

Video: Understanding NATO's War on Yugoslavia. Historic Interview with Sean Gervasi

The Yugoslavia Counter-Narrative in 1993: Sean Gervasi Spoke Out in the Early Years of the Catastrophe

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I spoke to Sean Gervasi on several occasions prior to his untimely death in June 1996. His incisive understanding of the process of breakup of Yugoslavia, not to mention its cruel aftermath was far-reaching. According to [Gary Wilson](#), "Gervasi saw the breakup of Yugoslavia as an extension of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the first step in a NATO takeover of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. He became active in exposing the role of external powers, particularly the U.S. and German governments, in fomenting the civil war in the Balkans."

With foresight Gervasi predicted the geopolitics of the post-Cold War era. The breakup of Yugoslavia laid the basis for NATO intervention in the Kosovo war in 1999, which in turn was followed by the enlargement of NATO and the conduct of US-NATO wars and military interventions in the Middle East.

Michel Chossudovsky, December 02, 2018

*Interview with **Professor Sean Gervasi**, Institute of International and Economic Problems, Belgrade, Yugoslavia.*

Recorded on February 24th, 1993

Harold Channer (HC): Good evening and welcome very, very much to the conversation. We're pleased to welcome to the program Sean Gervasi. He is a professor and academic who is concerned with economics and particularly with what is relevant to what we want to talk about tonight. He has just returned from a long stay in in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and knows something of that situation. Sean Gervasi, welcome very, very much to the conversation, and back to New York. Before we go into some detail about what in the world is going on in terms of the Balkans, from your experience there, maybe share a little bit of your own background. You did some economics, you're interested in economics.

Sean Gervasi (SG): Well, I'm basically an economist. I studied in Europe, came back to graduate school at Cornell, went into the federal government, resigned.

HC: And the Balkans... you had some reason to be concerned with that area particularly in some of your early life experience and so on?

SG: Well, I'd lived a long time in the Mediterranean. My father had been a diplomat posted in the Mediterranean and he covered a number of countries there for quite a long time after the war, so I was living in the Med, and I know a fair amount about Yugoslavia. I'm particularly interested in American foreign policy, the economic aspects of that, and so when things started getting really out of hand about a year ago, some old friends of mine whom I had known in the UN very well and who are Yugoslavian, and diplomats, spoke to me and enticed me to come over to the Institute for a week or ten days. Out of that I became a research professor in Belgrade.

HC: Yes, you're research professor at the Institute for the Study of Economic and Political Problems.

SG: Right. It's the Institute for International Politics, so it's concerned primarily with understanding the international aspects of Yugoslavia's position and it's really been the premier research institute in Yugoslavia since 1948 or so when it was founded. It was very large, with a very substantial staff which has now been cut in about half. It's still about 60 to 70 people, but it's the equivalent of a major think tank in the United States, obviously without the connections and power that those have, although many members of the government, the federal government primarily, have gone in and out of the institute and government, and back and forth.

HC: And that's a long-standing institution.

SG: It was founded in 1948, right after the war with Tito and so forth, and it's interesting that they tack on the end economic *problems*. Problems they have in the Balkans.

HC: That is for certain and what a vantage point it has been for you. Now we're taping on February 24th, 1993, and you've been there...

SG: Well, I went to the institute in all this. I was appointed in all this, and I've been in and out... I've been back to the states three times, but I've spent a good bit of time there over the last six, seven months.

HC: And as you said, things began to come apart, as you put it, about a year ago. Maybe you could set the stage for us here because the Balkans in modern history have been a pivot point for world developments. After all the First World War started there. There's been a clash of cultures. Maybe you could give us a little of that historical development, of the crucial nature, and the geopolitical crucial nature of that that particular region. Fill in the general audience.

SG: Well, actually it's the crucial geopolitical nature of the region which really explains the founding of Yugoslavia in the beginning in 1918 as a state to unite the South Slav nations, the republic of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes. Yugoslavia is in a very unique position in some respects because it's been a focus of struggle between, for a long time, the Habsburg Empire on the one hand, and the Ottoman Empire on the other. And it's a focus therefore of European interest because it really represented the demarcation line between the Eastern Empire and the West in some sense, and that demarcation line moved up and down the Balkan Peninsula wildly according to the various struggles which were going on between the 13th century and the 19th century, and it was really with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,

the Habsburg Empire, in 1918, as a result of the First World War, that a vacuum was created in a sense in that area and the Western countries, the entente, really wanted to see a solid political entity there in order to guard against—don't forget this is shortly after the Soviet revolution—in order to guard against a very traditional Russian Soviet expansionism into the Mediterranean.

HC: This is even following the First World War.

