

Why Bosnia must defeat Milosevic

Branka Magas is a Croatian socialist living in London, and author of "The Destruction of Yugoslavia" (Verso). She talked to Martin Thomas about the nature of Karadzic's Bosnian-Serb military machine and the case for siding with the Bosnian government in the current war.



Branka Magas

BOSNIA'S DECLARATION of independence in 1992 was preceded by a referendum in which a large majority of the population voted in favour. Those Bosnians who found themselves under the control of the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav army were not allowed to take part in the referendum.

If Milosevic was so confident that the Bosnian Serbs as a national group would have voted against, then why did he not let them vote in the referendum, which was under international supervision? Instead, in the area under the army's control, he produced a bogus referendum among Serbs only. That referendum was unsupervised, giving plenty of scope for the Serbian-dominated army and police to produce any result they wished. The fact is that those Bosnian Serbs were not given a chance to say what they wanted.

You must realise that Karadzic is Milosevic's creation. The Serb Democratic Party (SDS), of which he became the leader, was created by the Serbian secret police, in an attempt to influence the result of the first multi-party elections in Bosnia in 1990. On the surface it was a spontaneous creation. Vladimir Srebrov, who helped to found the SDS, was a committed Bosnian.

But Srebrov was removed and imprisoned as soon as it became clear that he would not participate in the genocide against Muslims which the Belgrade regime had planned.

The SDS was used as the instrument for establishing civilian administrations in the areas that were, or came, under the control of the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav army. In

those areas, local civilian authorities were removed and most of them killed or imprisoned. They were replaced by people from the SDS.

Even in overwhelmingly Muslim towns like Prijedor in central Bosnia, people would wake up one morning to find that the SDS had taken over the key buildings and posted armed soldiers in front of them. After that the non-Serb population was either killed or sent to concentration camps. Those who remained alive were simply deported from the town.

The army itself did not carry out the massacres — its chief task was to ensure that there would be no resistance. Mass murders and rapes were carried out by special paramilitary units, created for the purpose, and led by extreme Serb chauvinists like Arkan and Seselj. Some of the local Serbs were

then recruited into those paramilitary formations.

Although the so-called Bosnian Serb Republic enjoys a degree of autonomy from Belgrade, Mladic's army has remained fully integrated into the Serbian army command. Appointments, salaries, military plans, supplies — everything is decided in Belgrade.

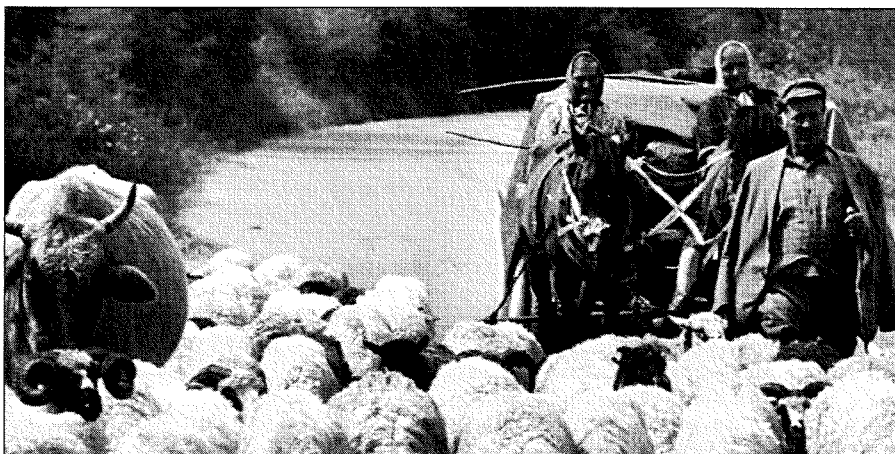
In Serbia there is still a semblance of democracy, but the war in Bosnia shows you the true nature of this regime. Its mental make-up was displayed in Srebrenica. It is based on racial purity and authoritarianism: one nation, one state, one leader. The Serbian population has had it drummed into them that they are surrounded by racial enemies — either you kill them, or they will kill you.

There is some opposition to Milosevic among sections of the intelligentsia, but it is rather weak and fearful. And there is passive opposition to the war. In Montenegro [now amalgamated with Serbia in Milosevic's rump "Yugoslav" state] there is a significant opposition, grouped around the idea of independence from Serbia, with a strong social-democratic component.

The Serbian regime is, I believe, highly unstable. Until there is significant pressure on it, we cannot judge its exact degree of instability, but we must remember that it is a regime created for war and which can survive only by continuing with the war.

