

Reply to Simic

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To the editor:

Andrei Simic's response to my earlier letter raises some very interesting points. Nevertheless, I believe my main point stands. While intermarriage rates are only one indicator of social relations, they are a telling one. Comparing intermarriages in a complex modern society such as Yugoslavia to medieval Crusaders forcibly taking "Saracen" brides is of course not useful.

But quite apart from intermarriage statistics, the detailed evidence on the ground clearly indicates that the violence in Yugoslavia has been a purposeful policy by the political elite aimed exactly at reinforcing ethnic boundaries that had been slowly disappearing in some regions. (see for example Conversi; Gagnon). Also very telling are social science studies showing that as late as 1989-90 the highest levels of tolerance in the former Yugoslavia were exactly the most ethnically mixed regions. (Hodson et al)

Of course in other regions, especially rural ones, some degree of animosity continued to exist. But it is indicative that Simi('s anecdotal evidence comes from Hercegovina and Lika, which are very rural and (along with Montenegro) are traditionally the homes to the most fervent and violent nationalist forces among Serbs. (Western Hercegovina serves the same function for Croats). Thus Simi('s anecdotes come as no surprise. But to generalize those experiences to the very different environments in other regions of Yugoslavia is a mistake.

My main point is not that everyone in the former Yugoslavia lived happily and peacefully with their neighbors; clearly there was tension and problems, including ethnically-related ones, in certain regions. Rather, it is that ethnic differences alone were not enough to trigger the kind of violence seen in the Balkans. Despite the political arguments of the nationalists on all sides, there was a significant part of the population which did live together peacefully and which was the target of the violence of the past war. Also, it is very clear that the violence was brought in from outside in these regions. In the case of Serbs in Croatia, Belgrade imposed extremist nationalists who repressed moderate Serbs who dared to disagree; likewise Croat extremists from Hercegovina imposed their views on Croats in Slavonia. (Gagnon)

The assumption that just because people maintain an ethnic identity, or an identification with a certain culture, they necessarily are hostile to others and that only a minority of people do not have such resentments, is a provocative hypothesis, and is the centerpiece of the strategies of political extremists throughout the world. But in fact there is no logically objective reason that difference equals hostility, much less violence.

In fact what we see exposed is the mythology of ethnic solidarity as a natural phenomenon which inevitably leads to violence. In fact, the Yugoslav wars were meant to create an environment where ethnicity was all that mattered, and where interests could be articulated only in terms of ethnicity defined in a very particular, antagonistic, way. In this Yugoslavia is not alone; similar dynamics are at work in most of the current violent conflicts along ethnic cleavages throughout the world.

References

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