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In Defense of the Bosnian Republic

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By STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), of the three ex-Yugoslav successor states west of the Drina River, faced the worst internal and external disadvantages at the time Yugoslavia's final collapse began in mid-1991. Slovenia, with a politically sophisticated and ethnically homogeneous population, was united and committed to independence from the moment Yugoslavia broke up; it emerged from a brief military contest with Belgrade mainly unscarred.

Croatia and its leader, Franjo Tudjman, wavered in dealing with the disintegrating Yugoslav regime. The pre-Tudjman Communist authorities permitted the disarming of the Croatian Territorial Defense (on orders from Belgrade), but Tudjman then watched passively while the Serbian populace in the Knin area openly prepared for war. Yet, while it paid an enormous human and cultural cost for its independence, Croatia managed to organize its defense, coming out of the experience with the Croatian people, at home and in the large diaspora—which plays a greater role among Croats than among any other Balkan people—united and committed to the country's reconstruction.

If the Croats may be said to have wavered in the face of approaching conflict, the Bosnian Muslims and most of the Bosnian Croats and Serbs allied with them for a multicultural but unitary Bosnia and Herzegovina—who will be designated herein collectively as "unionists"—may be said to have waltzed, if not sleepwalked, into disaster. This fatalism may have reflected no more than awareness that, while Slovenia was saved by its homogeneity and Croatia partially rescued by the large size of its ethnic majority (80 percent), the Bosnian ethnic mosaic was irresolvably complex. Its composition of 45 percent Mus-

lims, 35 percent Serbs, and 13 percent Croats offered to all the temptation to fight but to none the probability of an easy and a clear victory. Such could be only an inducement to win victory by terror:

Bosnia's social and cultural identity was defined by *absence*, rather than by *presence*; by the failure, over the centuries, to impose a clear Bosnian identity on the Serbs and Croats who resided there. In a tragic paradox, the very tolerance of Bosnia's "multicultural" character encouraged its constituent ethnicities to strike out on their own, with disastrous results.

The march into oblivion was visible in the inaugural electoral process in post-Communist BH. The first free elections in Slovenia had produced a complex set of competing ideological platforms, but an overall commitment to parliamentary democracy. The parallel elections in Croatia had established Tudjman's conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) as the mass party of Croatian nationalism, facing a reduced but articulate opposition. But the first elections in BH in November 1990 were an ethnic plebiscite and nothing more: a form of census by ballot, in the words of one observer.

The three political forces that commenced sharing the center stage in Bosnia had been organized on an unabashedly ethnic appeal; no serious political force, aside from those still defending the Communist system, stood, at least at the beginning, for unity. The Serbian Democratic Party, already tainted by association with similar forces launching chaos in Croatia, championed Serb claims while declining to specify how such would be served in a BH approaching independence. It swept the Bosnian Serb communities.

The BH branch of HDZ employed the Croatian national flag as its symbol even while it sought to reassure Bosnian Muslims it would

help defend them against Serbian aggression. The main Bosnian Muslim party, the Party of Democratic Action, or SDA, could not help but present itself as a confessional party, given that religion was and is the main element distinguishing the Bosnian Muslims from their Serbian and Croatian neighbors, and given that both Croats and Serbs had already declared their vision of politics as ethnicity. SDA rallies prominently featured the green Islamic banner with crescent and star that was also displayed inside mosques.

Ivica Čerešnješ, president of the Sarajevo Jewish community and a loyal Bosnian unionist, opposed to the depredations of both Serbia and Croatia, has nonetheless expressed to me his contempt for the maneuvers of the ethnic politicians in BH preceding the war there. "All of them organized on a basis of tribal loyalty and none of them faced the inevitable product of such a polarization, which was a breakdown of civility," he recently commented. He has included the Bosnian media, such as the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje*, which later played a heroic role under the siege in that city, in this impeachment.

Bosnia's Muslim masses, above all, genuinely seem to have entered the nightmare unknowingly. Prior to the Yugoslav constitutional crisis of June 1991, Slovenia had gone through years of psychological preparation for secession, with its leadership actively opposing the Yugoslav military order and training citizens in decentralized community defense. Once the series of atrocities began in the Serbian combat zones inside Croatia—most importantly, the massacres at Borovo Selo and Dalj—Croats, however Tudjman wavered, understood what was coming, even if they little knew what to do about it.

