

PERCEPTIONS OF THE WARS IN YUGOSLAVIA

Public Controversies

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**Missed Encounters:
Engaged French Intellectuals and the Yugoslav Wars**

Abstract. In her contribution, Nadège Ragaru investigates what she calls a paradox: The wars in Yugoslavia provoked a wide array of citizen initiatives, petitions, and demonstrations. Yet, their impact on French diplomacy was limited. The French government remained opposed to the idea of military intervention until the 1995 elections. The author examines three aspects of this paradox: First, the encounters between Paris and Sarajevo resulted in missed opportunities. For the French intellectuals the conflict turned into an arena where several prominent figures tested their authority, attempted to bolster their legitimacy, and introduced the divisions that structure their competing intellectual fields. Second, while “local voices” were solicited by the media and inaugurated “the era of the witness” (Wieviorka), their selective use tended to obscure the conflict. Finally, the wars represented a critical moment for academics with a Yugoslav background. Many had not worked on Yugoslav issues before and witnessed powerlessly as former academic solidarities in France and Yugoslavia collapsed. This situation in turn impeded a more adequate analysis of the Yugoslav wars.

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Few crises have spawned as many polyphonic narratives as the break-up of former Yugoslavia.¹ Fewer still have provoked such a wide array of citizen initiatives, petitions, and demonstrations. In the first half of the 1990s, the French public space was filled with a wealth of intellectuals, scholars, and artists who offered contrasting accounts of the dissolution of the Federation and the ensuing conflicts. Numerous essays were published, autobiographical writings circulated, and documentaries and movies made. Most intellectual circles supported the adoption of a higher profile by French authorities, including military intervention. Yet their impact on French diplomacy was at best limited. Until the election of Jacques Chirac to the presidency in 1995 the French remained committed to a reading of the war that assigned equal blame to all protagonists, shied away from advocating an armed response, and prioritized UN “peace

¹ The author wishes to thank Xavier Bougarel and Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

missions". Additionally, President Chirac's ultimate support for air strikes and the exercise of greater pressure on Serb leader Slobodan Milošević owed more to intra-bureaucratic discussions and to the changing international context than it did to domestic advocacy networks. Even more striking is the fact that the numerous voices, which were raised in the name of Vukovar, Dubrovnik, Mostar, or Sarajevo, often betrayed limited knowledge of Yugoslav history, as well as of the processes that led to the demise of the Federation.

The purpose of this essay is to reflect on this twin paradox by examining how the wars in former Yugoslavia were refracted into the French public space. The focus is not primarily on ruling circles or on Mitterrand's foreign policy. The president's commitment to the unity of Yugoslavia, his failure to grapple with the end of the Cold War, German reunification, and the reshaping of Europe, have already been amply studied.² Rather, the emphasis falls on the interplay between three sets of actors: public intellectuals, scholars specializing in the Balkans, and the networks of individuals – often with a background from the region – who contributed to shaping the public discussion in France on the causes and possible responses to the conflict.

In so doing, three arguments are put forth. First, the wars in Yugoslavia bear eloquent testimony to one familiar observation: that cognition is always intimately intertwined with recognition. Facts do not appear unhindered; they owe to the perspective taken on them.³ What actually took place between Paris and Sarajevo was a missed encounter. The encounter did not take place because the conflict turned into an arena where several prominent figures tested their authority, attempted to bolster their legitimacy, and imposed the divisions that structured their competing intellectual fields on reality. While talking, writing, and debating Yugoslavia, they were actually tackling issues only remotely connected to the war: chief among these was the future of European integration and the crisis of French universalistic Republicanism. Additionally, while refugees flowed into European countries and violence escalated in Bosnia, Sarajevo was used as a metaphor by an intelligentsia that endeavoured to maintain the public standing it had had during the decades when its voice had been prominent in disputes on socialism, Soviet dissidents, and the French left.

Second, these logics of engagement do not mean that "local voices" were removed or even remote from the French discussion. Quite the contrary, the wars in Yugoslavia saw the advent of what could be called – paraphrasing An-

² See among others Samy COHEN (ed.), François Mitterrand et la fin de la guerre froide. Paris 1998; Thierry TARDY, La France et la gestion des conflits yougoslaves (1991-1995). Enjeux et leçons d'une opération de maintien de la paix de l'ONU. Bruxelles 1999.

³ Gerard LENCLUD, Quand voir, c'est reconnaître. Les récits de voyage et le regard anthropologique, *Enquête* 1 (1995), 113-129, available at <<http://enquete.revues.org/266>>. All cited internet sources were accessed on 31 August, 2013.

nette Wieviorka's expression – the era of the witness in real time.⁴ From 1992 onwards, print media and renowned intellectual journals solicited testimony, mostly from Bosniak, Croat, and Serb witnesses. Some authors engaged in the epistolary genre, others portrayed the appalling conditions in besieged Sarajevo. "Live" accounts of the suffering were published in order to provoke a moral outrage that was not devoid of voyeurism. It looked as if every single intellectual coterie in Paris wished to give the floor to "its" chosen artist or novelist. Yet as texts travelled in translation, often thanks to intellectual friendships made in the 1980s, through the mediation of the Yugoslav diaspora and a network of devoted translators, the flood of powerless testimonials also gave credibility to readings of the wars that did not preclude social stereotypes and cultural self-exoticization by Yugoslav intellectuals. Nearly all the witnesses fitted nicely into the imagery of the urban, post-national intellectual who was at odds with the nationalist policies of his or her respective government and with the (rural) "masses" who were seen as supporting them. Thus the era of the witness in real time created a sense of proximity and at the same time contributed to a fragmented and mosaic-like (mis)reading of the conflict.

Third, and finally, the wars in Yugoslavia represented a critical moment for a scholarly community comprised of both Balkan specialists *and* academics with a Yugoslav background who up to that time had not worked on Yugoslav political, economic, or social issues. While the latter group felt the urge to publicize their reading of the crisis and often experienced the divisiveness of the war in their own flesh – as the transposition of Yugoslav cleavages to France destroyed old friendships –, the former revealed themselves ill-prepared to analyze the Yugoslav collapse that they had no more anticipated than the Sovietologists had foreseen the downfall of the Soviet Union. This scholarly silence spoke thousands at a time that required in-depth pieces on Yugoslavia's 20th century.

Against this background, this essay sketches two key moments in the interpretation of the wars with a view to highlighting salient turning points and matters of contention. What is Yugoslavia/Bosnia "a case of"; and how did public intellectuals engage in meaning-making activities? These are the questions to be addressed here. The analysis shows how the geographic and historical contours of the war were shaped, extended, at times twisted through attempts at relocating in space and time what could bear the semblance of a new phenomenon. Public intellectuals thought by analogy, if not by proxy, a demeanour which – beyond its rhetorical convenience – did bear upon the interpretation of the conflict. Moreover, the trajectories of engagement of public thinkers will be examined, thus unveiling patterns of commitment rooted – alternatively or simultaneously – in the 1970s-1980s anti-totalitarian Left, in advocacy for

⁴ Annette WIEVIORKA, *The Era of the Witness*. Ithaca/N.Y. 2006 (originally published in French in 1998).

humanitarian interventionism or in the defence of a specifically French trope, the public intellectual *à la* Malraux. An examination of the public thinkers' statements also suggests that references to the Holocaust provided a key prism through which the Yugoslav wars were viewed at a historical juncture marked by the emergence of a new world order and by changes in ways of remembering and commemorating the Holocaust.

