society. Women and children survivors were too insignificant in such a patriarchal society to matter! This preposterous verdict simply confirmed the obvious fact that ICTY is working for those who set it up, choose its judges and pay its expenses: that is, essentially, NATO. It is there to justify the NATO interpretation of the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, by putting the entire burden of blame on the Serbs. Unless an Orwellian future bans free historical inquiry, I am confident that my critical appraisal of ICTY will be justified by history.

Why do you believe NATO carried out its bombing war against Serbia?

The essential reason was to save NATO from obsolescence after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, whose supposed threat had been its ostensible *raison d'être*. The United States came up with a new “humanitarian mission”, and the large-scale NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 served to prove that NATO could get away with it, without United Nations authorization. This was “the war to start wars”. It is regularly cited by apologists as “the good war” which proves that “human rights” constitute the most efficient excuse for aggression. It was indeed a perfect little war, waged safely from the air with all the casualties on the ground, whether Serb or Albanian.

How do you view the UK's role in the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia?

As absolutely shameful. The British foreign office certainly had experts able to understand the complexities of the Yugoslav situation, and indeed the conservative government hesitated. Lord Carrington and then Lord Owen, if supported, might have brokered an early peace in Bosnia. But Tony Blair preferred to strut the stage of “humanitarian intervention”, and most of the left swallowed the wild tale according to which the world's most powerful military alliance was henceforth motivated by sentimental concern for the underdog.

What did you make of the trial of Slobodan Milosevic?

That trial actually aroused my first admiration for Slobodan Milosevic. He defended himself, and his country, with great courage and intelligence, and successfully disproved most of the charges against him, even though he died before the defense could make its case. The ICTY was set up largely to convict Milosevic, and would surely have found a way to do so regardless of the evidence. His death spared them that trouble. Of course, Western media failed totally to report fairly on the proceedings.

You speak of your admiration for Milosevic “defending his country” in the Hague. But is

there not a wider and more fundamental sense in which Milosevic's rule was by no means beneficial for Serbia? V. P. Gagnon Jr. has written about how Milosevic used war as a tool against movements for democratic reform, by effectively changing the subject to whether people were pro or anti-Serb at any point where these movements became too strong. Karel Turza and Eric Gordy have written about the deleterious effect that Milosevic's rule had on Serbian society and culture. Little of this speaks of a man worthy of admiration, even from a Serbian perspective. Was Milosevic defending Serbia, or just defending his regime?

When I said that Milosevic on trial in The Hague aroused my first admiration for the man, I was obviously making the distinction between Milosevic as President and Milosevic as prisoner of a biased tribunal that had been set up to convict him. However unfortunate his policies as president, he became a victim when he was illegally shipped off to The Hague, in a rather sordid deal between prime minister Zoran Djindjic, who violated Serbian law in the hope of economic rewards, and the NATO powers, who needed the trial in order to justify their 1999 bombing campaign.

What is meant by "democratic reforms"? Milosevic did introduce a multi-party system, which is the basic democratic reform. Whatever his faults, it is by no means clear that his political adversaries in the early 1990s would have been better for the Serbian people than he was. Now that Serbia has Western-approved "democratic" governments, major industries have been sold to Western corporations, the media are more uniform than ever, and the economic situation of the majority of the population has worsened considerably.

Many people in Serbia who hated Milosevic when he was in office admired his defense at The Hague. His self-defense was automatically a defense of his country, since the totally arbitrary (and unproven) charge of a "joint criminal enterprise" in effect implicated collective guilt, since the alleged enterprise had no defined limits.

Little blame for the Balkan wars appears to attach to the Serb side in your account. Yet Bosnian Serb figures such as Vojislav Šešelj, Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić have stated publically that there was a drive for a Greater Serbia. Doubtless there have been many attempts to reduce the conflict to nothing more than a case of Serbian aggression, but while correcting for that is it not also important to still leave room for attaching the appropriate level of blame to the Serbian side?

Testifying at the Milosevic trial, Vojislav Šešelj stated clearly that Milosevic was not in favor of Greater Serbia, and that he had slandered him politically for that very reason, because Šešelj himself did favor Greater Serbia. The meaning of "Greater Serbia" is complicated, and I have dealt with it in my book, "Fools' Crusade". But Serbs were divided on the matter, and Milosevic for one did not advocate a "Greater Serbia". Milosevic was competing with politicians such as Vuk Draskovic and Zoran Djindjic, whom the West considers "democratic", but who were far more nationalistic than he was. No Serbian politician could be totally indifferent to Serb populations cut off from Serbia by the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, starting in 1992, Milosevic signed onto a series of potential peace accords that left Serbs outside of shrinking Yugoslavia, and were clearly incompatible with a greater Serbia.

I do not presume to attach "appropriate levels of blame" to the various Yugoslav parties. I simply point out certain facts, and the only blame that really interests me is that of the Western powers and especially of the United States. That is my responsibility as an American citizen. It is the United States that exploited the tragedy to strengthen NATO, and

the people of Yugoslavia who suffered and are still suffering.

Many of our readers will find it hard to accept your expressing admiration for Milosovic. Its well understood that the West portrays its enemies dishonestly (take Saddam's mythical WMD, for example). But to praise the "courage" of a man widely seen (including by those who are no fans of Western power) as having a lot of blood on his hands goes a good deal further than this. Is your choice of words here really appropriate?

I am not going to change what I say because many of your readers, as you allege, have a limited capacity to understand the complexities of human character. Of course, all leaders of countries involved in wars can be said to "have blood on their hands". The stereotype of an inhuman Milosevic is a fictional propaganda creation, like the long line of "Hitlers" the West keeps discovering. But supposing the man was utterly ruthless, does that preclude courage? I fear our "humanitarian" age is adopting an unprecedentedly simplistic notion of what people are - either innocent lambs or savage beasts. Look at many of the heroes of ancient tragedy, who were complicated enough to be ruthless and courageous, and often displayed a mixture of good and bad qualities. If we are incapable of recognizing the humanity of our chosen enemies (and Milosevic was a chosen enemy, who actually liked the United States where he had lived as a banker, and never even slightly threatened the West), then there can be no peace in the world.

What have been the consequences for the constituent republics of becoming independent states?

In general, secession is beneficial to the bureaucrats. Someone who was only a minor official in a large country gets to be Cabinet Minister, or ambassador. So secession was a good thing for members of the bureaucracy in each statelet. It has also been good for a minority who live off crime and corruption. For the rest of the population, it was beneficial primarily to Slovenia, whose leaders succeeded in getting into the European Union ahead of the others. Of course it was not beneficial to the small population of Yugoslavs who were not ethnic Slovenians and found themselves living in Slovenia without any civil status.

Croatia has the advantage of strong German support, but so far this has not yielded all the economic benefits hoped for. Most of the Serb population has been driven out, which is of course satisfying to the racist Croat nationalists, and does not seem to disturb the Western leftist multiculturalists.

Otherwise, people who once were citizens of an independent, medium-sized European country find themselves confined in small mutually hostile statelets, dependent on outside powers and poorer than before. Outside intervention has served to exacerbate ethnic hatreds, and continues to do so, notably in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The political situation of most of the successor states is precarious and further tragedy is almost certain.

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