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## Letter to the Editor Re: "Former Yugoslavia"

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

December 1, 1994

Dear Editor:

Re: "Former Yugoslavia" by David Steele in Religion in Eastern Europe, Vol. XIV No. 5  
I found Dr. Steele's analysis of the role of the churches and religion in the Yugoslav conflict helpful and in many ways more even-handed than most reports coming out of this tragic war. I will try to take to heart his observation that "Most people respond defensively to allegations against their own group, citing their own list of allegations against their adversary," but there are two points on which I must comment.

The first point refers to Dr. Steele's statement, "Despite careful documentation by internationally renowned organizations, such as Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch, the [Serbian Orthodox] bishops denied that Serbian militias had held and raped 40,000 Muslim women." This charge of "rape camps" was given a huge amount of play in the media and was instrumental in creating an image of Serbian monsters, but in fact it has never been substantiated, and there is no credible evidence that any such policy or such camps ever existed. Peter Brock, special projects and political editor for the El Paso Herald-Post, writes in the journal Foreign Policy, #93, Winter Edition 1993/94:

On December 10, 1992 Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle also cited parts of an August 2, 1992, report from the State Center for Investigation of War Crimes (Serb Republic of Bosnia—Herzegovina). Compiled for the U.N. in November 1992, it identified locations at Sarajevo, Tuzla, Bugojno, Konjic, Bihac, and Slavonski Brod where Serb women were allegedly confined and raped by Croat and Muslim soldiers.

Also unnoticed by the media was the submission on December 18, 1992, of the lengthy report (S/24991) by the U.N. Security Council to the General Assembly. The report includes some of the depositions by Serb rape victims from the incidents above. U.N. officials have never explained why it was not made publicly available until January 5, 1993, even though it was the only report produced by an international agency that contained documented testimonies from any rape victims up until that time. Yet, while that report was receiving minimal circulation at the U.N., the news media were focusing on undocumented claims by Bosnian government officials that Serb soldiers had committed as many as 60,000 rapes of Muslim women.

From the start of the Bosnian war in April 1992 until November of that year, thousands of refugees fled into Croatia and other countries. There, extensive interviews failed to disclose allegations of "systematic rape." Then suddenly, in late November and early December, the world received a deluge of reports about rapes of Muslim women. The accounts originated in the information ministries of the governments of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The January 4, 1993, Newsweek, for one, quoted unsubstantiated Bosnian government claims of up to 50,000 rapes of Muslims by Serb soldiers. A European Community delegation headed by Dame Anne Warburton made a hurried

investigation during two brief visits to the region in December 1992 and January 1993. It reported that it had visited primarily Zagreb but obtained only minimal access to alleged Muslim victims or refugee centers where victims were supposedly located. Of note, the delegation said it had encountered additional reports about rapes of Croat and Serb women. Although it declined to specify the source of "*the most reasoned estimates suggested to the mission*," Warburton's group decided to accept and report "*the number of victims at around 20,000*."

An inquiry by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights soon presented a more moderate estimate, however. Its investigators visited Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia from January 12 to 23, 1993. In its report of February 10, the commission, while refraining from giving an official estimate, mentioned a figure of 2,400 victims. The estimate was based on 119 documented cases. The report concluded that Muslims, Croats, and Serbs had been raped, with Muslims making up the largest number of victims. Finally, the EC's Committee on Women's Rights held hearings on February 17 and 18 on the Warburton Delegation's findings, eventually rejecting the estimate of 20,000 Muslim rape victims cause of the lack of documented evidence and testimony. At the hearing, U.N. war crimes commission chairman Frits Kalshoven testified that the evidence collected up to that point would not stand up as proof in a court. Similarly, representatives from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees concluded that not enough independent evidence could be found, while Amnesty International and the International Committee of the Red Cross concurrently declared that all sides were committing atrocities and rape.

The resulting handful of rape-produced births also clearly contradicts claims of waves of systematic rape-induced pregnancies supposedly treated in Bosnian hospitals and reported by Bosnian government authorities and Western journalists.

The general lack of follow-up on the rape allegations is in stark contrast to the lone account of French journalist Jerome Bony, who described in a February 4, 1993 broadcast on the French television program "*Envoye Special*" his trek to Tuzla, notorious for its concentration of Muslim rape victims:

"When I was at 50 kilometers from Tuzla I was told, 'Go to the Tuzla high school grounds [where] there are 4,000 raped women.' At 20 kilometers this figure dropped to 400. At 10 kilometers only 40 were left. Once at the site, I found only four women willing to testify."

At the height of the rape story, media gullibility reached new levels. In mid-February 1993, the Associated Press, citing only a Bosnian government source, reported alleged cannibalism by starving Muslims in eastern Bosnia. The story achieved instant headlines in the United States.

Receiving little if any play, however, was the denial the following-day by U.N. officials, who rushed to the scene of supposedly starving villagers and discovered them still in possession of livestock and chickens.