SG: I think that Yugoslavia was envisioned by the Allies at that time as a kind of bulwark against the expansion of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet revolution, into the Balkans.

HC: And the Yugo of Yugoslavia, does that mean *unity*, or does it have a literal translation? [Yug =South]

SG: It was the union of the Slavs.

HC: That was literally what the word means, and it brought together, prior to that, those ethnic identities, which in various ways are being asserted so obviously now, go way back.

SG: Bosnian, that's a rather artificial conception. It's not an ethnic concept at all. The ethnic groups in the area are historically the three South Slavic ethnicities, if you like, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, the second and the third being traditionally under the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Catholic, the former [Serbs] being much closer to Russia and Orthodox, but there are a very large number of significant minorities mixed in there, significant numbers of them too: Hungarians, Albanians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and then there are even other peoples there.*

HC: The Montenegrins, and so forth, these would be subcategories of these three main groups?

SG: No. Well, the Montenegrins really are very closely related to the Serbs, but the Albanians are not at all, neither are the Hungarians, and the Macedonians are more complicated. They are Slavs, but they've also, being in the southern part of that area, lived for centuries under a strong Turkish influence.

HC: Yes, indeed.

SG: And there is a significant Muslim population in Macedonia, as there is, of course, in Serbia and the province of Kosovo where the Muslims are Albanian.

HC: Yeah, and then you have Skopje to the south.

SG: It's the capital of Macedonia.

HC: That's Macedonia there, and that's not been in the news until now, and let's hope that it does not become news, but in any event, there's this clash of these entities there after the First World War, and then there's also been a considerable German interest.

SG: Well, there's been a historic German interest in the area. The Germans have always, particularly the South Germans, the Bavarians, have always looked with some possible cupidity on Croatia and on Slovenia. The Austrians have very close relations with Slovenia. Of course Germany, for a time, absorbed Austria. They're very close culturally, ethnically

etc. And Germany, of course, has always been interested in, particularly, the domination of Central Europe. This is an issue that goes way back to the Bismarck Empire and possibly one might also say that Germany has been interested in having access to the Mediterranean through gaining entry into the Adriatic via Croatia. That's not insignificant.

HC: Yeah, and the Baghdad railway.

SG: The Berlin to Baghdad railway. I forget actually where exactly that passed through. It must have passed through...

HC: But that is interesting. We want to talk some about Mr. Kohl's [German chancellor 1982-1998] role in the more modern experience with... But maybe we could pursue this historical development a little bit here. There was then, of course, the growth of Nazi Germany and there was the expansion, and they moved in. The First World War obviously started at Sarajevo with the assassination of the Archduke. But bringing it up into the more modern experience, the Balkans was an area where the Nazi forces actually experienced considerable difficulty with guerrillas. It held out and fought them and they never were really able to assert themselves, as powerful as they were, on the ground against some of those guerrilla forces. Or am I off-base on that?

SG: No, that's absolutely right. The Second World War was a very important experience in the Balkans, especially in Yugoslavia. The Germans created a puppet state in Croatia which was called the Independent Croatian State. This was very large. It included all of Dalmatia, almost all of what is presently Croatia and Bosnia as well, so it was a very large area. That was the area which they occupied. The Italians were given a piece of Montenegro, and had some activities in other parts.

HC: When would they have done that?

SG: 1941, when the Germans invaded in 1941. They created this independent Croatian state, and this is extremely important in understanding the present because the Independent Croatian State included large numbers of Serbs, firstly, and as Croatia and Bosnia today do, they include probably in excess of two million Serbs living in Bosnia, what is now Bosnia, and what is now Croatia. They were also in those areas at that time. In fact, there were probably proportionately more of them, but the important thing to remember about the Independent Croatian State, which is remembered very sharply and bitterly today, is that it was a clerical fascist state, and as a clerical fascist state, it pursued quite savage policies toward the minorities, towards Jews, Gypsies and Serbs. And in fact I think there's a lot of historical evidence, and certainly it's taken for granted in the Balkans, that under the Nazis the Germans in fact gave the responsibility to Pavelić, the head of the Independent Croatian State, for carrying out a part of the Holocaust which included the elimination of a large part of the Serb population. It was a very deliberate racist, genocidal policy.

HC: Directed at the Serbs.

SG: Directed at the Serbs, the Jews and the Gypsies, and it's been recognized after the war by the United Nations as a policy of genocide. Now in that situation at that time, in a number of camps, primarily a camp called Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia, very large numbers of Serbs perished and very large numbers of Serbs perished when the Ustashe, the fascist military cadre, attacked Serb villages and pretty horrible atrocities were carried out. Now there's a lot of controversy, obviously, over precisely how many people

were killed, but the range of estimates I can give you, which is generally accepted—except, of course, by the present Croatian president—is between 300,000 and a million Serbs were exterminated at that time.