The Break-up of the Yugoslav Federation: The Fear of a Post-Communist World Disorder

Democracy vs. (Neo-)Communism: Nationalism's "Return to Europe"

The dissolution of Yugoslavia was initially understood to be part and parcel of the reordering of Europe following the fall of the Iron Curtain. The question of what violence was likely to accompany the (fledgling) victory of democratic forces over communist regimes was a key item on the agenda in 1990-1991. During the Cold War, national identities had often been praised for their emancipating quality. Following the end of Soviet regimes many observers dreaded a possible "return of the repressed" after decades in which national demands had supposedly been suppressed by communist rulers.⁵ In late 1990, American scholar Kenneth Lowitt lamented that

"we cannot expect the 'clearing away' effect of Leninism's extinction to be self-contained, [...] the Leninist extinction of 1989 has hurled the entire world into a situation not altogether unlike the one described in the Book of Genesis. Central points of reference and firm, even rigid, boundaries have given way to territorial, ideological, and political confusion and uncertainty."⁶

In France, Pierre Hassner, a fine observer of international affairs, similarly emphasized that

"communist totalitarianism acted as a negative unifying force. Its demise brings forth conflicts between levels and orientations, between social strata and between cultural traditions."⁷

Under these circumstances it is no wonder that the break-up of Yugoslavia was caught up in the democracy vs. communism debate. Some public figures opposed "secession" (including sociologist Edgar Morin,⁸ geographer Michel Foucher, as well as editor-in-chief of the journal *Défense nationale* and journalist

⁵ Whether communism suppressed national forces or favoured an intensification of ethnic contention was at the time – and has remained – a subject of heated scholarly debate.

⁶ Kenneth JOWITT, *The New World Disorder*, *Journal of Democracy* 2 (1991), n. 1, 11.

⁷ Pierre HASSNER, *Culture and Society*, *The International Spectator* 26 (1991), n. 1, 136.

⁸ Edgar Morin's position later evolved, as illustrated by his public dispute with the Serb writer and then President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Dobrica Ćosić in early 1993. See also Edgar MORIN, *Les fratricides: Yougoslavie-Bosnie 1991-1995*. Paris 1996.

at *Le monde diplomatique*, Paul-Marie de la Gorce). They did so either because they cherished the memory of antifascist Serb resistance during World War II and the legacy of Tito, because they had been fascinated with Yugoslav self-management and the country's role in the non-aligned movement, or because they feared that independence might set a precedent for the Soviet Union and the rest of Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the commentators who equated access to state sovereignty with liberty systematically contrasted Slovenia's and Croatia's democratic leaderships with Serbia's neo-communism. Centrist parliamentarian Bernard Stasi epitomizes this position:

"After 45 years of communist and Serb domination Croatia and Slovenia have chosen democracy. Facing them, Serbia, still a communist country, is trying to maintain the federal structure to keep control [over them]."⁹

He had earlier maintained that

"the intervention in the north of the country is reminiscent of the darker pages of both Stalinism and Brezhnevism. As in a bad dream, images of Budapest 1956 and Prague 1968 were once again shown on the television screens of the planet. Soviet-made tanks were destroying hastily built barricades."¹⁰

Understandably, Croat president Franjo Tuđman never failed to legitimize his policy accordingly: "We defend our right to self-determination", he stated in an interview to the French daily *Le monde* on 10 September, 1991, "but we are also shielding Europe against a restoration of communism".¹¹

In the meantime, cultural(ist) references spread across the intellectual and the media spectrum. Obsession with "ethnic hatreds", irrationality, and primeval bloodletting, as well as fears that these hatreds might disrupt the Western European equilibrium reached a high point in a widely publicized conference held at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, entitled "Les tribus ou l'Europe" (27-29 February, 1992) and attended by President Mitterrand. Although the list of participants reveals a diversity of individual vantage points,¹² the very formulation of the central theme expresses the intellectual climate. Moreover, press commentators multiplied statements that posited a clash between Eastern European passions and Western reason:

⁹ Bernard STASI, L'autodétermination doit primer, *La Croix*, 14 August, 1991.

¹⁰ *Id.*, Yougoslavie: la liberté ou le chaos, *L'Express*, 4 July, 1991.

¹¹ Cited in Bernard FERON, Yougoslavie, origines d'un conflit. Paris 1993, 121.

¹² The list of participants included Robert Badinter, François Fejtö, Peter Schneider, Noël Copin, René Girard, Marek Halter, Jean-François Deniau, Gilles Martinet, Alain Touraine, Yuri Afanassiev, Andreï Gratchev, Bernard Guetta, Alexandre Yakovlev, Otar Iosseliani, Claude Lanzmann, Adam Michnik, Edgar Morin, Paul Thibaud, Georges-Marc Benamou, Peter Fleischmann, Peter Handke, Rachid Mimouni, Danielle Sallenave, Jorge Semprun, Théodore Zeldin, Jacques Delors, Alain Finkielkraut, Bronislaw Geremek, Julia Kristeva and Erik Orsenna.

"[...] appalled by the two world wars it had provoked, Western Europe has since 1945 finally surmounted the heinous and barbarian aspects of nationalistic sectarianisms",

columnist Jean-François Revel wrote.

"But the people who were crushed by communism, what could they do in the meantime? Forced into want and despair what else could they hold on to, what could they ultimately find but national belonging and religion?"¹³

Interestingly enough, the equation of the Slovenia/Croatia vs. Serbia divide with the struggle between democracy and communism was never fully distinguished from the drawing of an opposition between Central European virtues and Balkan wrath. The intermingling of the two positions comes out most eloquently in French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut's writings, one of the earliest and most vocal promoters of Slovenian and Croatian independence. For instance, in his response to Austrian writer Peter Handke¹⁴ in August 1991, he stated that

"the Balkan specificity of the conflict has been underlined with some sort of raging contempt and general disgust towards all protagonists. [There was] no question of determining who were the aggressors and who the victims of aggression in this 'interethnic' infighting – as people have called it and still do, and without disguising their repugnance. [...] This is not the first time that the small nations of Central Europe have been so treated. In 1938 disdain on the part of the civilized world towards the savage played no less a decisive role than political cynicism or fear in the abandoning of Czechoslovakia."¹⁵

Jean-Claude Casanova, editor-in-chief of the influential journal *Commentaire*, followed in these culturalist footsteps:

"In Yugoslavia, Slovenes and Croats, strangers to the Serbs in religion and history, have been tied to them since the allied victory in 1918 and the tearing apart of the Austrian Empire."¹⁶

While scholars have often examined the process by which the Balkans were made to seem exotic to the West¹⁷ and the dynamics of "nesting orientalisms"¹⁸, idealized references by French intellectuals to Central Europe as a "kidnapped

¹³ Jean-François REVEL, Communisme: le début de la sortie, *Le point*, 28 September, 1991.

¹⁴ Peter HANDKE, Le conte du neuvième pays. Ma Slovénie en Yougoslavie, *Libération*, 22 August, 1991, 17.

¹⁵ Alain FINKIELKRAUT, Ne nous félicitons pas, *Le messager européen* 5 (1991), 9-17, reprinted in idem, Comment peut-on être croate? Paris 1992, 14. This Central European point of view is also noticeable in the author's intellectual references, chiefly Czesław Miłosz, Istvan Bibó, and Milan Kundera.

¹⁶ Jean-Claude CASANOVA, La guerre en Yougoslavie rend nécessaire une force européenne d'intervention, *L'Express*, 12 September, 1991.

¹⁷ Quintessentially in Maria TODOROVA, *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford 1997.

¹⁸ Milica BAKIĆ-HAYDEN / Robert HAYDEN, Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics, *Slavic Review* 51 (1992), no. 1, 1-15;

West"¹⁹ have been unduly neglected. Yet the role of such a view in the judgments passed on the dismantling of Yugoslavia is striking.