By contrast, when armed Serbian bands appeared in the streets of Sarajevo in 1992, mounted barricades, and began firing on civilians, the city's residents reacted with dumbfounded shock, hysteria, and touching but meaningless pacifist demonstrations. Reports had circulated for months that arms were being transferred here and there; Serbian irregulars were obviously involved in and emulating their compatriots' offensive in Croatia; Muslims had organized some armed groups that proved, at the beginning at least, more rhetorically than militarily visible. Yet, perhaps because, unlike in Croatia, there was no compact Serbian zone in Sarajevo or Bosnia as a whole that could provide an obvious

center for insurrectionary activities, unionist Bosnians deluded themselves into believing an assault comparable to that in Croatia was impossible. In fact, the Serbian terror in Bosnia, erupting in the midst of a long-settled urban life in cities like Sarajevo and towns like Bijeljina, Prijedor, Foča, and Višegrad, proved more frightful than that in Croatia, in every detail.

Another factor in lulling the defenders of multicultural Bosnia into a position of ex-

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treme vulnerability was that the local Serb-extremist leadership "cooperated" in a tripartite ethnic-based administration of the republic that had emerged from the 1990 "confessional" vote. This structure immediately took up and gave preliminary approval to plans for decentralized, local government through ethnically-defined "cantons"—far short of full partition—with the agreement of the Muslims and Croats who hoped that such would satisfy Serbian claims while permitting the maintenance of the historic BH borders.

Serb extremists took advantage of their role in this "precantonal" political structure to prepare their insurrectionary movement, mainly through the Ministry of Public Order; in Bosnia as elsewhere in former Yugoslavia, regional and local police showed an ethnic Serbian preponderance. The Serb-controlled ministry used the months prior to the realization of full independence to disarm the republic, as Yugoslav military officials had earlier disarmed Croatia, and to otherwise disorganize its defense capabilities.

When outright war began, and particularly after the Serbian pogroms against Muslims, Croats, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Czechs, Slovaks, Jews, and other non-Serbs in North Bosnia—the cradle of "ethnic cleansing" in its immediate contemporary form—the SDA and its main leader, Alija Izetbegović, abandoned their former confessional appeal and emerged as the champions of unionism. Izetbegović and his colleagues opposed any plan

for an ethnically homogeneous Bosnian Muslim state; they condemned such a concept, long proposed by Belgrade under the contemptuous title "Alija's Pashaluk," as the equivalent of a ghetto, a reservation, or a "Bantustan." They have continued to oppose any such solution, proving the inaccuracy of labelling Izetbegović's administration a "Muslim" government. And it is because they in principle rejected any such state that Izetbegović's forces resisted the various proposals for a partition developed in negotiations in Geneva and elsewhere.

The ranks of Izetbegović's State Presidency, which preserved the 1990 tripartite form, reflected the composition of Bosnian unionism in general. The latter encompassed members and offspring of mixed marriages, a widespread phenomenon in BH; Bosnian Serbs who chose to fight in defense of a multicultural state; a notable section of Croatian opinion that viewed Croat-Muslim unity as a historic necessity, and, of course, nearly all Bosnian Muslims, as well as most Jews.

The unionist platform was based on defense of civic coexistence as well as on Bosnian traditions of regional disengagement from both Serbian and Croatian claims, and on recognition of the European and overwhelmingly secular culture of the Balkan Muslims. Serbian extremists asserted the right to partition Bosnia on the basis, first, of delirious "Great-Serbian" expansionism, and second, of organizational logic—if Yugoslavia could break up, why should not the very republic that had always, because of its ethnic mix, been called a mini-Yugoslavia, also break up?

Third, they appealed to Serbian anti-Muslim prejudice, harking back many centuries to the Turkish conquest, but that entered its period of virulence following the Turkish retreat from Europe in the mid-1870s, when the first extensive modern Serbian massacres of Muslims—ethnic Turks, Bosnians, and Albanians—occurred. Finally, they called on an undercurrent of Serbian peasant resentment against the former Muslim landlord class.

