
Guest Commentary: Claude Ragon

The war in the heart of Europe is not an ethnic or religious conflict

Claude Ragon, a Frenchman from Haute-Savoie with relatives in Croatia, sent the following contribution to the French newspaper Nouvelle Solidarité where it appeared in the Dec. 20, 1991 issue. For reasons of space limitations, our translated excerpts omit his invective against the European Community's neutrality in the war, a neutrality which has prolonged the butchery.

The drama which has been striking Yugoslavia for months, because of its complexity, makes one think of another drama—Lebanon. How is it possible that on the eve of the 21st century we can again be witnessing a war where we see the massive deployment of military means, leaving in their wake the total destruction of towns and villages, deaths in the tens of thousands, and refugees in the hundreds of thousands? This is taking place on our doorstep, since, after all, it takes less time to go from d'Annecy [in France] to Zagreb, than from d'Annecy to Brest.

Croatia, from the beginning of the war, had no more than several thousand rifles. It had neither aircraft, nor heavy artillery, nor tanks, nor navy—nothing that characterizes an army. In order to defend itself, it had to help itself from what was in the barracks of the Federal Army. Needless to say, these “exploits” were paid by very heavy losses. The battle was largely unequal. What characterizes this war is the savagery and fury of the Serbs to conquer Croatia.

For surely, this is a war of conquest. Every means is brought to bear: bombardment, heavy artillery barrage, intervention by the navy along the Adriatic coast, utilization of armored vehicles; the irony of fate is that Croats have paid for part of this armamentarium. Civilian populations are particularly targeted, villagers being assassinated in order to create a climate of terror. Numerous Croatian villages are annihilated. In Slavonia, there are many towns stamped with the dark memory of Oradour-sur-Glane [a southern French town, where the Nazis murdered all the inhabitants in retaliation for a *maquis* attack on a Nazi convoy]. We had forgotten that in Europe it was still possible to be delivered up to such atrocities. After the Serbs had gone, one found the bodies of the men, but also the women, children, and elderly, frightfully mutilated, their eyes torn out. The battle for Vuko-

var cost thousands of lives and considerable destruction. In the ruins, they found 41 children with their throats slit. Is it believable that in 1991, thousands of civilians, without food, without water, without electricity could be bombarded for weeks? Can one imagine a hospital having to be set up in the sewer system?

Geneva Convention defied

The evacuation of Vukovar was done in defiance of the Geneva Conventions, under which the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) should have handled the survivors and conveyed them to Croatian lines. No such thing happened. The survivors were driven to a work camp in Serbia. At least, the able-bodied were, for the elderly and the wounded had been massacred, discreetly, far from the eyes of the European observers.

To date this conflict has already left more than 20,000 dead, and a macabre accounting risks raising this figure more. The unleashing of the Serbian army with the support of the irregulars lies halfway between lack of all inhibition and a unprovoked act. It must be known that this is an especially dirty war, insofar as any war could be clean.

No humanity is respected and the laws of war, such as they exist, are overturned, ignored, trampled under foot. Why attack hospitals, schools, nursery schools, churches? Nothing justifies the bombardment of Dubrovnik—there is neither a federal barracks nor an important Serbian minority there. The sorry truth is that the Serbs want to “break Croatia” and increase their territory at the expense of Croatia's. Whatever cannot be taken must be destroyed. The Dalmatian coast is Croatian: Each year, it attracts numerous tourists; it is important for earning hard currency. In order to bring Croatia “to its knees,” this source of income had to be destroyed. Bombing a luxury hotel is tantamount to bombing a factory. Already for several years, armed groups had been frightening tourists.

The fanatical nationalist Serbs have clearly announced their intentions: Kill all the Croats. Could one be clearer? To unjustly accuse the Croats of being Nazis does not authorize the Serbs to use Nazi methods. In claiming the Croats were Nazis, the Serbs justify their crimes and cause ancient hatreds that had totally gone away to be renewed in the population.

Are we going to send a commando team to London to avenge Joan of Arc? In Belgrade, the media are running a furious campaign in order to whip up bellicose feelings. Propaganda and the nationalist delirium turn into hysteria. You can buy the insignia and medals of ancient Serbia, over a century old, or buy cassettes with war songs on them. We are fully back in the Middle Ages, with television to boot.