HC: Good Lord! And this was done in the name of... was there a racist component at the time as there would have been against the Jews?

SG: Absolutely. It was exactly what was directed against the Jews.

HC: And yet the Croats were Slavs, so the direction against the Serbians was something other than geopolitical demonizing. It was an ethnic or racist argumentation, and yet the Croats themselves were Slavs. Why was the Aryan appeal able to find fertile ground among the Croats?

SG: It was the clerical element which generated the difference between the two. The difference between people who had lived under the Catholic Church for a very long time and people who remained in the Serbian Orthodox Church.

HC: And the underpinning of Bosnian or Muslim was there all along? What was the attitude of the Croats toward those Muslims who were...

SG: That's an important point.

HC: The Ottoman influence.

SG: It's important to understand that these Muslims are ethnically Slavs. The Muslims in Bosnia and in other parts of Yugoslavia are people who are the descendants of those Slavs forcibly converted when the areas in which they lived were under Ottoman occupation. Under the Ottomans, the Slavs were, of course, seen as lesser folk, and they were persecuted, discriminated against, and, in fact, very often in danger of their lives. They were very heavily taxed, and there was a lot of resistance to the Ottoman occupation.

So ferocious was—and it's very famous in literature—the Ottoman occupation that large numbers of Slavs did, in fact, convert to Islam, but, as it were, in a more formalistic sense. So today, for instance, in Bosnia and other parts of Yugoslavia you have Muslims who are ethnically Slavs, blond-haired, blue-eyed, very tall etcetera, but who are in a cultural sense still formally Muslims—by the way many of them are not at all very religious—they're very modern for Muslims—but they regard themselves as Muslims in some sense. And, of course, as Yugoslavia began to break up, and even before that, there was a great deal of pressure put on Muslims in places like that to become more Islamic. Now one important point, I think, to remember about the experience of the independent Croatian state during the Second World War was that as it included a significant number of Bosnian Muslims at that time, Muslims of Slavic origin but descendants of converted Slavs, again, those people were enlisted in, frankly, the genocidal war which was waged against other populations there. And, in fact, the Muslims formed the primary elements of two SS divisions in Bosnia, and that is one of the bitter memories which Bosnian Serbs have of that epoch: that that the Muslim population actively participated with the Croatian Ustashe in the genocidal attacks which took place against gypsies, Jews and Serbs.

HC: Who at that time was, in a certain sense, if that's the right term, backing them?

SG: Well, the Nazis. As you know, Serbia was totally occupied by the Nazis. There were at

that time, essentially, two quite different groups of Serbs resisting that situation.

HC: Tito being one.

SG: There were first of all Tito's partisans who were made up of all the Slavic nationalities and including some Muslims, I believe—Serbs Croats and Slovenes. The partisans were primarily a multi-ethnic group and obviously ideologically unique and not at all ideologically diverse, but ideologically coherent around the idea of a future struggle for communism in the future Yugoslavia.

HC: You would tie it to the Soviet Union?

SG: Oh, they were. They had political relationships with the Soviet Union, but the primary military backers I would say at that time, perhaps not the primary military backers of the partisans, were the Allies.

HC: I was thinking in terms of ideology.

SG: Oh, not ideologically. We supported Tito. But there was another Serbian group at the time that needs to be remembered because today it's a bit on the rise and that is the royalist Serbians calling themselves Chetniks [SP] which refers to the old resistance fighters against the Turks. The Chetniks and the partisans both fought the Nazis, but they also fought each other, so the Second World War is a pretty hellish scene in Yugoslavia in the sense that there was triangular warfare going on.

HC: And the resistance that the Nazis and the Croat patriots experienced was persistent and consistent and well-remembered in the minds of many of the Western Europeans who had experience in that Second World War. There was a real major force that was launched against these invasions.

SG: The partisans, particularly the partisans in Bosnia, really pinned down a large number of German divisions and fought them to a standstill. There is no doubt about that. That was probably the most significant military opposition against the Nazi occupation.

HC: You would think that might be well remembered by military advisers even as we sit and talk now.

SG: Oh, absolutely. There are many British intelligence officers, one of whom died recently, a man named Lise [correct spelling unknown], a man who wrote about British relations with Tito. He was very much against them. He and a number of people like Fitzroy MacLean and _____ Davidson who was an MI-6 officer in Yugoslavia during the wars, who is now a very famous writer. All of these people are fully familiar with the intensity of that conflict and it's triangular character.

HC: And then there's building up among the people who inhabit that area these historical and even contemporary, relatively contemporary, experiences of deep animosity and hatred among the people who make it up, which might help account for the incredible chaos that seems to be emerging.

