

# The wars in Yugoslavia

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A path being beaten to The Hague war crimes' tribunal? It has almost become a road, such is the traffic. Since October, 12 alleged war criminals have made their own way to Holland to hand themselves over. They are mostly Serbs, but last week it was the turn of Ramush Haradinaj, the former prime minister of Kosovo, accused of crimes against his territory's Serb minority. This week the Croatian government will probably be told that it has lost its

chance of being considered for European Union membership since it hasn't persuaded Gen. Ante Gotovina to turn himself in.

The penny is beginning to drop that you can't do such dastardly deeds and strut your stuff in your hometown forever more. Something has profoundly changed in international relations which augurs well for the future of international justice and the diminishing of

future conflicts.

One lesson is being learned, but another isn't. The conventional wisdom still holds that Yugoslavia's wars were ethnic conflicts. They were not. They were wars of thugs. The murderous core of the supporters of ex-Yugoslavia's president, Slobodan Milosevic, the Bosnian president, Alija Izetbegovic, the Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, and the Croatian president, Franjo Tudjman were not by and large ordinary citizens incited into violence against their neighbors but soccer hooligans, street gangs, even criminals, who were released from jail for the purpose and, on the Bosnian side, Mujahedeen recruited from Afghanistan.

They were recruited by the politicians, first and foremost by Milosevic, to pursue a nationalist agenda that he believed could keep him in power at a time when it became obvious that the Yugoslav

Army was disintegrating in the early days of the first war with Croatia, with an estimated 150,000 Serbian young men either emigrating or going underground. The hooligan killers inevitably attracted opportunists drawn to the fruits of war the looting, raping and binge drinking that were their daily fare. Vladan Vasilijevic, an expert in organized crime, says that most of the well-documented atrocities in Bosnia were committed by men with long criminal records.

In the absence of an alternative political leadership, rank and file citizens fell in behind them or at least tolerated them especially as revenge killings from the other side began to take their toll. Both Milosevic and Tudjman were adept at using their secret police to direct and coordinate the killings in pursuit of ethnic cleansing. Some of these

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groups evolved into semi-coherent paramilitary outfits like Arkan's Tigers and Vojislav Seselj's Chetniks. Arkan, (aka Zeljko Raznatovic), one of the most feared war criminals of the whole war, had been the leader of the official fan club of Belgrade's Red Star Soccer team.

Even in Rwanda, where the genocide was on larger scale and much more thorough, it was a small minority that did the real killing. Hutu extremists were substantially in charge of the ruling party, the government bureaucracy and the police. If one reckons that there were 50,000 hard-core killers (a high estimate) and that each of these killed one person a week during the 100-day holocaust, then the 700,000 who died were killed by some two percent of the Hutu population. In other words at least 98 percent of the Hutu did not kill.

For all the horror of these recent cataclysms, they were not Hobbesian wars of all against all and neighbor against neighbor. They were stirred by unscrupulous politicians who relied on relatively small numbers of evildoers to do their bidding.

In most, if not all, societies if such thugs were licensed they could do similar deeds. Until quite recently it was quite possible to imagine Northern Ireland descending into Bosnian chaos if the British authorities had not been prepared for the long haul of patient policing and political accommodation. Even so the "thug" element in the paramilitaries is still calling many of the shots as we have recently seen with the IRA-sponsored bank robbery and the murder of Robert McCartney.

The overthrow of Milosevic, we must never forget, happened because of people power, not NATO bombing the essen-

tially good, silent majority, who were prepared first to vote and, second, demonstrate when they saw it stood a good chance of success. Unfortunately, the Western nations made a too simple analysis of the situation.

They concluded early on that it was large-scale ethnic war and from there they ended up with a simplistic conclusion bombing that worked only to consolidate Milosevic's power and, in the case of Kosovo, precipitated the ethnic cleansing they were supposedly trying to avoid. Fortunately, Western policy had another face, the legal one, which we are now seeing, enacted in The Hague.

But, if only there had been a standing international criminal court 14 years ago with the power of arrest and if only the EU had dangled the carrot of European membership then, the worst of these so-called "ethnic wars" could have been avoided. The people would not have allowed them.