Serbia has severe economic problems, increasing problems with refugees, and also unsolved national problems: over one-third of its population is non-Serb. Whichever way the war ends — either with partial defeat for Milosevic or with total defeat for him, and those are the only two possibilities — a civil war in Serbia itself is highly likely.

However, the Serbian democratic opposition feel disarmed by lack of support



Bosnian Serb refugees

from the West. Opposition would grow in Serbia if there was more support in the West for Bosnia.

Britain and France take the view that Serbia has got a huge army and wants to dominate the region, so they should let Serbia take as much as it wants and then keep the peace. They say, for example: if you arm the Bosnian government, the war will continue. The Western states want Bosnia to surrender so that they can get on to other things.

They talk about the danger of the war spreading. But the war will spread only because Serbia spreads it. My guess is that if Serbia is defeated in Bosnia, it will not go for war elsewhere. But if it is not defeated, then it will. It will go for genocide in Kosovo. It will plan to divide Macedonia.

The only force that can bring peace is the Bosnian army, by defeating Serbia. We have had four years of war. The Western states can't sell us any more of their peace plans, their robust reactions, and so on. We know what will bring peace: the success of the Bosnian army. If you want peace in Bosnia, you have to arm that army, you have to take the side of Bosnia.

I don't say that there will be no problems if Bosnia wins. There will be lots of problems. But there will be much worse problems if Bosnia doesn't win — for the Serbs and the Muslims and the Croats, and for Serbia and for Croatia and for Macedonia, the whole area.

What guarantees for the Serbs?

We also discussed the issue of guarantees for the Bosnian Serbs in any peace settlement.

MT: In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the nationalities of which the country was made up have been torn apart, to a large extent, by the war. There are rivers of blood between them. There are tremendous hostilities, feelings of guilt, feelings of revenge. And there is no political movement on the scene which unites the different nationalities.

It is necessary to support the Bosnian government in the conflict as it is now. But I do not see how the outcome of that can be the recreation of Bosnia-Herzegovina as it was in 1992 or before 1990.

I don't see how that could be done without a total reconquest; I don't think that reconquest is possible; and I don't believe that a state built on that reconquest could be viable. Any viable settlement must win some free agreement from the Bosnian Serbs with



Controlling forces in the region

guarantees that they will not become a harassed minority.

BM: Yes, ethnic separation has been achieved in large parts of Bosnia. That was, after all, a chief aim of the Belgrade regime. It has been done by force, and — what is the most tragic aspect — not only by soldiers. Civilians also took part in the so-called “ethnic cleansing”.

On the other hand, it is also true that, once peace is established, the past is — I would not say forgotten, but put aside. People are keen to build for the future. If you look at the situation in parts of central and western Bosnia, where there was a violent conflict between the Croat forces (HVO) and the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina, you see a very strong desire to build for peace. After all, people differentiate between national groups and their leaders.

Healing the fissures inside Bosnian society, on the other hand, very much depends on economic assistance. If people are to return, they have to be able to return to somewhere. In lots of places houses have been either destroyed or taken over by others: Serb houses by Croats, Croat houses by Muslims, etc. For this chain reaction to be reversed, you have to build houses, organise water and electricity supplies, and create a functioning economy.

I am not pessimistic, I suppose, because of what happened after the Second World War, which in this region to a large extent was a civil war. Provided that there is a just peace settlement, a society heals very fast. Demographic renewal is very fast. The separation of the nationalities in Bosnia will not become permanent unless Bosnia loses this war and the country is partitioned.

You assume that the Serbs in the area under Karadzic's control support Karadzic. But there is little evidence of that.

Serbia's occupation of Bosnia has involved collaboration by local people just as, in the Second World War, the Nazi occupation of large parts of Europe depended on collaboration, passive support, or absence

of organised resistance. But the Nazis lost the war, the population welcomed the demise of fascism, and the collaborators were either punished or reintegrated.

As for the Bosnian Serbs, the fact is that nobody asked them whether they wished to go to war. There is no evidence that they wished to see the destruction of Bosnia. Once the war started, many were recruited into Mladic's army. A lot of them have left Bosnia — perhaps as many as 400,000. An estimated 100,000 have been killed. Over 200,000 remain in the part of Bosnia under government control, where they participate the Bosnian army and in the political life of the country.

There is much evidence that the Bosnian Serbs under the control of the Pale bandits [Pale is Karadzic's capital] are sick of war and want peace.

You speak of total reconquest as the only way to unify Bosnia, but that will not be necessary. A decisive shift in the military situation in favour of the Bosnian government will also bring about a change of leadership in Pale, more favourable to a peaceful settlement based on Bosnia's territorial integrity. We know for a fact that there are more moderate currents inside the Pale political structure. An important role will be played here by the Serb Civic Council, which gathers Bosnian Serbs loyal to the government in Sarajevo. It is possible to imagine also local uprisings against Karadzic in favour of peace.