As information regarding President Tudjman's less than perfect democratic credentials started to reach a wider audience in the fall of 1991, the clear line between democracy and communism began to dissolve. It was to disappear entirely following the outbreak of hostilities in Bosnia in April 1992. Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the rather peaceful break-up of the Soviet Union, "ethnic hatreds" moved from the provinces of Eastern Europe to the narrower confines of the Balkan Peninsula, adding to the sense of a ubiquitous quagmire. In November 1991 the Yugoslav army's shelling of the Croatian cities of Vukovar and Dubrovnik, "the antique Ragusa, which stood on par with Venice" as philosopher André Glucksmann said, impelled a major departure from previous readings of Yugoslavia's fate. Until then, only a handful of intellectuals had commented upon the end of the Federation.²⁰ The selection of civilian targets by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), the large scale destruction of historical monuments, libraries, churches, and medical facilities provoked uproar. Several thinkers until then silent, such as Pascal Bruckner and André Glucksmann, took the floor. Concurrently, transnational solidarities started being activated as evidenced in the publication of a column by forty-three Nobel prize laureates (three of them French) in *Le monde*.²¹

Vukovar: "Europe as a Civilization Is Being Crucified"

The end of the year also witnessed the emergence of a framing of events that was to acquire its most compelling expression during the siege of Sarajevo: the location in Yugoslav cities in "the heart of Europe" and the drawing of an analogy between urban destruction and the erasure of Europeanness. No longer situated between the East and West blocks, not even on the Central European periphery, even less in a wild Balkan region, the two Croatian cities were portrayed as embodying the very essence of Europe. As several commentators put it, "Europe as a civilization is being crucified", and "ten centuries of Eu-

Milica BAKIĆ-HAYDEN, Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia, *Slavic Review* 54 (1995), no. 4, 917-931.

¹⁹ To borrow the expression coined by Czech writer Milan Kundera in 1983: Milan KUNDERA, The Tragedy of Central Europe, *New York Review of Books* 31 (1984), no. 7, 33-38. It was originally published in French under the title: Un Occident kidnappé ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale, *Le Débat*, 27 (1983), 3-23.

²⁰ The first petition asking for the recognition of the two countries' independence was published in *Le monde* on October 16, 1991. It was signed by prominent intellectuals, historians, scientists, and politicians: François Furet, Marc Ferro, Georges Canguilhem, Michel Jobert, Jacques Le Goff, Milan Kundera, Alain Finkielkraut, Jacques Defert.

²¹ Trois propositions pour la Yougoslavie, *Le monde*, 21 November, 1991.

ropean memory are being erased". Moral indignation, already combined with a sense of powerlessness, superseded the analysis of the wars' dynamics. André Glucksmann for instance denounced a "moral Pearl Harbour".²² Academician and writer Jean d'Ormesson undertook a trip to Dubrovnik with the French state secretary for humanitarian action, Bernard Kouchner, before pleading for a rapid recognition of Slovenia's and Croatia's independence. From then on, travel to former Yugoslavia – at times for a matter of days, sometimes hours, occasionally for longer stays – was to become one of the key modes of protest by intellectuals and engaged citizens. However, at the time much of the intelligentsia was committed to a humanitarian solution to the crisis. Illustrative of this position are the "Three propositions for Yugoslavia" published in *Le monde* in November 1991.²³ Earlier divided over Croatia's and Slovenia's independence, eight intellectuals rallied around the call for humanitarian assistance. This depoliticization of the conflict – which precluded any consideration of the role played by soldiers, bureaucrats, political elites, institutional frameworks, or economic variables in the war – was to bear more balefully on subsequent UN policies towards Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Extension of the War to Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Cleansing and the Trope of Sarajevo's Cosmopolitanism

Bosnia: European Integration and the Mirror Effect

The spill over of the war into Bosnia-Herzegovina sparked a major reconfiguration in the characterization of the conflict on the part of French intellectuals as well as a reconfiguration of alliances within the French intelligentsia. As Frédéric Martel has aptly noted, it was no longer possible to stigmatize secessionist elites for dismantling the Federation since most Bosnians were reluctant to leave the Yugoslav state and dreaded the consequences of separation.²⁴ A Republic where three peoples and three religions intermingled, Bosnia was also seen as a miniature Yugoslavia symbolizing peaceful interethnic coexistence. Previous lines of contention were redrawn, as several public figures that had been critical of the Slovenian and Croatian movements for independence turned into advocates of Bosnia's territorial integrity.

Within a matter of months, the siege of Sarajevo, the revelation by the American journalist Roy Gutman of the existence of detention camps in Au-

²² André GLUCKSMANN, Un Pearl Harbor moral, *Le monde*, 11 December, 1991.

²³ The petition was signed by Jean-Toussaint Desanti, Ismail Kadaré, György Konrád, Claudio Magris, Peter Schneider, Jorge Semprún, Mario Vargas Llosa, Elie Wiesel, Peter Handke and Edgar Morin.

²⁴ Frédéric MARTEL, Pour servir à l'histoire de notre défaite, *Le messager européen* 8 (1994), 129-154.

gust 1992, reports by the UN special rapporteur on human rights, Tadeusz Mazowiecki,²⁵ documenting the breadth of the destruction and the advances of ethnic cleansing,²⁶ as well as information regarding the use of rape to achieve war aims, led much of the French intelligentsia to ask the “international community” to put an end to the ongoing atrocities. Public discussion centred on the relative risk and merits of military intervention. In June 1992 President Mitterrand took an unexpected trip to Sarajevo demanding the reopening of the airport to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid. The move, praised in the French media, proved short-sighted. With the passing of time, it became obvious to most observers – including French army officers – that the deployment of UN Blue Helmets, far from contributing to peace, allowed Serb forces to claim ever larger swaths of Bosnian territory.²⁷ The majority of commentators also acknowledged that the December 1991 UN embargo on the delivery of weapons to all warring parties was mostly disadvantaging the small Bosnian army. However the French presidency continued to support a UN option, deploying up to 4,000 soldiers in Bosnia who were ill-trained for this new kind of mission and painfully aware of the absurdity of their mandate.²⁸

The debate on intervention was heavily influenced by the domestic political agenda, i.e. the referendum on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. Indeed the vote was scheduled for September 1992. The campaign was haunted with discussions of Germany’s role in Europe, on the one hand, and the failings of the European communities in Bosnia, on the other. Germany’s recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence in December 1991 had been widely perceived in France as a breach of European solidarity, nourishing fears that a reunified Germany might be intent on exerting greater power in Europe. Voting in favour of Maastricht, some claimed, would oppose German ambitions with a stronger European framework; those who vetoed Maastricht often insisted that Germany stood most to gain from the new European architecture.

That Europe had betrayed its values in Bosnia was the second argument encountered in discussions over Maastricht. This was the moment when European “passivity” began to be systematically exposed through references to Guernica

²⁵ The reports were published in the journals *Esprit* and *La Nouvelle Alternative*.

²⁶ On the notion of “ethnic cleansing” and its uses in the French public debate, see Alice KRIEG-PLANQUE, “Purification ethnique”. Une formule et son histoire. Paris 2003.

²⁷ See among others the testimony of a leading protagonist (General) Philippe MORILLON, *Croire et oser. Chronique de Sarajevo*. Paris 1994; Natalie LA BALME, *L’influence de l’opinion publique dans la gestion des crises*, in: Samy COHEN (ed.), *Mitterrand et la sortie de la guerre froide*. Paris 1998, 426-440; Jean Cor et al., *Dernière guerre balkanique? Ex-Yougoslavie: témoignages, analyses, perspectives*. Paris 1996.

²⁸ For a well-documented critical review of French UN policies during the war see Thierry TARDY, *La France et la gestion des conflits yougoslaves (1991-1995). Enjeux et leçons d’une opération de maintien de la paix de l’ONU*. Bruxelles 1999.