Croat designs toward a potential Bosnian partition were obvious from the beginning, and were probably inevitable given the homogeneous Croatian majority in Western Herzegovina and past Croat rule over that area. Such intentions were obscured for some time by rhetoric, revived after many decades, of Croat-Muslim unity against Serbia. For the

first six months of the war in Bosnia, this posture was supported by the main Bosnian Croat leader, Mate Boban.

But Croatian behavior in Western Herzegovina displayed sinister shadings from the beginning. Croat and Muslim militia fought over the Herzegovinan capital, Mostar, soon after its recapture from the Serbs in 1992, and many mosques and other monuments in the city's famous "Bazaar Quarter" were destroyed by Croat artillery.

I was one of the first U.S. journalists to report on this threat. In the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 30 May 1992. I quoted Ivica Čerešnješ, who warned. The Bosnia we loved will never return. . . . The Muslims and Croats are now carving their pieces off the corpse of Bosnia, and we feel the next stage will be a conflict between them."

Both Serbs and Croats, in their time, had argued that Muslim Bosnians were "Serbs of Muslim faith" or "Muslim Croats." These propagandistic arguments by Zagreb and Belgrade were supplemented by assertions that, furthermore, there was no distinctive tradition of Bosnian nationality or statehood.

Yet every Bosnian Serb or Bosnian Croat is immediately recognized as such, by speech alone, in the streets of both Zagreb and Belgrade. Bosnian literary and folkloric traditions are unique, neither Croat nor Serb, and Bosnian Islam traces its origin to a will to perpetuate a regional identity embodied in pre-Islamic times by the "Bosnian Church"—so-called "dualists" or "Bogomils," independent from the ecclesiastical dominion of both Rome (represented by Hungary and Croatia) and Constantinople (represented by Serbia).

Bosnia, to the extent that it defined itself as neither Croat nor Serb, also fell heir, unwontedly, to the "Yugoslav" tradition. An appeal to Yugoslav identity had been put forward by Belgrade early in the war in Croatia, with no less a protagonist than Slobodan Milošević himself seeking to paint his forces as "internationalists." Serbian media claimed an antifascist struggle was underway against those it labelled *Ustaše*, reviving the party label of the pro-Axis regime in Croatia during World War II. But in Bosnia the Yugoslavist slogan and other "Tito-flavored" phrases such as "antifascist resistance" were eventually adopted by the Bosnian unionist forces.

The obstacles facing the BH unionists and the government of Izetbegović at the outset of the 1992 war were, of course, aggravated by

the following further problems: the overwhelming imbalance of military resources in favor of the Yugo-Serbian aggressor; the geographical isolation of BH, which has virtually no coastline and an inadequate river transport system; the rapidity and efficiency in terrorism of the Serbian advance into North Bosnia and the East Drina area; international sanctions against the purchase of arms by BH; the grim situation of survival facilities and rise of criminality inside the unionist enclaves, and political divisions at the top of the unionist leadership. But, most of all, the Croats continued their dance with betrayal. Yet multicultural BH and its defenders were by no means helpless. Unionist BH proved difficult if not impossible to subdue.

Most significantly, "ethnic cleansing" by the Serbian aggressor, intended to stampede Muslim residents out of North and East Bosnia, failed to do so. The ethnic mix on the ground in BH was simply too complex. Like the expectations of the Serbian invaders, the proposals for partition served up by the foreign powers failed to take the stubborn character of this reality into account.

Unionist BH did not collapse. The area shown (incorrectly) as "Muslim-controlled" on media maps around the world diminished, but then slowly and persistently expanded. As David Ottaway wrote in *The Washington Post* in September, "Since early June, the Bosnian army has nearly doubled the territory under its undisputed authority and virtually reversed the proportion of Bosnia held by Muslims and Croats."

The siege of Sarajevo dragged on for more than sixteen months (at the time of this writing) but the city did not give up. Some cities that had been seized by the Serbs at the beginning of the Bosnian war were liberated, like Mostar, while others, although heavily punished, were relieved, like Goražde. Bihac, Srebrenica, and Zepa, pockets of Muslim strength surrounded by Serb forces, did not fall; nor did some major cities: Tuzla, Maglaj, Zenica, and Travnik.