The second point I wish to comment upon is the consistent use of the term "Serb aggression." The term has been used so much in the media that for many people the two words seem to be married with the implication that Serbs and aggression naturally go together. It should be pointed out that, at least from the Serb point of view, much of the fighting has not been aggression at all. The Serbs who are fighting are almost all natives of Bosnia-Herzegovina or of Croatia respectively and are, in their view, for the most part simply defending their own homes, lands, and families. It is a fact that ethnic Serbs held legal title to over 60 percent of land in Bosnia-Herzegovina before the war started. The Serb-controlled Krajina area of Croatia is Serb controlled exactly because it is ethnically predominantly Serbian. "Aggression" in international relations denotes an attack upon a country from outside its borders. As the parties to the conflict are natives of these areas,

these would more precisely be termed civil wars, and in such wars the role of "aggressor" is much more difficult to assign.

A further illustration of the one-sided use of the term may be found in the November fighting around the Bihac "safe area." The media reported with approval the Bosnian government's Fifth Corp's offensive from inside the "safe area" while it was pushing Bosnian Serb forces back from lines which had been stable and inactive for some time. It was only when the Bosnian Serb counter-attack became successful that we began to hear about Serb aggression against a United Nations safe area, with scarcely a mention that the fighting had been initiated by Bosnian government troops. (Fighting in other U.N. "safe areas" has often, though certainly not always, been initiated by Bosnian government troops in an effort to involve NATO air forces against Serbian positions.) The point is that the propriety of Bosnian government military actions *from inside a United Nations safe area* was never even questioned by the media, much less characterized as "aggression."

From a political point of view, the war(s) have boiled down to the following questions:

1. Do an independent Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have a right to exist? Putting aside all the practical economic and social questions involved, most people in the former Yugoslavia, including most Serbs, would say, "Yes."

2. What are the borders of these new countries? This is the crux of the problem. The international community simply recognized the internal administrative borders of the constituent Yugoslav republics as international borders. The Serbs living in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, citing historical persecution and long-standing mutual distrust, as well as the lack of strong guarantees for the protection of human rights for minorities, have as a whole repeatedly refused to accept the status of a minority group in these new states. They demand the same right to self-determination accorded to Croats and Bosnian Muslims. [Ethnic Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina for a long while in this war had the same goal, setting up a Croatian-controlled area on Bosnian territory which even used the Croatian flag, currency, and auto license plates. The U.S.-brokered Bosnian-Croatian federation has put an end to that temporarily, but many would not be surprised to see a future push for the integration of predominantly Croatian lands in Bosnia-Herzegovina into a "Greater Croatia."] A drawing up of new borders promises to be an extremely difficult task, but it can be done through intensive negotiations. The main obstacle to such negotiations has been the refusal by members of the international community to admit that their recognition of these new states several years ago was premature and that the borders they recognized along with these new states were untenable.

Of course, for people of faith the question goes much deeper than mere politics. As Patriarch Pavle and the Serbian Orthodox bishops have repeatedly pointed out, some of the viciousness of this war is attributable to the effects of the Communist era when basic

Christian morality was banished from society. But there are legitimate grievances and historical memories which will not simply disappear. The peoples of the region all need to rediscover not only their own victimization, but also their own culpability. Only then will they be able to mutually forgive and ask forgiveness, and only out of this mutual forgiveness will they be able to address the task of learning to live together, not only in peace and toleration, but in mutual respect and cooperation as neighbors. It is in this regard that the religious communities can have the greatest impact. Religious leaders from all sides must categorically and emphatically reject the concept of "holy war" which certain extremists on all sides have embraced. But it is unrealistic to put too much hope in, or too much blame on, the faith communities of the region. Even should the religious leadership of all sides unambiguously commit themselves in this way, it is perhaps questionable, given the peripheralization of religion over the past half-century, whether their people would follow their lead.

A major reason for the prolongation and savageness of this war has been the demonization of each of the combatant parties by the others. This, of course, is unfortunately nothing new in history since it is always easier to fight an enemy which one sees as less than human or civilized. This demonization, with the wild conspiracy theories and accusations which accompany them, must be rejected by faith leaders and political leaders alike. Equally to blame for the prolongation of the war has been the concomitant irresponsible demonization of one side, the Serbs, in the international media and in world public opinion, which has led to international policies which have fed and seemingly confirmed Serbian feelings of persecution and conspiracy. True statesmen must deal with a complex reality and not with the tempting simplicity of "white hats versus black hats" which most press coverage has fostered.

What is needed to give peace a chance in this area is a new view both of one's own nation and of other nations and peoples. In other words, what is needed is true *metanoia*, true repentance, a true change of mind and heart. Such repentance can come only from a deep spiritual transformation, a crisis of faith which leads to a strengthening of faith. The religious people of the area must lead this transformation, which demands letting go of certain old comfortable positions, hatreds and animosities, and developing new moorings and foundations for a common life of peace. It remains the prayer and hope of all people of good will that God will give them and all of us the grace and wisdom and strength to make that leap.

Sincerely,

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