(the abandonment of Republican forces during the Spanish civil war),²⁹ Munich (the appeasement policy pursued by Great Britain and France), and the Holocaust.³⁰ Here again, it was the domestic calendar that mattered. In July 1992, France commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Vel d'hiv roundup, the mass arrest of 13,152 Jews, including 4,115 children. Several intellectuals had called on President Mitterrand to acknowledge the French state's responsibility in the deportation and extermination of the Jews. In an interview with French public television the president dismissed this demand, declaring: "Do not ask this Republic for accountability; it always did what it had to do." A few minutes later he addressed the situation in former Yugoslavia, insisting once again on his attachment to the defence of (Serb) minority rights. Alain Finkielkraut commented on this speech shortly afterward in a text eloquently titled "Indifferent memory":

"We need to learn to face our past [...]. We need to do so for the memory of the victims and to prevent 'this' from happening again. And yet when for the first time since 1945 in Europe an event takes place that is not 'that' but has to do with 'that', an event that is not industrial extermination but a war openly inspired by a racial doctrine, [...] it is treated as a regrettable but exotic and subaltern event."³¹

*A Struggle between Good and Evil:
The Memory and Mesmerizing Reference to the Holocaust*

References to the Holocaust constituted a leitmotiv throughout the war, but they became all-pervasive at two specific moments: after the discovery of prisoner camps in the summer of 1992 and following the fall of the UN "safe area" of Srebrenica in July 1995, ensuing the extermination of the enclave's male inhabitants. In November 1992 a demonstration was organized upon an initiative of the Comité Vukovar-Sarajevo, whose motto left no room for misunderstanding: "We won't be able to say that we did not know." Essayist Jacques Julliard delivered the concluding speech:

"We are here to protest against barbarianism, to say that half a century after the hunt for Jews and death camps, today's hunt for Muslims and Croats, the opening

²⁹ At the time of Vukovar's fall, writer Annie Le Brun had begun to use this historical parallel: Annie LE BRUN, *Guernica aujourd'hui s'appelle Vukovar*, *Libération*, 19 November, 1991.

³⁰ Let us note that references to the Spanish civil war, to Munich, and to World War II were not the precinct of French public space but also fed the discourse on intervention in the United States. For instance, on the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Marek Edelman, a survivor, declared that "in Bosnia, we are witnessing mass slaughter, and Europe is behaving the way it did toward the resistance in the ghetto". See Peter SCHNEIDER, *Serbian Barbarism – And Ours*, *The New York Times*, 30 May, 2003. See also Rabia ALI/Lawrence LIFSCHULTZ (eds.), *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War*. Stony Creek 1993.

³¹ FINKIELKRAUT, *Né nous félicitons pas*, 67f.

of new concentration camps, ethnic cleansing, tortures, massacres, the bombing of civilians are a shame for those Serbs who are executing these policies and for Europe that tolerates them. What yesterday used to take place in the shame of night raids and sealed wagons is now being done in broad daylight, before the eyes of reporters and television cameras. [...] Yes, let me repeat it, what weighs upon Europe is the dramatic inability of diplomats to adjust to the emerging world; these policies are built around the preservation of the *status quo* and the right of states to massacre their population [...]. We call on all European governments, on Europe with its twelve member states, to consider all possible solutions, including the resort to arms, in order to put an end to the war."³²

In a move that is not devoid of paradox, the reactivation of memories from World War II were used to denounce as obsolete diplomatic practices that were deemed to be rooted in the past and incapable of confronting new challenges.

In part because of their personal background, some of the intellectuals who voiced their indignation over the war crimes in Bosnia were particularly sensitive to the argument that there are circumstances when the principle of state sovereignty has to be overruled and the taking up of arms is legitimate. Yet memories of the extermination of the Jews, albeit more frequently referred to by proponents of military intervention, did not yield a univocal reading of the war. In 1992, writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel blamed the outbreak of violence in Yugoslavia on Croatia, arguing that

"the historic nature of Croatian demands, linked to the tentative creation of an independent state by Ante Pavelić's *ustashi* during World War II sends us indubitably back to the hatred of the other. Let us remember that Zagreb was from 1941 until 1945 a devoted ally of Nazi Germany, often surpassing its Berlin master in committing atrocities. The collapse of communist regimes has visibly reawakened old devils, allowed exclusivist fantasies to come back to the front stage and the ghosts of irrational ethnic hatred from the 1930s to take hold once again of part of the European population."³³

On the other end of the spectrum, asked in an interview to comment on allegations that President Tudjman was relativizing World War II anti-Jewish and anti-Serbian massacres, Alain Finkielkraut responded:

"Had I not been a Jew myself, I would perhaps not have put the tremendous ardour and insistence you have noted in my defence of Croatia. But [...] it seemed to me indispensable to refuse the benediction of Jewish memory to conquering Serbia and to prevent the recruitment of the dead, of whom I feel I am the guardian, by today's adepts at 'ethnic cleansing'."³⁴

³² Quoted in Véronique NAHOUM-GRAPPE, *Vukovar, Sarajevo ... La guerre en ex-Yougoslavie*. Paris 1993, 262f.

³³ Elie WIESEL, *Nommer l'exclusion et la haine contre l'ennemi, Lignes de fond. Revue de l'UDF*, 2 January, 1992, 92, quoted in Frédéric MARTEL, *Pour servir à l'histoire de notre défaite*, 32.

³⁴ Alain FINKIELKRAUT, *Ne nous félicitons pas*, 51f.

Other public thinkers still tried to steer a middle course between these polar stances. So, for example, Pierre Hassner in a beautiful piece:

“Unsatisfied by the risk of simplification, Manichaeism, and café strategy, on the one hand, by the risk of moral indifference and by self blinding before the specificity of a totalitarian phenomenon and the use of technology as an alibi for passivity, on the other hand, I have myself tended to seek refuge in the Gramscian paradox ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’, translated and reformulated under the present circumstances as: ‘indifference, impossible, efficiency, improbable’.”³⁵

More broadly, the years 1992-1993 witnessed a gradual displacement of the terms in which Bosnian realities were formulated. The war was depicted increasingly in moral categories as a struggle between Good and Evil. Earlier references to Serb and Croat nationalisms were slowly replaced by a dichotomy of “criminals” and “victims”. This move did not simply represent an attempt at euphemizing “national” keys, nor did it merely betray a belief in the political expediency of ethical categories. To some extent, the shift of discourse came as the result of the reactivation of the *longue durée* just-war debate on the European continent that seemed to have renounced the use of military might. The “criminals” vs. “victims” dichotomy also echoed that of the “manipulative” ruling elites and the (supposedly) “innocent people”, a view shared by a significant number of observers.

While public attention was geared to the siege of Sarajevo *and* the search for a Serb opposition to Milošević,³⁶ the publication of testimonies from personalities in Yugoslavia gave some credence to this characterization of the war. Faced with a seemingly incomprehensible conflict, numerous local actors were tempted to impute the war to a tiny political elite, ignoring the fact that they had been elected and were not altogether disavowed by their citizens. Thus Bosniak writer Miroslav Karaulac stated that

“the civilian population, the primary victims of the war in Bosnia, no matter how unacceptable their suffering appears to them, have no real chance of saving their own skins; like a bull in an arena they are expected to pay with their lives for the obscure purpose of this spectacle – staged as usual without their consent.”³⁷

Similarly, renowned Croatian novelist Slavenka Drakulić, whose writings on the war were circulated worldwide, remarked that “war dawned upon us as a sort

³⁵ Pierre HASSNER, Les impuissances de la communauté internationale, in : NAHOUM-GRAPPE (ed.), Vukovar, Sarajevo ..., 83.

³⁶ See the thematic issue L'autre Serbie, *Les temps modernes* 2 (1993); and L'état des oppositions démocratiques en ex-Yougoslavie, *La nouvelle alternative* 6 (1993).

³⁷ Miroslav KARULAC, Les mots à l'épreuve: Bosnie, Bosniaque, in: Authors' collective, L'éclatement yougoslave. Une tragédie européenne. Paris 1994, 73.

of natural calamity, a plague, a flood, unavoidable, our destiny”, depicting the conflict as “a seed of craziness growing inside us”.³⁸

Against this background, the depiction of the Muslims in war-afflicted Bosnia often suffered from oversimplification, idealization, and occasionally from paternalism. The social and regional diversity of the Muslim community, political divisions within the Muslim leadership, as well as the ambivalent background and aims pursued by President Izetbegović, were simply omitted. In the writings of engaged intellectuals Bosnia was subsumed under Sarajevo, while Sarajevo – although practically cut off from the rest of the country – escaped local “Balkan” realities to acquire the status of a living embodiment of Enlightenment universalism. A symbol above and beyond time, the city ended up having little need for a specific history or an actual population. More than any other, French thinker Bernard-Henri Lévy (who joined the “combat for Bosnia” in the spring of 1992 and was to direct a movie *Bosna!* to make his point more forcefully) exemplifies the symbolic overloading of Sarajevo at the cost of hollowing out the specific history of the Bosnian capital:

“One need not know this city to pay tribute to it. It is sufficient to have once dreamt, thought, or linked a certain idea of European destiny to the very melody of its name.”³⁹

Used as a metaphor, Sarajevo symbolized in turn tolerance (vs. narrow national loyalty), Europeanness (vs. barbarity), and universal citizenship (vs. national belonging). As Bernard-Henri Lévy put it,

“this is a civilized city, this is a European city. If Europe means openness, tolerance, and cosmopolitanism, Sarajevo is no doubt one of the greatest capitals, not only of Balkan Europe, but of Europe itself.”⁴⁰

Last but not least, with its brave population adamantly enduring open-air imprisonment, food deprivation, and sniper fire, Sarajevo was also conflated with the Jewish ghetto of Warsaw, offering one new tale of struggle, resistance, and survival.

