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### **Explaining the Yugoslav Catastrophe** **The Quest for a Common Narrative**

By Ylli Bajraktari and [Daniel Serwer](#)  
**January 2006**

More than a decade after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, people of the region remain deeply divided by contradictory accounts of what happened. Redefinition of historical perspectives along ethno-nationalist lines makes mutual understanding more difficult and hinders reconciliation. Controversies that emerged from the decade of wars continue to hamper the region's prospects.

With grants from the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Balkans Trust for Democracy, Purdue University Professor Charles Ingrao brought together more than 250 scholars from the Balkans, Europe and the United States over the past three years. This "Scholars' Initiative" aims to contribute to the peace-building process in the [Balkans](#) by forging a single, multi-faceted narrative comprehensible to all. Its main findings are being unveiled at the American Historical Association on January 6, 2006 in Philadelphia.

Key participants from seven of the Initiative's eleven research teams gathered at the Institute on [April 19, 2005](#) to offer preliminary results and discuss their implications. Professor Ingrao was joined by Mile Bjelajac (Belgrade), Darko Gavrilovic (Banja Luka), Dusan Janjic (Belgrade) Ylber Hysa (Pristina), Matjaz Klemencic (Ljubljana), Drago Roksandic (Zagreb), as well as James Gow (London) and two other American scholars, Julie Mertus (American) and Gales Stokes (Rice).

This USIPeace Briefing, prepared by Yll Bajraktari and [Daniel Serwer](#) of the Institute, provides a summary of the issues discussed in the Scholars' Initiative and the views expressed by participants. It does not reflect any conclusions of the Institute with respect to these historical questions.

#### **Ethnic Nationalists Caused the Wars..**

The minority issue in Yugoslavia developed because "democratic" leaders established ethnic "ownership" over each republic as they seceded from Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, the leaders of Serbia and Croatia also claimed leadership of those Serbs and Croats who lived as minorities in other republics.

The most critical problem was the concern of Serb minorities for their rights and safety, which was exploited by the Serb nationalist leadership (Radovan Karadzic and Slobodan Milosevic) to justify armed rebellion and intervention. President Franjo Tudjman of Croatia pursued a similar approach. Nationalist forces made a difficult situation not only worse, but much worse.

Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic, the leader of the Bosnian Muslims, was far less divisive. The Bosnian Serb claim that Izetbegovic was a fundamentalist was unfounded. Izetbegovic's agenda favored modernization through commitment to Islam and through the work ethic he saw bringing success to the West.



Kosovar refugees fleeing their homeland.

Photo: [UN](#)

### **...and the International Community Made Things Worse in the Early 1990s.**

It is unclear whether the bloody demise of Yugoslavia would have been prevented if the international community had reacted sooner, but its failure to facilitate a peaceful transformation of Yugoslavia was a mistake. U.S. policy was inconsistent. Matjaz Klemencic reserved particular criticism for UN personnel for the assassination of Bosnian Deputy Prime Minister Hakija Turajlic in 1993, for the siege of Sarajevo, for the hostility of Generals Mackenzie and Rose toward the Bosnian government, and for claiming that the Bosniaks were shelling themselves. Despite domestic political pressure to recognize the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, Germany did not encourage Yugoslavia's dissolution until the last quarter of 1991. Germany's unilateral acceptance of Croatian independence undermined the EU's (Badinter Commission) multilateral approach to deciding recognition, and ultimately forced the European Community's hand.

### **Safe Areas were Far From Safe...**

Eager to "do something," the international community acted through the UN to create six Safe Areas around towns in Bosnia in order to forestall ethnic cleansing and other human rights violations. But France, Great Britain, and the United States avoided the financial, military, and political burdens necessary to render the Safe Areas effective.

Charles Ingrao argued that the Bosnian-Serb military (VRS) had a legitimate right to besiege all six towns, a task complicated by UN resolutions and counterattacks by Bosnian government forces (ARBiH). Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that the VRS was not guided in its choice of tactics by concern for international law. The VRS resorted to massive, indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Sarajevo and other Safe Areas that violated international law.

While the VRS was most likely responsible for the three disputed mortar attacks against a Sarajevo breadline and the city's Markhale market, the aggregate record of indiscriminate VRS shelling renders moot the debate over any one incident. Following the fall of Srebrenica, VRS units massacred up to 7,800 men and boys in a well-coordinated operation directed by General Ratko Mladic.

Further research is needed to ascertain the extent of (1) crimes committed against Serb civilians within and around Safe Areas such as Sarajevo, Srebrenica, and Zepa, and (2) the extent to which the Yugoslav political and military leadership knew about and assisted in the Srebrenica massacre.

### **International Intervention in Kosovo Was More Decisive...**

Experience in Bosnia, Serbian police and military action in Kosovo during 1998 and the first months of 1999, as well as the belief that Belgrade intended an extensive campaign of ethnic cleansing in its southern province, motivated Western intervention in Kosovo in 1999. By then, Milosevic and his regime were recognized as the source of the problem. The West sought to avoid the use of force through negotiations that would permit a ground force, led by NATO, to be deployed on the ground. There is ample evidence that the West's intent at the Rambouillet negotiations in early 1999 was to secure an agreement, rather than to have a pretext for air bombardment, which was not well-planned and suffered from strategic and political differences among the Allies. Refusing to negotiate seriously a peaceful resolution, Milosevic called NATO's bluff.

There was a clear belief among the NATO Allies that the intervention was legal, but no agreement on a single legal basis. James Gow was of the opinion that virtually all questions about the conduct of NATO operations have been appropriately addressed and dismissed by the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). There were, however, in his view, elements in NATO's use of cluster bombs in the town of Nis that might suggest a prima facie case to investigate (though the outcome of such an investigation is uncertain).

While inevitably some people fled seeking shelter from NATO bombs in Kosovo and elsewhere in Serbia, it is clear that Belgrade forces carried out a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing. This strategy was marked by diverse atrocities, which have led not only to indictments against individuals associated with the actual operations, but also the Belgrade leadership, including Milosevic. Some

Kosovo Serb civilians fled KLA action targeted against them, leading to a number of ICTY indictments against KLA personnel and leadership.

### **Justice Has Served Legal but not Moral Purposes..**

In its eleven years of existence, the ICTY has meaningfully advanced international law. The Office of the Prosecutor believes that it is fulfilling its purpose and just needs fine tuning.

But a strong current of public opinion in the Balkans believes that the court never established its legitimacy and is not fulfilling its self-proclaimed purpose. Broadcasts of ICTY proceedings have reinforced preexisting views. Whatever legal professionals may think, those who live in the Balkans have not entirely accepted ICTY's legitimacy. The ICTY did not initially reach out and inform the civil society throughout the Balkans about its activities, and even today there is room for improvement in these areas.

As a result, the ICTY suffered from being unable to meet inflated expectations. The court initially was expected not only to judge guilt, but also to contribute to reconciliation, to promote the concept of justice, and to steer the development of national identity. This has proven to be far too much for the court and must be undertaken by others if the job is to be done right.

### **Of Related Interest:**

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Balkans Working Group Event, April 19, 2005 (Audio)

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by Ylli Bajraktari and [Daniel Serwer](#) of the Center for [Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#) at the U.S. Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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