SG: Well, I would emphasize the very precise words you use: "help account" because that's only part of it. In fact, I would say that one of the remarkable things about the period from

1945 until quite recently in 1990, until 1989 perhaps, is that these ancient antagonisms were very much attenuated, I would say. Some people like to say repressed. There's no doubt that Tito was an enormously successful leader in this sense. Under the slogan of brotherhood and unity he succeeded really in composing... I would not say eliminating... but he succeeded in composing the accumulated historical antagonisms between the various groups in Yugoslavia, and he and the leadership of the Yugoslav Communist League built what is surely one of the most successful federated states in the history of the 20th century, far more successful in some respects than the Soviet Union was. I would have said it was a model of federalism in many respects...

HC: Of federalism, not confederalism?

SG: Of federalism. I'm not correcting you. I want to make the distinction because from the time of Tito's death, actually before, from the time of the 1974 Constitution when there were clearly tendencies, possibly fostered already from outside, towards a much looser federation, from the time of that constitution when, by the way, all of the republics of Yugoslavia were already declared sovereign. That's the sense in which you can already say that there's a tendency to confederalism in Yugoslavia from the adoption of the 1974 Constitution. The 1974 constitution was already loosening up. There's just no doubt about it.

HC: Following the Second World War Tito emerged and you had Mr. Churchill with his Iron Curtain, but Yugoslavia which was a nominally socialist, communist aligned country but was unique to the rule that Mr. Tito was able to have a window, in a certain sense, on the West.

SG: More than a window I'd like to say. I think something needs to be said about that.

HC: But he also had a link to the communists.

SG: Ideologically, Tito of course had very close links historically with the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet Union, and in 1945 the Yugoslavs established a communist state, but I think Stalin did not regard Tito as a very good communist.

HC: I would think he had reason not to. He had an independent streak.

SG: Tito was a very strong person, and very independent, and the Yugoslavs are very, very independent. The Yugoslavs are very, very independent people. Under the pressure of the Soviet Union they began to wind down joint enterprises with the Soviet Union in the late 40s. They brought about the withdrawal of Russian military advisers, which, by the way, had been with the partisans as well as British officers and some Americans, I think. And then there was an interesting event in 1949. Mr. John Foster Dulles secretly flew to the island of Brioni in the Adriatic and met with Marshal Tito and offered him not just a window but a very large foot in the door. Foster Dulles offered Tito a kind of tacit alliance with the United States to stand against possible Soviet expansionism in the Balkans. And as a matter of fact, there was a tacit and a secret alliance between Yugoslavia after, say, the early 1950s, from the early 1950s, and the United States, in particular in the framework of NATO. There are very large bases which were to be activated in the event of a conflagration between the major powers in Yugoslavia—secret bases like...

HC: In....[INDISTINCT]

SG: Oh, no. Much more serious stuff than that: a major underground military air base in Croatia. There were other bases...

HC: This is in the 1970s?

SG: No, this is from the 1950s. Yugoslavia undertook actual military obligations within the context of a NATO confrontation with the Soviet Union. For instance, the Yugoslav forces undertook the obligation to block the movement of Soviet forces into southern Italy from Hungary. There were very specific engagements which were undertaken. Now, in return the Yugoslavs received enormous military assistance from the United States, from NATO, but really 90 percent of that military assistance was from the US. Yugoslav officers were trained in the United States. Yugoslavia received enormous technical assistance in its aircraft industry, in its military industry. That assistance enabled the creation of a very powerful, very modern military force in Yugoslavia, and of course that was a NATO asset.

HC: And those forces were under the command of the Yugoslavs and of Mr. Tito?

SG: But in the event of a confrontation between East and West, they were to participate in military actions aimed at the Soviet Union.

HC: Now what was the role of the Soviet Union in terms of the support, say militarily, or the logistics, or the internal logistics to the East in terms of military support. How do we begin to understand whence came the weapons that are being utilized in the Balkans now?

SG: Today?

HC: It seems, from our perception, to be overwhelmingly in the hands of the Serbian forces, that they seemed to be very, very well-armed. What were the realities of that, and what has been historically the tie to the Soviet Union in terms of arms and the arms that do appear and are there in the Balkans?

SG: Well, let me start by saying that Yugoslavia saw between 1945 and 1981-82 a quite a remarkable transformation really. It became an industrial state, an industrialized country, not fully industrialized, still with a minority of its population working the land, but nonetheless as a semi-modern industrialized state. There is a widespread view that the exclusive area of industrialization was Croatia and Slovenia, but it's not true. Let me just give you an example. One of the most modern industries in Yugoslavia is the arms industry. It's very large, by the way. I think it probably was in the beginning of the 1980s or the mid-80s perhaps the fifth largest arms industry in the world—exporter, sorry, I should correct myself a very, very significant exporter of military equipment and arms.