It is a lie to claim that this war is the end result of an ancestral hatred of the Serbs for the Croats. The Slovenians, who have no historical contentions with the Serbs, also demanded to be freed of the Serbian yoke. Bosnia and Macedonia have clearly and democratically expressed that if Yugoslavia should one day explode, they wouldn't want to stay with the Serbs.

There is also a question of a war of religion: The Serbian extremists speak of a Croat-Vatican-German conspiracy. The phrase is so grotesque that it would be laughable if there were not thousands of dead in the background. The Serbs are Orthodox, whereas [most] Croats are Catholic. Certain Orthodox priests breathed life into dying embers in recalling that the massacres of 1941 had not been expiated. They are Serbs before being Christians. Why, if this is a war of religion, have the Macedonians, who are also Orthodox, disengaged themselves from the Serbs?

A hope for peace

To designate the actors in the conflict as Serbs and Croats is a ruse that distorts the truth. True, it is the Serbs (and their allies among the Montenegrins) who are currently invading Croatia. But whom do they represent? A handful of fanatics thirsty for conquest who have access to and largely make use of essential levers: the army and power. Everywhere numerous Serbs are raising questions about the legitimacy of this war. Desertions are not rare. One Serbian reservist killed himself rather than participate in the massacre. The Croatian resisters of Vukovar were commanded by a Serbian officer; there were Serbs fighting at the side of Croats, which should not only not be surprising, but comforting. In Croatia there are many villages where Serbs and Croats fraternized, at times inside the same family. When the enemy sent its bombs or its shells, it did not differentiate: Just as often, it was a Serbian house that could be hit, with its occupants—a curious way for an army to “deliver” its brothers.

Today, many peace movements are trying to make themselves heard and bring back peace. In the climate currently reigning in Belgrade, these efforts rise to the level of heroism. In fact, some of the peace leaders were called up and sent to the front lines, which is why it is the wives and parents of the soldiers who are most involved. It is not good to be a peace activist today in Serbia. They have just started recruiting at the workplace, and “volunteers” are pushed into combat with a rifle at their backs; recalcitrants are beaten, to then become the bodies that are served up as “victims of the Croats.”

Interview: Mersudin Pajo

Muslim Croats have been targeted

Mersudin “Mike” Pajo, is a Croatian, born near Mostar, the capital of Hercegovina, in 1937. He left his country in 1966 and has lived in Edmonton, Alberta, since 1968. In an interview with Umberto Pascali on Dec. 23, he charged that discrimination against Croats, especially Muslim Croats like himself, goes back to the beginning of Yugoslavia, which was artificially created by the Versailles Treaty in 1920.

The communist Yugoslavia of Marshal Tito—even though Tito was half-Croatian—continued to be this Serbian-dominated Yugoslav state. Even though there was no official support, as in Stalin's U.S.S.R., for the idea of a “guiding nation,” practically speaking, the Serbian nation enjoyed that position. Especially in Bosnia and Hercegovina, even the communists often found it really hard to be a Croat. In 1949, Mike Pajo reports, seven Muslim students were hanged by Tito in Sarajevo for having created the Young Muslim organization, among them a 22-year-old relative of Pajo's. He says, “I think people in the U.S. and Canada have been victims of a campaign of disinformation concerning the Croats of Muslim religion. The Greater Serbs try to propagandize the idea that Muslims cannot be Croats. I am a Muslim by religion and a Croatian by nationality and proud of both. It is clear also why the Greater Serbs want to maintain this false idea, so they can make their false calculations and their *divide et impera*” (divide and conquer).

“But, since the first moment I can remember, we Muslims always had good relations with the Catholics; there was never any problem. For example, now, in Edmonton, I can go to a Catholic mass and a Catholic can go to a mosque. We respect each other. And we are all Croats.

“It is different with the Greater Serbs. You cannot understand how much I love my native city, Mostar. But I had to leave: too much injustice! There was a policy of removing Muslims and Catholics from any important positions. We were, almost by definition, second-class citizens. And we Croats of Muslim religion are often ‘harder’ Croats than the Catholic. We speak the Croatian language better than they do in Zagreb, for example,” he says proudly.

We asked Mike Pajo to comment on the fact that the Greater Serbs have decided to create in Bosnia-Hercego-