James Gow, a research fellow at the Centre for Defence Studies, University of London, in a revealing article published in *RFE/RL Research Report* (4 June 1993), described how BH managed, against all odds, to mount a respectable defense. Gow stated that the BH army maintained 120,000 active troops, with up to 50,000 fully equipped and 80,000 in combat. The BH army, which began the war

as a "people in arms," bringing together male and female volunteers with little more than hunting weapons and police sidearms, had managed to reach a point where its supplies of light weaponry were formidable, although it continued to face ammunition shortages.

The BH forces profited greatly from a single operation north of Tuzla, in which a 100-vehicle Serbian supply column was captured, giving them around 40 tanks and 30 armored personnel carriers, as well as large

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numbers of field artillery. The light armaments and ammunition seized in the Tuzla action, according to Gow, were sufficient to equip 15,000 fighters. The BH army also held "relatively large" supplies of mortars and shoulder-launched anti-aircraft rockets.

Gow also noted that, in addition to this surprisingly extensive military capability, the anti-Serbian struggle also involved "Muslim guerrillas" in the area of Eastern Bosnia around Bratunac, scene of terrible atrocities by the Serb invaders early in the war. In a manner similar to that of Marshal Tito's partisans, these guerrillas had organized a network of up to 2,500 effectives, launching raids, "largely successful" according to Gow, to capture Yugoslav weapons. In January 1993 the "Muslim guerrillas" scored significant victories in Eastern Bosnia, Gow writes, pushing the invader back across the Drina.

Meanwhile, attempts by Bosnian supporters, including the governments of Iran and other Muslim states, to get rid of or evade the international arms boycott on Bosnia had results that were impossible to evaluate in the short term. Around 500 *mujahedin* or Muslim fighters were believed to have come to BH and remained to fight in the war, but their combat effectiveness was questionable and they were charged with having fomented conflicts with the Croats, among other problems. Croatia, however, needed few excuses to sell out Bosnia. Croatia was encouraged to pursue the seizure of Western Herzegovina by the

actions of the Western powers (if not directly, by Lord David Owen, who came to embrace Croat positions on the Bosnian future.)

In their first two years of governance Tudjman and Co. had made great efforts to prove to the West that they were not *Ustaše* or otherwise Croat extremists, but were, rather, center-right democrats in the German or Austrian mold, who sought to play by Western rules; but such insistence gained Croatia nothing. Nor could Western acquiescence to Serbian "ethnic cleansing" be expected to impel Croatia toward any attitude other than one of imitation; finally, dependence on Western intervention to save the victims of the Serbs began to seem not only foolish, but would leave the Croats in Herzegovina at greater risk.

Indeed, Croatia's claim on Western Herzegovina was immoral but backed by substantial practical arguments. It was the most ethnically compact area in BH; its Croat population had enjoyed special religious and other privileges under the Turks; it had been assigned to "banovina Croatia" in a short-termed revision of borders just before World War II, with the (failed) object of securing Croat loyalty to monarchist Yugoslavia.

All this, in addition to growing anti-Muslim pressure throughout the West, made some kind of Croat-Serb deal at the expense of the Bosnian Muslims increasingly probable. However, aside from a so-called *Ustaša* element, which harked back to Croat-Muslim unity on the Axis side in World War II, much of Croatian society viewed such a strategy unfavorably.

Croatian losses in the 1991 war had been too serious to be forgiven in exchange for Western Herzegovina; a division of Bosnia with the Serbs would only increase the military advantages enjoyed by the latter, and lead, many believed, to yet another Serbian assault on Croatia. Further, it was clear that if Croatia acquiesced in the division of BH, it would lose any standing to oppose the permanent Serbization of the Croatian *Krajine*.

Thus, Tudjman's abandonment of the Bosnian government and attempted assimilation of a Western Herzegovina purged of Muslims came to be opposed by political groups ranging from the ultrarightist neo-*Ustaše* of the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) to the Christian democrats Marko Veselica and Anto Kovačević. Tudjman's critics on this issue included the influential Social Liberal Party

and the "historic" remnant of the Croatian Peasant Party (whose forebears dominated Croat politics before World War II), as well as major personalities and factions in his own party, HDZ.