HC: And manufacturer?

SG: And manufacturer. Absolutely.

HC: Manufacturer of small arms?

SG: No, no. Really, the Yugoslavs manufacture everything from tanks to sophisticated electronics for and avionics.

HC: Let me ask you a naïve question that I should have had right at the beginning. What population are we talking about?

SG: In Yugoslavia? 25 million.

HC: And they had built up industry, one of which was an arms industry.

SG: Right now it's important to remember that after the building tensions, if you like, with the Soviet Union, the Yugoslavs removed their arms industry and concentrated it where? In Bosnia. Seventy percent of this very modern arms industry is in Bosnia today and was in Bosnia when Mr. Izetbegović declared the independence of his republic in April 1992, April of last year. Now, most of the areas which are occupied by the Muslims are areas which have large portions of that 70% of the Yugoslav arms industry.

HC: What percentage would you say? You've brought this point up. It's new to me. What percentage of the arms that are there, in terms of the fighting on the ground, or in the air, had been sourced domestically?

SG: The vast majority was produced domestically, some of the stuff under license. For instance, the Yugoslavs produced Soviet T52s etc., but they produced their own versions of the 72 called M84. They produced that themselves. My recollection is that it was the 5th largest arms exporter at a certain stage, maybe the mid-80s. I could be wrong, maybe sixth. It's a significant producer of modern arms and equipment.

HC: Apart from that then if we were to look at that, and you said we had armed the partisans in the Second World War, and there had been this ideological tie to Soviet Union, communism. There was this quasi-tie to NATO. There were ties back to Moscow and so forth, and I'm just in a certain sense curious as to those that were not domestically produced and what has been the reality of supply lines and externally generated materials that would support a war?

SG: In the present conflict?

HC: Leading up to and within the present conflict.

SG: There are two principal external sources of arms in the Yugoslav conflicts today. There are two conflicts, essentially, one between Croatia and the Serbian populations of Croatia and Bosnia, and one between, on the one hand, Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats, and a part of the Croat army in place in Bosnia, and the army of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia, which includes 35,000 regulars, perhaps 40,000, and 35,000 irregular troops. And they're roughly matched in size. The Croatian army has between 45,000 and 50,000 men and weapons inside Bosnia today. That's something that's not much talked about.

HC: These are regulars?

SG: Oh, those are regular members. Those are are brigades of the regular Croatian army.

HC: And they would have been part of an overall Yugoslav force that would have been there previously.

SG: Right. No, they weren't there previously. These troops are...

HC: Because there had been a Yugoslav military presence and established order...

SG: That withdrew from Bosnia in the spring of 1992.

HC: To where?

SG: To Yugoslavia. Some of the people who might have been stationed in Bosnia in the Yugoslav army before that might have withdrawn to Croatia. Many Croatian officers, for instance, left the Yugoslav Army with the outbreak of the wars in Croatia in the spring of 1991 a year previously. They were then integrated into the Croatian army. Now it's that army which actually invaded Bosnia last year.

HC: You had said earlier there were two sources.

SG: Two sources, primary external sources of arms today. One is Germany. Germany, for instance, is perhaps this week completing the delivery of two squadrons of MIG-21s to Croatia. It has provided military advisors and weapons of many kinds, more light weapons, I think. There are rumors about German leopard tanks being used in Bosnia. They haven't been confirmed so far as I know, but there's no doubt that the Germans had a very large hand in equipping and preparing the Croatian army in the end of 1990 in the beginning of 1991.

HC: And those links would have gone back through time?

SG: The political relationship. I would say that Mr. Kohl's recognition of the seceding republics is without any doubt what precipitated the wars in Yugoslavia. It didn't start them, but it turned them into major international conflicts. The other source of arms going into Bosnia today is a pipeline from the major Islamic countries, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, who are obviously competing against each other for influence in the Bosnian Muslim region.

HC: Is that reaching significant dimensions?

SG: It's not insignificant. The number of volunteers, I don't think, is really very large—maybe four or five hundred in Bosnia now—but it's not insignificant and the arms are becoming significant and the military advisers—by the way, I forgot to mention that the Turks are very, very important in this great power game that's going on.

HC: And there's great feeling among a good deal of the Muslim world as they see, as we have seen, a great deal of...

SG: What seems to be the persecution of the Muslims?

HC: ... what seems to be the persecution of the Muslims by an overwhelmingly powerful Serbian force that has been able to exert itself. Well, you're aware of the Western press and perhaps you see things differently.