In terms of organization and numbers, the second half of 1992 and the first half of 1993 saw French initiatives for “Bosnia” reach a climax. During this period, several trajectories of engagement converged: some intellectuals came from the so-called anti-totalitarian left.⁴¹ In the 1970s, the publication of Aleksandr

³⁸ Slavenka DRAKULIĆ, *The Balkan Express. Fragments from the Other Side of War*. New York 1993, 14, 33.

³⁹ Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Sarajevo, mon amour*, *La règle du jeu* 9 (1992), 245.

⁴⁰ Idem, *La Yougoslavie au cœur*, *Politique internationale* 57 (1992), 273-287.

⁴¹ By contrast, throughout the war the extreme left (the French communist party and its daily, *L'humanité*, the Trotskyist movement, the CGT trade union, and the pro-Third World circles around the weekly *Monde diplomatique*) remained hostile to military intervention, if indeed they did not adopt a straight forward pro-Serb reading of the war.

Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in French renewed the debate over the violence of communist dictatorships among intellectual critics of communism, but also among part of a new generation of left-wing intellectuals who did not reject the communist project *per se*, but refused to be blinded by partisan political allegiances taken up in the Cold War. Tony Judt has aptly described this moment:

"France in the Seventies and Eighties was no longer Arthur Koestler's 'burning lens of Western civilization', but French thinkers were still unusually predisposed to engage in universal questions. [...] As anti-Communism gathered pace in French public discussion [...] a new generation of French intellectuals transited with striking alacrity out of Marxism, driven by a sometimes unseemly haste to abjure their own previous engagement."⁴²

The loss of hope in a great historical cause also coincided with a rethinking of the role of engaged public thinkers. In May 1980, the launching of the intellectual journal *Le débat* by historian Pierre Nora reflected this attempt to ponder the condition of intellectuals in France; the initiative also testified to the visibility of East European dissidents. In the 1970-1980s, several Central European artists and intellectuals (such as Polish historian Krzysztof Pomian in 1973, Czech writer Milan Kundera in 1975, and Czech historian Karel Bartošek in 1983⁴³) migrated to France adding to an already existing network of Central European personalities, among them Hungarian-born historian and journalist François Fejtö.⁴⁴

Their presence, coupled with that of a large Polish diaspora, explains the vast echoes the Polish Solidarnosc movement had in France in 1980. Several figures who were to speak up at the time of the Yugoslav wars had taken active parts in initiatives to support Solidarnosc members, especially after the declaration of martial law, the official suppression of the trade union and the silencing of its leaders. That the Solidarnosc movement was key to shaping experiences of engagement transpires *en creux* from Pierre Hassner's retrospective reflection on François Mitterrand's inability to understand the end of Yugoslavia:

"Mitterrand had no sensitivity to what was taking place in communist regimes and to the system's contradictions. At the *Journal inattendu* on [French radio] RTL during the winter of 1980-1981, the 'Solidarnosc' winter, a journalist asked Mitterrand what he thought Wałęsa was going to do. The socialist leader answered: 'Wałęsa? All that matters is what the secretary general of the Polish Communist Party is going to do.' [...] the problem of dissidents did not affect him."⁴⁵

⁴² Tony JUDT, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*. New York 2005, especially chapter 18: *The Power of the Powerless*, 559-584, 562.

⁴³ Three years later, he restarted a journal founded in 1979 by communist publisher François Maspero, *L'alternative* under the title *La nouvelle alternative*. The publication, which remained left-oriented, gave voice to critical thinkers from Eastern Europe.

⁴⁴ Krzysztof POMIAN and Milan KUNDERA were early and regular contributors to *Le débat*.

⁴⁵ COHEN (ed.), *Mitterrand et la fin de la guerre froide*, 456.

This anti-totalitarian background also throws light on the early participation of the CFDT, a moderately left-leaning trade union with a Catholic background, in Bosnia-related demonstrations.⁴⁶

The path of a second trajectory passes through the non-governmental sector and more specifically the humanitarian-aid milieu of *Médecins sans frontières*. In the 1970s a small group of French doctors coalesced around a common resolve not to let state *Realpolitik* prevent citizens in conflict zones from accessing medical services. Based on their field experience, several of these medical volunteers sought to lay the basis for the development of international humanitarian law. As early as 1987, jurist Mario Bettati and doctor Bernard Kouchner coined the notion of “devoir d’ingérence humanitaire” (which can be roughly translated as the “duty to engage in humanitarian intervention”). However, during the Cold War the divide between the United States and the Soviet Union who were seen as waging their dispute by proxy, severely limited the possibilities of overruling the principle of state sovereignty in the name of humanitarian rights. The war in Bosnia occurred precisely at the time when a new normative framework seemed to be emerging which placed international (humanitarian) intervention in the domestic affairs of states on the international agenda. Apart from Bernard Kouchner, several renowned figures from *Médecins sans frontières* (for example, Rony Brauman⁴⁷ and Jean-François Rufin), although aware of the trappings of humanitarianism, saw in the Bosnian war precisely the kind of situation that called for armed intervention, grounded in humanitarian law.⁴⁸

The anti-totalitarian left and the proponents of humanitarian intervention joined forces with scattered members of the intelligentsia. These included some journalists, diplomats and writers who believed that any decent man favoured with education and known to the public had the responsibility of engaging in the affairs of the city and of defending moral values (for example, Jean-François Deniau, Gilles Martinet, Georges-Marie Chenu), and representatives of the anti-communist right-wing (Marie-France Garaud among others). In the media, their stances were nonetheless offset by the so-called “New Philosophers” (primarily Bernard-Henri Lévy, Alain Finkielkraut, André Glucksmann, and Pascal Bruckner) who had become visible in the 1970s, broke with Sartre in the

⁴⁶ On the CFDT’s support for Solidarnosc, see Marie KOLAGO, *Solidarnosc dans le regard français. L’exemple de la CFDT, les rapports CFDT-Solidarnosc 1980-1993*, Master’s Thesis in History, Sciences Po. Paris 1998.

⁴⁷ Rony BRAUMAN, *L’Europe doit intervenir militairement*, *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 30 May, 1992, and *idem*, *La boucherie à notre porte*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 04.06.1992, 42f. Rony Brauman was nonetheless critical of the kind of humanitarian operations that acted as a substitute for a political reading and response to war. This position is made explicit in Rony BRAUMAN, *Contre l’humanitarisme*, *Esprit* 12 (1991), 77-85; *idem*, *L’action humanitaire*. Paris 1995.

⁴⁸ During the war, *Médecins sans frontières* also collected testimony about violence and war crimes. See *Médecins sans frontières, Lettres de Sarajevo, Mogadiscio, Kigali ... Bruxelles* 1995.