In May 1993, Cardinal Franjo Kuharić, Catholic primate and a leading figure in Croatian life, clearly condemned the Croat leadership in Herzegovina for their attacks on Muslims and warned that such might lead to serious world sanctions against Croatia. Boban, the boss of the Mostar Croats, reacted gracelessly, just as throughout much of 1993 his force—the HVO or Croatian Defense Council, backed by Tudjman—made clear by its actions to "ethnically cleanse" Herzegovina and Central Bosnia of Muslims that a will undeniably existed to arrive at an understanding with Serbia. The HVO in Mostar murdered Muslim children, destroyed homes, and conducted a wholesale campaign of vandalism, completing the devastation of the historic Muslim quarter on the left bank of the Neretva river by levelling the remaining sixteenth century mosques and other monuments.

Above all, the West seemed to be searching for evidence that all sides were equally evil in the Yugoslav war, and the Croatian betrayal of the Bosnian Muslims certainly helped fulfill that need. As European toleration of Serbian aggression encouraged Croatia into a similar course, toleration of the resulting Croatian treason to Bosnia encouraged some Bosnian Muslims to adopt a similar attitude of extremist ethnocentrism. Prof. Ivo Banac of Yale University commented: "The worst crime of Milosevic is that his conduct legitimated similar atrocities by his victims."

But although the world media and political elites saw the solution to Bosnia's tragedy in intervention from outside BH, either to impose an unjustifiable partition or to punish Serbian aggression, only one moral remained to be drawn from the first sixteen months of the war: regardless of what maps were chewed over in Geneva and whether or not Clinton would act against Belgrade, unionist BH would not obligingly disappear.

Even were the Serbs to emerge from peace talks enjoying territorial aggrandizement, they would have to maintain control over areas they could grab but could not easily conquer. The Serb-occupied Croatian *Krajine* are mainly primitive hinterlands without communications, transportation, or other eco-

conomic infrastructure. Northern Bosnia and the East Drina zone were in chaos, and Serbian supply lines were tenuously established there. None of these so-called gains were likely to survive the inevitable collapse of the Milošević regime, given that the forces involved in their seizure were mainly poorly-trained irregular bands, drawn from the hard-core lumpen classes of the Serbian cities and the most backward rural communities.

In the final analysis, the Serbian forces in Bosnia stood to gain, in a partitioned BH, little more than they would have obtained by honoring the original 1992 "cantonal" constitution of the republic. Serbia could expect little help from the outside world in the reconstruction of its economy, and could better expect to suffer as a world pariah for some decades.

Indeed, I do not believe the Serbian aggression in Croatia and Bosnia was ever meant to be a serious military effort; the intention from the beginning was simply terroristic. The Serbians knew they could not hold the sections of Croatia and Bosnia they claimed; above all, they knew they could not drive all the non-Serb population out of the areas they claimed. However, they were determined to carry out as much terror and destruction as they could accomplish. Thus, all that may have been achieved by Serbia in this terrible war was to have provided the worst elements of primitivism in Europe an opportunity to vent their frustrations.

Monarchist and Communist Yugoslavia were both destroyed by Great Serbian pretensions and abuses. Once the violence loosed by the latest explosion of Great Serbian ideology

exhausted itself, it might not prove impossible that some kind of confederation, in which the constituents would perforce enjoy far greater equality than before, might be reconstituted. Slovene economists were already discussing the reconstitution of a Yugoslav customs union or other economic confederation, given that the independent republics had little hope of economic recovery without recourse to their long-established traditional markets: each other.

Ivica Čerešnješ, one of the genuine heroes of this frightful epic, summarized the views of Bosnian patriots. In July 1993, he declared to the Bosnian exile newspaper *Naš AS* (published in Split): "Today about 700 Jews remain in Sarajevo. The condition of their lives is hardly different from that of other citizens. . . . We are helping the rest of our fellow citizens. . . . For example, three-quarters of the city is supplied by our three pharmacies in Sarajevo. If we succeed in breaking the blockade of the city, we will also bring in food and distribute it equally. . . ."

"As a Sarajevan, I can say that I would be happiest if I could tell all my friends and loved ones that they must leave this hell. However, as the president of the Jewish Community I believe it would be terrible if a community which has existed in BH for 500 years should leave because of this miserable war. . . ."

"I am proud to affirm that we Jews are faithful to our country, Bosnia and Hercegovina. . . . To the last atom of my strength, I will fight for the survival of the Jewish Community in BH."