It is true that most Bosnian Serbs in the areas under Pale control have been completely isolated from the outside world. They therefore they do not necessarily trust the Sarajevo government, which they think of as Muslim-dominated.

There is also an element of fear that they will be punished, just as the German population feared collective retribution after the end of the Second World War. It is very important that the Bosnian government should be capable of reassuring this part of the population. Bosnia is, after all, their

country.

It is important to ensure that there is no collective retribution, and for that a proper war crimes tribunal is necessary. More important is the survival of ethnic tolerance in towns like Tuzla, Sarajevo and Zenica, which shows that these Serbs will be welcome in post-war Bosnia.

The Orthodox church in Tuzla still stands. Mladic's units have been shelling it, but the local authorities have repaired it each time. The Tuzla authorities, you may say, have got better things to do, you could say, have more urgent things to do than repair churches. But they have made a special effort on rebuilding this Orthodox church just to show the Bosnian Serbs that their church is going to stay.

Bosnian Serbs can be against Karadzic, and still feel a sense of Serb identity, and feel threatened. For example, Maggie O'Kane, in the Guardian a few weeks ago, reported a strong mood for peace in Banja Luka [a Bosnian-Serb stronghold]. The people she quotes say things like: "It's time for peace. We know we've conquered too much territory. We must give some of it back". But the "we" is not the Bosnian people as a whole. It is the Bosnian Serbs. And these are people who are against the war and want peace.

I hope that you're right that peace is possible on the basis of federation. But peace is only going to be possible on that basis if the Bosnian Serbs feel that they have a guarantee that they are not going to be forced into a state in which they are a minority.

Bosnia's main problem is the view of the war as an ethnic war — Serbs versus Croats and Muslims, etc. It is not. You speak in categories that do not reflect reality, and which indeed distort the Bosnian reality.

The Bosnian Serbs to whom Maggie O'Kane talked are only one part of the Bosnian Serb population — that part which Belgrade managed to press into its military machine. To speak of self-determination for the 600,000 Bosnian Serbs who have had the bad luck of finding themselves under occupation, who represent a minority of the Bosnian Serb population and who, moreover, lived in an ethnically mixed territory — that is absurd.

The fact is that the Bosnian population was intermingled. There is no way in which

you can grant the right of secession to any particular national group without simultaneously denying the same right to others.

How can the Serbs of Banja Luka, for example, have the right to opt out of the Bosnian state when half of that city was not Serb, and when, moreover, Serbs were in a minority in the area around it?

Unfortunately, the intermingling of peoples is not as true now as it was...

If you say that the realities on the ground have to be accepted, then you are just legitimising "ethnic cleansing", which is a euphemism for genocide. Only by respecting the territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina will you create the conditions for the return of Serbs, Croats and Muslims to their homes. Self-determination in Bosnia can mean only equality as regards national rights, not territorial secession.

Of course we must uphold individuals' rights to return to their homes or a new home sufficiently nearby. But individual rights do not settle the matter. The war has sharply separated off a Bosnian-Serb population from the rest of Bosnia, and viable democratic peace will not be possible unless they have collective guarantees. In fact not everyone is going to return to their home, are they?

Some of them will not, but many will. In the last instance what matters is the right to stay and to return.

The Bosnian Serbs were not an endangered national group before the war. Nobody denied them any collective political rights. If they are now in danger, that is only thanks to Milosevic.

If one wants justice for Bosnian Serbs, preserving Bosnian territorial integrity is crucial for it. Otherwise they will be what they have been all these four years of the war: refugees on the one hand, or cannon-fodder for Serbia's militarism on the other.

One only needs to look at the fate of the section of the Croatian Serbs who found themselves in the so-called Krajina. The civilians were ordered to leave by their leaders, who had no idea what to do with them afterwards. The Serbian military's only concern is to recruit soldiers from among the able-bodied men to fight the war in Bosnia — a war which, incidentally, Serbia will lose, just as it has lost the one in Croatia. ■

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Bosnia Solidarity Campaign

The Bosnia Solidarity Campaign — calling for the arms embargo to be lifted, and for support for multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina — was set up after a demonstration in London on 22 July, and has organised a further demonstration (6 August) and a 24-hour picket of Downing Street.

Contact: Bosnia Solidarity Campaign, c/o ADBH, 12 Flitcroft St, London WC2H 8DJ. Phone/fax 0171-240 7992.