SG: Well it's very difficult to be on the spot, and you have to look at all of this stuff very carefully. Let me remind you about the incubator incident in Kuwait. Let me remind you about the fact that there's a vast official propaganda mechanism at work in every major Western country which emanates from the government, which organizes mass propaganda campaigns. Look, there's a part of the directorate of operations of the Central Intelligence Agency that deals with these things and hundreds of people are employed. Similarly, in the United States Information Agency, similarly, in parts of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. So let's start from the fact that official propaganda is a fact and that there are massive mechanisms for organizing that. The question at issue here is when we look at what we have seen in the media in the West during the last year and a half as far as you Yugoslavia, or whatever you wish to call the various parts of it, is concerned, are we dealing with honest, objective reporting, or are we dealing with, to very large extent

officially inspired and indeed fabricated propaganda?

HC: All right. Officially inspired propaganda on the part of whom?

SG: Primarily on the part of Germany I would say. The Germans have a very great interest in this situation. Let me just sketch that very briefly. At the end of the 1980s, as you know, the communist regimes in Eastern Europe were really disintegrating, under various kinds of pressure.

HC: And in the centrifugal forces that are exerting themselves in Yugoslavia there is a relationship between that fact and the fact that there is difficulty emerging in Yugoslavia.

SG: Well, yes and no. Let's just start with the fact that this was a fact at the end of the eighties, all right? Now, in 1989 Germany was reunified. That made Germany far and away the most powerful country in continental Europe. Now we also have to remember that Germany at the time—and this was particularly accentuated by the process of unification—had already experienced, as the United States and France and Britain and Italy and other Western countries have, long years of economic dislocation, slowing of economic growth, rising of unemployment. Germany today has more than ten and a half percent unemployment.

HC: They're absorbing East Germans.

SG: Well, they had a high unemployment before they absorbed East Germany. Eastern Germany has created an absolute economic cataclysm for Western Europe because of the manner in which it sought to be absorbed.

HC: You don't think they'll get their act together?

SG: Absolutely out of the question. Well, it depends on what you mean. Economically there's no way in which they can make it viable, but that's an economic question we can look at. That's another hour's discussion. So, we have the disintegration of the Eastern European regimes. By the way, the death of Tito was in 1980, which is a not insignificant date and an important factor contributing to this situation. We have long years of economic stagnation and dislocation in the West. By the way, that was transmitted to Yugoslavia through the reductions in trade, reductions in investment, reductions in immigrant remittances etc., so that Yugoslavia through the 1970s was affected by the economic crisis in the West which deepened and deepened, you know, from 1972 to 1973. When West Germany absorbed Eastern Germany, that economic difficulty was really greatly enhanced. We then saw... actually it had begun well before that... a rise of a new kind of nationalism in Germany which hasn't been seen there in a long time. And if you look at the German debates which have been going on for some time now, they are fairly hair-raising. German academics, historians etc. are really debating anew how bad Hitler was. That's the tenor of the debate. There's a very large revisionist debate going on in Germany which has been accompanied by and, I think, has facilitated the rise of nationalism. And we have also the rise of the right-wing extremist groups. By the way, I have to remind you...

HC: Skinheads and whatnot?

SG: Like Deutsche Alternativa—these groups which are essentially street combat groups, but they're financed through the electoral system because when you create a political party in Germany, you get subsidies from the electoral system in order to field your candidates.

HC: You think these street ruffians and people doing fire bombings of immigrants and shouting “*auslander aus*” and so forth are supported by the government officially?

SG: That’s a complicated question.

HC: Is it disaffected individuals who are lashing out?

SG: No, it’s much more systematic than that. They’re supported by important figures in industry, and they are supported by people in the government in very discreet ways, obviously, but just to give you an example: There are two deputy directors of the Federal Ministry of Defense in the Federal Ministry of the Interior in Germany, an enormously important department in Germany, who are actually members of revanchist eastern parties, particularly *Sudeten Deutsche* parties, which...

In any case, these connections exist, but most important of all of these things is that Germany began consciously rebuilding its cultural and economic links into Central and Eastern Europe systematically, and South Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia has always been one of the areas which has been in, historically, German imperial sights. And with the reunification of Germany, and the rise of nationalism, and all that that’s been accompanied by, we have seen a definite clearly defined, traceable German effort to resume its dominance in Central Europe, particularly East Central Europe. That is, Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, and the Czechs for instance maintain that the Germans played a critical role in precipitating the schism in Czechoslovakia, the separation of Slovakia. And there’s very good reason for believing that. I mean the Germans, don’t forget, had historic ties to the Slovaks. They did, in Slovakia during the Second World War, very much what they did in the independent Croatian state. It wasn’t quite as horrible, but there were Slovak fascists. The Germans supported them. There was a Nazi puppet state in Slovakia etc. What I’m saying is that a lot of the of the ugliness that we saw in the 1930s and the 1920s in Western Europe and in Germany, in particular, really is resuming.