1980s, attempted to take over his role, and who hoped to become the oracles of the dawning post-1989 era. Part of their struggle for influence and authority was waged through the intellectual journals (*La règle du jeu*, associated with the name of Bernard-Henri Lévy and *Le messenger européen*, associated with Alain Finkielkraut).⁴⁹

However it was another publication that turned out to be the rallying point for the defenders of a Bosnian cause: the renowned center-left literary journal *Esprit*, founded in 1932 by personalist thinker Emmanuel Mounier and close to the French “second left” during the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁰ In May 1992, *Esprit* set up a Comité Vukovar-Sarajevo,⁵¹ which brought together editor-in-chief Olivier Mongin, jurist Antoine Garapon, researcher Pierre Hassner, thinkers Alain Finkielkraut and Pascal Bruckner, historian François Fejtö, and writer Annie Le Brun. The Comité organized demonstrations and circulated petitions; some of its members welcomed Bosnian refugees into the safety of their own homes; others sought informal contacts with the French ruling elite, still others travelled regularly to Sarajevo. Within a few months of its creation, the Comité had managed to reach out to trade unions (primarily to the CFDT), to some student organizations, and to a web of associations (*Assemblée européenne des citoyens*, *Comité contre la purification ethnique*, *Initiative Citoyens Europe*, etc.). Occasionally the *Esprit* team also tried to initiate joint action with human rights organizations, most of whom had adopted a reserved attitude on the question of armed intervention (*Ligue des droits de l’homme*, *MRAP*, *SOS Racisme*, *LICRA*). However no initiative managed to attract more than a few thousand participants.

When Former Friends Become Foes: The Bosniak-Croat Confrontation and the Unravelling of the “Former Yugoslav” Diaspora in France

Islam and France’s Uneasy Management of Ethnocultural Diversity

In the same way as the fall of Dubrovnik and Vukovar in 1991 had embodied the barbarian turn of the Croat/Serb conflict, the destruction of the 17th century bridge of Mostar, shelled by Croat troops in November 1993, came to

⁴⁹ *Les temps modernes*, the journal started by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, which, at the time, was headed by Claude LANZMANN, filmmaker of *Shoah* (1983), adopted a much lower profile.

⁵⁰ Some publications with a more limited circulation also acted as platforms for engaged citizens, such as *La nouvelle alternative* (whose editor-in-chief was Karel Bartošek) and *Trans-européennes*.

⁵¹ On the Committee, see the (insider’s) account by Guy Coq, *Le comité Vukovar-Sarajevo et les initiatives militantes contre la purification ethnique*, in: NAHOUM-GRAPPE (ed.), *Vukovar, Sarajevo ...*, 261-274. See also Frédéric MARTEL, *Pour servir à l’histoire de notre défaite, Le messenger européen* 8 (1994), 129-154.

symbolize the transformation of the Bosnian conflict into a “war of all against all”. For those observers whose vision of the crisis had been structured around a rather clean division between Serb aggressors and Muslim/Croat victims, the infighting between the two former allies which began in the Spring of 1993 was a source of dismay: “The spiral of the war is leading the aggressors to tear each other apart, to resort to similar methods against civilians, i.e. ethnic cleansing” – so Véronique Nahoum-Grappe in her introductory essay to the Comité Vukovar-Sarejvo’s edited volume in late 1993. “This tragic mimetism is not the least of Milošević’s victories.”⁵² In addition, a reconsideration of the idealized portrayal of the Muslims as collective victims was called for. Information about the transactions between Muslim leader Fikret Abdić and his Serb enemies in the Bihać region was becoming available, while the presence of foreign volunteers (the so-called mujahedeen from Arab countries)⁵³ alongside the Bosnian militias seemed to give credence to the charge of a Muslim threat made by the Serb rulers and their supporters in France.

As early as August 1992 the philosopher Pascal Bruckner had developed an awkward argument to defend the policy of coming to the rescue of Bosnia’s Muslims:

“What shall we tell the Islamists when they rightfully reproach us with having consented to the massacre of European Muslims in a climate of general indifference?”⁵⁴

Was support for “Bosnia” predicated upon the belief that all Muslims in Europe identified with the fate of the Bosniaks and the wish to prevent Muslim resentment in Western Europe? Was it grounded in considerations of French internal religious and cultural diversity? Some journalists did not hesitate to make such an argument. In the widely circulated right-wing international affairs journal, *Politique internationale*, whose editor-in-chief Patrick Wajzman had advocated armed intervention since mid-1992, journalist Xavier Gautier pleaded that

“it [is] urgent to learn the ‘Bosnian lesson’ [...] not only for the sake of Sarajevo or Mostar, but for our own Western societies. If we are insensitive to the dignity of the Bosnian housewives who went out during the bombings to demonstrate their resolve not to be moved away from their home by Serb terrorists [...], how shall we anticipate the revolt that threatens to enflame our own suburbs through clashes between young *Beurs* and white youth [...] Today, Western Europe too is threatened by the risk of an eruptive civil war.”⁵⁵

⁵² NAHOUM-GRAPPE, Vukovar, Sarajevo ..., 43.

⁵³ For further information on these combatants, see ICTY, Summary of the Judgement for Enver Hadžihasanović and Amir Kubura. The Hague 2005, accessible at: <http://www.icty.org/x/cases/hadzihasanovic_kubura/press/en/PR1054e%20%20Summary%20of%20Judgment%20for%20Hadzihasanovic%20an.pdf>, 9 September, 2013.

⁵⁴ Pascal BRUCKNER, *Le Figaro*, 10 August, 1992.

⁵⁵ Xavier GAUTIER, Balkans: la contagion, *Politique internationale* 57 (1992), 245. *Beur* is a slang term derived from the word *Arab* through several inversions of syllables. It is used to describe

Several French observers who had adopted Milošević's rhetoric – such as journalists Paul-Marie de la Gorce and Jacques Merlino⁵⁶ – drew opposite conclusions from similar observations: "Islamism" in Bosnia had to be contained, if not rolled back.

The Era of the Witness "in Real Time"

The year 1993 was also the moment when a flurry of testimony about the origins and the unfolding of the war started to appear on the French book market. One might be tempted to attribute this upsurge of interest in, if not fascination for, voices from the region to a situation in which, in the words of Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, "seldom has such a dramatic war been so unreal to us and so unintelligible to the victims".⁵⁷ The repeated references to a new Holocaust may also have encouraged the search for witnesses able to narrate the catastrophe in the making. The war in Bosnia was indeed taking place at a moment when testimonies and autobiographical writings had become not only valuable sources for historians of the Holocaust, but also documents whose ever greater symbolic significance was associated with a transformation in the modes of remembering the extermination of Europe's Jews.⁵⁸ In any case, the increasing interweaving of individual memory, storytelling, and history was not lost on Western publishing houses. In 1993, Robert Laffont translated the diary of a young girl living under siege in Sarajevo into French. Earlier it had been published in Bosnia's capital. In his forward to the French edition, Bernard Fixot emphasized the parallel with Anne Frank's diary:

"Amidst the crowd of testimonies and flow of information that reach us from former Yugoslavia, the words of Zlata, the daily chronicle by this little girl whose model is Anne Frank, acquires a particular resonance. At a time when the war in Bosnia is becoming drowned in endless negotiations, a text similar to this one may give everyone a new awareness of the drama that is currently being played there."⁵⁹

The soliciting of the comments, observations, and thoughts of Yugoslav intellectuals and writers soon became one of the characteristics of the Bosnian war. Most dailies, weeklies, and engaged intellectual journals, as well as a diversity

French citizens of Northern-African descent. The expression is not necessarily derogative.

⁵⁶ Jacques MERLINO, *Toutes les vérités yougoslaves ne sont pas bonnes à dire*. Paris 1994.

⁵⁷ NAHOUM-GRAPPE, *Vukovar, Sarajevo ...*, 50.

⁵⁸ On this evolution, see WIEVIORKA, *The Era of the Witness*.

⁵⁹ Zlata FILIPOVIĆ, *Le journal de Zlata*. Paris 1993, 8. The book came out in English under the title *Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo*. London 1994, with an introduction by Italian journalist Janine Di Giovanni. Other testimonies (co-)authored by teenagers include Edisa PALIKUCA, *N'oubliez pas Mostar*. Paris 1994.

of printing houses, opened their doors to “former Yugoslavs”.⁶⁰ As Véronique Nahoum-Grappe recalled, every single intellectual circle had his or her Bosnian connection, his/her contact in Sarajevo, his/her refugee home.⁶¹ The particular geopolitical status of Yugoslavia during the Cold War, as well as the existence of a large Yugoslav diaspora in the United States, Germany, and France, guaranteed the availability of local voices. West of the Iron Curtain, socialist Yugoslavia had been accessible and extremely inviting. The Federation had become a familiar destination for many Western artists⁶² and thinkers who had befriended Tito and/or members of the critical intelligentsia (left or nationally-oriented intellectuals). More often than not, the selection of local voices built upon these earlier intellectual friendships and linguistic affinities. In France translators like Mireille Robin and Mauricette Begic devoted tremendous energy to make sure that their works would reach a French audience. Moreover, as more and more intellectuals left their homeland to seek refuge in West European countries, the number of possible witnesses in these countries increased. Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić, after being subjected to a violent media campaign for her anti-Tudjman positions, settled in the Netherlands; Croatian philosopher Rada Iveković opted for France, as did Serb opponent Ivan Djurić; the former dean of the Sarajevo Faculty of Theatrical Arts, Dževad Karahasan, left for Vienna.

The “testimonies” thus collected were diverse: Some pieces represented scholarly attempts to make sense of the war;⁶³ others chronicled daily life in wartime⁶⁴, and a third category of authors chose fiction to narrate the conflict.⁶⁵ There were also several renowned intellectuals of Yugoslav descent who were

⁶⁰ Somehow a “nice” division of labour was established, which is exemplified in a volume co-edited by the leftwing daily *Libération* and the Editions de l’Aube in 1994. The book is neatly divided into three sections: witnesses from the region; “experts” (i.e. scholars working on the Balkans), and public thinkers. See Authors’ collective, *L’éclatement yougoslave*.

⁶¹ Informal comment made at a seminar at the Centre d’études slaves, where Anne Madelain lectured on “Interpréter l’irruption de la violence et les justifications ethniques dans les guerres yougoslaves des années 1990”, Paris, 8 February, 2012.

⁶² This point is well-documented in Mila TURAJLIĆ’s documentary on Yugoslav cinema, *Cinema Komunisto* (Serbia 2010), 100 minutes.

⁶³ Ivan DJURIĆ, Les racines historiques du conflit serbo-croate, *Etudes* 4 (1991), 293-303; idem, Réalité historique et géostratégique de l’espace yougoslave, *Les Temps modernes* 10 (1992), 142-149; idem, La Croatie depuis l’effondrement de la Yougoslavie. Paris 1994; Ivan ČOLOVIĆ, Le bordel des guerriers. Folklore, politique et guerre. Paris 2009 (1st edition 1993).

⁶⁴ Željko VUKOVIĆ, L’Assassinat de Sarajevo. Paris 1995; Zlatko DIZDAREVIĆ, Journal de guerre: chronique de Sarajevo assiégée. Paris 1993; idem, Portraits de Sarajevo. Paris 1994; idem, J’accuse l’ONU. Paris 1995; Predrag MATVEJEVIĆ, Epistolaire de l’autre Europe. Paris 1993; idem, Entre asile et exil. Paris 1995; idem, Le monde “ex”. Paris 1996; Bogdan BOGDANOVIĆ, L’homme-Sarajevo, *Esprit* 5 (1995), 90-103; Dubrovka UGREŠIĆ, Sarajevo mon amour, *La Règle du jeu* 9 (1993); idem, Le coeur en pain d’épice, *La Lettre internationale*, Spring 1993.

⁶⁵ Velibor ČOLIĆ, Bosniaques. Paris 1993 (translated by Mireille ROBIN); Vidosav STEVANOVIĆ, La neige et les chiens. Paris 1993 (translated by Mauricette BEGIC and Christine CHATON).

not strictly speaking “witnesses” but who built upon their knowledge of Yugoslavia in order to offer their interpretations of the war. The texts of such writers as Slavoj Žižek, Slavenka Drakulić, or Predrag Matvejević circulated in (often simultaneous) multiple translations and drew on a transnational community of readers. Yet, beyond the diversity of their individual trajectories, most of the refugees and/or prisoners (locked up physically in Sarajevo or symbolically in Belgrade and Zagreb) tended to share several features: They were highly educated, multilingual, urban, and strongly opposed to state nationalism as well as to the narrowing of intellectual horizons that the war had caused. One might go as far as to say that their voices were given a hearing to the extent that they met the (non-nationalist, cosmopolitan, etc.) expectations of the pro-Bosnia French intelligentsia and publishers.

More importantly, for better or worse, their depictions of the conflict reflected both their social profile *and* their experiences as South-East European intellectuals. Seen from their vantage point, the support of part of Yugoslavia’s inhabitants for nationalistic parties appeared as a mystery, a sad absurdity, or the province of poorly educated rural people. The fame enjoyed in France by framing the war as the revenge of rural peripheries on an urban elite bears a “Balkan” imprint. Architect and former mayor of Belgrade Bogdan Bogdanović was one of the most respected proponents of this reading. Reflecting on the reasons behind the systematic and purposeful destruction of “beautiful cities, very beautiful cities, the most beautiful”, he wrote:

“One of the engines of the rise and fall of civilizations [is] the eternal Augustinian, Manichean history [...] of the struggle without respite between the love and hatred of cities [...]. Those who hate cities and destroy them are no longer a phenomenon found merely in books; they are among us [...]. The primitive man has a hard time accepting that some things may have existed ‘before him’; his aetiology is simple, exclusive, and unique, especially when it has been systematically worked upon in cafés’ didascalía. [...] What I believe I may discern in the panicked souls of city destroyers is a ferocious opposition to all that is urban, i. e. to the complex semantic constellation composed of the mind, ethics, a way of talking, taste and style [...]. Hence we know what awaits us if the defenders of Serb villages and the failed conquerors of Croatian cities soon offer to become our fellow citizens, our fellow inhabitants, and our masters too.”⁶⁶

Véronique Nahoum-Grappe built on Bogdanović’s interpretation:

“[...] the true sociological line of division lies between cities and rural areas, between fully European citizens and a more closed and traditional peasant world that is a cause of joy for ethnologists.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Bogdan BOGDANOVIĆ, *L’urbicide ritualisé*, in: NAHOUM-GRAPPE, *Vukovar, Sarajevo ...*, 34-37.

⁶⁷ NAHOUM-GRAPPE, *Vukovar, Sarajevo ...*, 68.

Obviously, such a simplifying interpretation is no substitute for the much needed scholarly analysis of the social transformations that had actually taken place during socialism in Yugoslavia, including the rapid growth of urban populations and internal village-to-village migrations.

Moreover, "local" intellectuals engaged in exercises in self-exoticization by drawing on stereotypes about their fellow citizens, and in ways that owed much to the historical shaping of the role of the Balkan intelligentsia since the 19th century. For instance, in 1992, Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić added to the imagery of Balkan mysteries:

"No graph, drawing, or map can be of any real help because the burden of the past – [...] all that makes for irrationality, is buried deep in our subconscious and threatens to emerge at any time – it can simply not be explained."⁶⁸

Few are the French observers who, instead of welcoming such statements as depictions of a Balkan "truth", placed them in their own historical and social context.

*Divided Scholarship:
The Mosaic of a "Former Yugoslav" Community*

Part of the reason for the lack of critical distance is that scholars specializing in Balkan studies were at the time largely muted (and when they were not, hardly heard). Like scholars in the United States, French students of the Balkans were taken by surprise by the collapse of the Federation and the ensuing bloody war.⁶⁹ During the interwar period, France had actively engaged with South-East Europe, sponsoring a Balkan entente designed to preserve the *status quo* established by the treaties of Versailles, Saint-Germain, Trianon, and Neuilly – a commitment, which had given rise to a large body of scholarly work on the region. Following World War II, French foreign policy turned to other priorities, chiefly related to the loss of its colonial empire and the tentative recovery of its international standing. As a consequence Balkan studies waned and more often than not were incorporated into "Soviet studies". However there were also researchers specializing in Yugoslav affairs, a country with whom France had enjoyed warm relations. Yet they were mostly linguists (Slav languages specialist Paul Garde) and economists (Catherine Samary). The Balkans also attracted the attention of a handful of ethnologists, specializing in the study of identities (Jean-François Gossiaux) and/or in landownership (Marie-Paule Canapa). Finally, several academics approached the region through the prism

⁶⁸ DRAKULIĆ, *The Balkan Express*, 7.