HC: That’s very, very worrying.

SG: But it is an important element here in understanding what’s happened in Yugoslavia because the Germans really helped to precipitate that. They helped to precipitate the war between Croatia and Yugoslavia, the secession of Croatia, and they have armed, assisted, advised etc., guided the new version of the independent Croatian state under Mr. Tudjman.

HC: And do you think that the hand of Germany... I wonder if you could put this in perspective for us. This last year or so, the Serbian activity was a reaction to that?

SG: OK. Serbia. Let’s go over...

HC: We’ve had people like George Shultz and ex-president Reagan—all sorts of people at the very highest authority in this country condemn what we see on television. People are talking now about the Bosnians who have suffered. Today as you and I talk on February 24, they’re airlifting and air dropping supplies into Bosnia, for the suffering Bosnian people. And in the minds of the American people, the Serbian forces have been a ruthless and aggressive force that ought to be confronted. They are even talking about the use of air power against Belgrade.

SG: There’s no doubt that we are...

HC: And what is the reality, as far as you see, of all of these which you obviously can see, which is the perception that is felt by many of the leadership and much of the general society in this country. And we feel frustrated that we're not able to go in because our military advisors tell us we'll get ourselves into another Vietnam quagmire and we mustn't enter militarily. And do you think we might? And what do you think about some of these questions that are so much in the in the thinking of the American people now?

SG: I think it's important...

HC: Put some of that in perspective for us.

SG: I think it's important to come to the situation today, to the Vance Owen plan (Mach II), the version generated by the Clinton administration, the new proposals to go into Bosnia, the position of the United States military. But the background... let's just say something about that. There is a conflict in Bosnia, a major conflict in Bosnia, just as there is in Croatia between Serbs and Croats. Both of those conflicts were precipitated by a very simple fact: the secession of these states from Yugoslavia without attention to regulating the status of Serbs in Croatia and in Bosnia. This is a very serious question because of the historical background which I mentioned—the independent Croatian state and the genocide conducted against various populations, the Serbs in particular between 1941 and 1945. At the time that Croatia declared its independence in June of 1991, there were 750,000 Serbs living in parts of the Krajina, as they're called, which by the way is the geopolitical heart of Croatia. There were 1,300,000 or 1,400,000 Serbs living in Bosnia at the time that Bosnian independence was declared in April of last year. These secessions took place in a manner which raised the historic fears, historically justified fears, of the Serbian populations of these areas that they would be the target of genocidal persecutions again. Why? When Mr. Tudjman became the president of Croatia and declared its independence, he passed legislation which purged Serbs from government service, changed property rights of Serbs living in Croatia, mandated the purge of Serbs from the universities, the media etc. in the name of democratization, but nonetheless. And he began this, and in addition right-wing extremists in Croatia carried out military attacks on Serbian communities. And the Serbs resisted. That's how the war in Croatia began. That's why the Yugoslav army intervened in Croatia. Now again, remember that the Muslims in Bosnia sought to create, stated so, still do—it's a very important issue which is denied in this country—a fundamentalist Islamic state in the middle of Europe, and that also ignored the historic rights of Serbs to be considered an equivalent nationality as they had been before Croatian secession in Croatia, with equal rights to other members of the population, and as they saw it, this exposed them once again to the threat of genocidal persecution.

HC: Where would this Muslim oriented entity be?

SG: In Bosnia.

HC: In the whole of Bosnia?

SG: Yes, the secession of Bosnia took place when the Muslim population of Bosnia was 44% of the total and a minority. By the way, that's against the constitution of the Bosnian Republic itself—secession without the consensus of the three principal nationality groups is against the Bosnian Republic's own constitution in 1992. So all of these things that were done were totally illegal. The illegalities in themselves frightened the Serbs. The determination of the Croats to discriminate against and to leave the Serb populations out

of equivalent consideration constitutionally, as happened in Bosnia, really began to raise all these old fears. And the Serbs reacted. The Serbs reacted by saying, "OK, we will ourselves choose to secede as a Serbian nationality in Bosnia, in Croatia, from these independent republics and become members of Yugoslavia and accede to membership of Yugoslavia." That's really what they would like to see. This whole thing, by the way, could be settled very simply.

HC: How?