⁶⁹ Stevan PAVLOWITCH, Who Is "Balkanizing" Whom? The Misunderstandings between the Debris of Yugoslavia and an Unprepared West, *Daedalus* 123 (1994), no. 2, 203-223, 211f.

of Islam, following in the footsteps of Alexandre Popovic, the leading scholar in the field. Sociologists, political scientists, and contemporary historians were rarer. It is significant that the (rather pro-Croat) first piece of work devoted to the demise of Yugoslavia was written by ... a linguist.⁷⁰

Nevertheless the dominant issue is not the lack of historical or sociological knowledge. Rather the inability of scholarship to “comment live” on the war – a tempo which is by definition ill-suited to the logic of scholarly research – resulted from the existence of deep divisions among Balkan specialists. Most of them had a family background in the region and the dissolution of the Federation affected them directly as the ever sharper cleavages between the pro-Yugoslav, pro-Serb, pro-Croat, and pro-Muslim milieus were carried to France. While some authors had taken stock of Slovenian and Croatian independence early on (political scientist Jacques Rupnik⁷¹), others were more reticent (for instance, historian Joseph Krulic⁷² and Balkan Islam specialist Alexandre Popovic⁷³). Against this background a majority of academics preferred to abstain from joining the concert of media voices, thus leaving the floor to commentators whose knowledge of the area was sometimes scanty.

This configuration was made more unpalatable by the engagement of members of the “former Yugoslav” diaspora, whose work up to this point had been unrelated to Yugoslavia, but who felt impelled to promote their vision of the Yugoslav wars. On the “Serb” side of the “ethnic fence”, the respected publishing house L’Âge d’homme, whose bookstore in Paris had long served as a meeting place for the East European intelligentsia in France, turned into one of the promoters of Serb nationalist writings.⁷⁴ On the “Croatian side”, three renowned

⁷⁰ Paul GARDE, *Vie et mort de la Yougoslavie*. Paris 1992. One year later, Joseph Krulic offered his reading of the Yugoslav dismemberment in Joseph KRULIC, *Histoire de la Yougoslavie, de 1945 à nos jours*. Bruxelles 1993. See also Catherine SAMARY, *La déchirure yougoslave, questions pour l’Europe*. Paris 1994.

⁷¹ Jacques Rupnik edited one of the earliest academic publications devoted to the fate of Yugoslavia: Jacques RUPNIK (ed.), *De Sarajevo à Sarajevo, l’échec yougoslave*. Bruxelles 1992.

⁷² Joseph KRULIC, *Les populismes d’Europe de l’Est*, *Le débat* 67 (1991), 75-82.

⁷³ Alexandre Popovic later shared critical thoughts on the public thinkers having “preached” in the name of Bosnia, and offered his own reading of the trajectories of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Alexandre POPOVIC, *Les Musulmans de Bosnie-Herzégovine*. Mise en place d’une guerre civile, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 116/117 (1997), 91-104. See also idem, *Sur quelques mythologies journalistiques*, *Liber*, 14 June, 1993, 3-6.

⁷⁴ See, among others, Dobrica TCHOSSITCH, *La Yougoslavie et la question serbe*. Lausanne 1992; Slobodan DESPOT et al., *De l’imprécision à la falsification: Analyses de vie et mort de la Yougoslavie de Paul Garde*. Lausanne 1992; Pierre-Marie GALLOIS, *Le soleil d’Allah aveugle l’Occident*. Lausanne 1995; Vladimir VUKADINOVIC, *Le mur de Sarejvo: les Serbes face à la justice française*. Lausanne 1995. On the role of L’Âge d’homme during the war, see Alice KRIEG-PLANQUE, *Un dictionnaire de combat: le ‘Petit glossaire de la guerre civile yougoslave’ comme mode d’intervention dans un espace public en crise*, *Semen. Revue desémio-linguistique des textes et discours* 34 (2012), 7-9.

figures, including the historian of medicine Mirko Grmek, edited a collection of Serb texts, which purported to demonstrate the existence of a historical continuity between 19th century Serb theoreticians of the nation and the radical nationalists of the 1990s.⁷⁵ It was not until 1995 that the first field-based, in-depth, scholarly study of the conflict (a collection of articles written during the course of the conflict) was published as a separate volume.⁷⁶ The shock of the war as well as the intense frustration provoked by the ways in which it was exposed in the French public space gave rise to a new generation of scholars who, from the late 1990s onwards, endeavoured to overcome the painful divides that the war had made in the world of Balkan studies.

Conclusion

The fall of Srebrenica in July 1995 did not immediately alter the existing representations of the war. Media interest in the conflict was merely revived, despite considerations of viewer preferences for lighter topics during the summer break. A few months prior to the massacre, the decision of the Serbs to take UN Blue Helmets hostage (over 100 were French) had convinced President Chirac to create, alongside the British and the Dutch, a Rapid Reaction Force to support UN soldiers with force. In August, at last painfully aware of the powerlessness of UNPROFOR, Chirac agreed to join the Nato airstrikes against the Serbs. At the time, some public thinkers may have understood that a historical moment – the post-1989 years – was coming to a close. In 1994 a genocide had taken place in Rwanda. There was no longer talk of an “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama); the world seemed destined to be neither more orderly nor more disorderly than it had been during the Cold War period, now retrospectively construed as a long peace. What public thinkers might have failed to grasp, though, was that the great days of engaged intellectuals were also coming to an end. Although some lone “New Philosophers” have continued to endorse that role (primarily, Bernard-Henri Lévy), the war in Yugoslavia provided the final stage for their collective public performance. Since then the figure of the French intellectual (whose legitimacy was predicated upon his ability to endow events with meaning and to act as a moral authority) has been superseded by the “expert” (whose prestige stems from his specialized and supposedly objective and independent knowledge).

Throughout this paper, I have tried to depict the broad commerce of ideas and people that underlay the (mis)readings of Yugoslavia’s dissolution and of the war. However my purpose was not to place solely on the engaged French

⁷⁵ Mirko GRMEK / Marc GJIDARA / Neven SIMAC (eds.), *Le nettoyage ethnique. Documents historiques sur une idéologie serbe*. Paris 1993.

⁷⁶ Xavier BOUGAREL, *Bosnie. Anatomie d’un conflit*. Paris 1995.

thinkers and scholars the burden of having failed to apprehend this rather unexpected turn of events. Nor was it my intention to pass a normative judgement on attempts at building a cause and on the (often highly emotionally charged) commitment of engaged citizens. With the advantage of hindsight, and not subject to the uncertainties of the time the intellectuals and scholars lived in, one may well lecture on the ways in which they should have responded. However there does not seem to be much of value in taking such a position. Rather, the argument I have tried to make is that it takes two to tango: the missed encounter did not result exclusively from the projection of a range of French concerns into Sarajevo; they were the product of the specific connections between French and "former Yugoslav" public figures. Their dialogue enmeshed French and Balkan stereotyping in original ways, as Bosniak, Croat, and Serb "witnesses" tried to get attention and support by playing upon their interlocutors' expectations, while the French observers filtered the information they received through lenses tinted by their own experience and social trajectories. Ultimately, the techniques used to "translate" Bosnia into a set of operational categories tended to obscure the image of the country.

Perhaps more importantly, there is no guarantee that, despite the development of a large body of literature on former Yugoslavia over the past decade, scholars and decision-makers would be better equipped to face a crisis in the region today. As Kalevy Holsti has convincingly demonstrated in an ambitious piece of work, elites are typically one war behind: they confront every new unfathomable event by drawing on the memories and "lessons" from a previous conflict.⁷⁷ Alas, it is a banal fact of life that societies and issues change, and that knowledge acquired at a specific time and in a specific place loses its relevance at a fast pace. Scholars are no more shielded from this fact than decision makers are.

⁷⁷ Kalevy HOLSTI, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order*. Cambridge 1991.