SG: By according to the Serbian populations of these republics the same rights and privileges, the same property rights etc. as belong, according to their constitutions, to all other citizens. What has happened with the Croatian and the Bosnian secessions is that mono-ethnicity has been declared as the only right and proper basis for self-determination, but this is complete balderdash. Its historical nonsense. It's legal nonsense, and frankly it's only because it serves the strategic interests of outside powers, powers not part of that region, that this has been tolerated, and that around this a whole series of myths have been created which create the impression which you were describing a few minutes ago.

HC: And which is a very widespread one here. It makes one think a little bit of Cyprus where the Turks and the Greeks had fought so vociferously and then they divided the island into two groups.

SG: It doesn't make any sense economically.

HC: It doesn't make any sense economically, but it [division of Cyprus] did make sense because they were killing each other and fighting over these ancient animosities, and there are some attempts now to try and divide the people in the area of Yugoslavia into groups because there's a sense that these groups simply cannot get along together...

SG: Well, let me raise the further irony.

HC: ... unless there's this overpowering force of unity, a Tito or something to hold them together.

SG: Well, I think that's a false perception. There has been a very great effort to work at the stimulation of nationalist tendencies in order to fragment Yugoslav...

HC: Nationalist tendencies in this case being Yugoslav?

SG: No. Croatian, Slovenian secessionism, Bosnian secessionism, Muslim fundamentalism. All of these, including Albanian secessionism, all of these nationalities have been appealed to, to some extent—financed, cosseted, assisted, directed by outside powers—in order to bring about the dismemberment of Yugoslavia.

HC: Well, we have it not only in Yugoslavia. We have it in all kinds of places in the world. You mentioned Czechoslovakia. We have Tajikistan. We have it in Kurdistan and all sorts of entities, and ethnic entities on the subcontinent of India. We have it in Africa. We have it all over the place—these ethnic groups which are asserting themselves as nations which had previously been part of a nation. There was unity, but there seems to be ethnicity, and I'm not sure exactly what we mean by that, this is a whole other program, and this is becoming the basis of political sovereignty in the minds of many.

SG: Well, you see the problem is...

HC: We see this centrifugal force, which is exerting itself on a worldwide scale, and one wonders how many nation states—we don't say ethnic states—but the ethnicity seems to become the basis of political sovereignty in the modern world.

SG: This is impossible.

HC: It becomes economically unworkable, but I just wonder if...

SG: Apart from the economics...

HC: ... it's not just in Yugoslavia that it's exerting itself.

SG: I understand that, but let's look at the example of Yugoslavia. Apart from the economics, obviously the secessions have shattered Yugoslavian infrastructure totally, destroyed the linkages between industries across markets etc. It's an economic catastrophe for the secessionists. But then there is a further paradox, a very, very bitter irony, actually, which, I would say, for simple geostrategic convenience, various powers, including the United States and Germany in particular... by the way resisted for a very long time by the Netherlands and France and Great Britain behind the scenes. They fought bitterly to prevent Germany from doing what it did inside the European community. While these powers decry the impossibility of holding a nation of many ethnicities like Yugoslavia together, what they are doing is creating mini-republics with the same ethnic contradictions and puzzles. Bosnia is not a state with an 80 percent or 85 or 90 percent Muslim population. There is only 44 percent.

HC: This is going to compound the problem.

SG: Right. So the problem here is... and the same is true of Croatia. It has an enormous Serbian population. There is no way in the world that you can draw a map of Yugoslavia which will contain a really large majority of any individual ethnic group. It's just not possible.

HC: We only have about two minutes left. What about the Vance Owen plan? Could you just sum it up now? What's going to happen there?

SG: Well, it's clear that there's a strong desire on the part of some US politicians to involve the United States in this war, or at the very least to prolong it. Prolonging this war serves a very important strategic American purpose which is it's totally disrupting the European continent at a critical moment when it's trying to move towards political integration. That's a very important consequence. Germany, Italy and other European countries have suffered tremendously from sanctions [against what remains of Yugoslavia], but there's a very great danger here that the so-called minor military assistance to these so-called humanitarian efforts can explode into a major conflict, and the Yugoslavs are now telling the United States behind the scenes that they really are risking a major conflagration which could place them in the same situation that the Germans found themselves in when they tried to occupy the country in the Second World War.

HC: Yes, that's why there's so much concern. We could talk for hours. Thank you. Sean Gervasi has filled us in very, very admirably.

Note: The transcript has been altered here to reflect what must have been the intended

meaning. In the interview, Professor Gervasi said, "... Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, the first and the third being traditionally under the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Catholic, the latter being much closer to Russia and Orthodox." It is the Serbs who have Orthodox heritage, and the Croats and Slovenes who have Catholic heritage. Professor Gervasi probably meant to say, "... Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, the second and the third being traditionally under the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Catholic, the former being much closer to Russia and Orthodox."

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