

Milosevic's Wars

The canard about the Balkan conflict is that it springs from deep, ethnic hatred. In fact, the atrocities were largely the work of one man

BY CHARLES LANE

The Death of Yugoslavia

Laura Silber and Allan Little, *TV Books*, \$29.95

Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War

Peter Maass, *Knopf*, \$25.95

If you can only read two books about the wars in the former Yugoslavia, you should choose this complementary pair. Laura Silber and Allan Little's journalism is cool, historical, analytical. They have written the best, most detailed account of the political machinations which led to the breakdown of the Yugoslav federation and the beginning of ethnic conflict among its successor states. Peter Maass's reporter's memoir is emotive, gripping, and often moving in evoking the war in Bosnia and the horrible atrocities that were committed by Serb nationalist forces against the mostly Muslim civilian population.

The most durable canard about the wars in the Balkans is that they are the consequence of ancient ethnic hatred, too complex and too deeply rooted to be fathomed, much less countered, by outside powers. This "analysis," which sounds sophisticated but is in fact intellectually lazy, became conventional wisdom—a kind of intellectual trump card—among all those who sought to forestall United States military intervention to stop the Serb drive in Bosnia.

Silber and Little show that the true causes of the war were contemporary. Yes, there were underlying intergroup suspicions among the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims of Yugoslavia. But the "nations," as Yugoslavs call them, had grown accus-

tomed to papering over, if not solving, these tensions during the 40-odd years of Titoist Communism, which collapsed for good in 1990. Deliberate efforts by post-Communist politicians to arouse and exploit nationalistic feelings were what actually ignited the conflagration.

Silber and Little point no denunciatory fingers, but the cumulative impact of their reporting and analysis, based on extraordinary access to the key players in the former Communist governments of the Yugoslav republics, internal military intelligence videotapes, and other previously unearthed primary sources, is that Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia is the principal culprit in the Yugoslav crack-up.

This is essentially the story of three wars—in Slovenia, in Croatia, and in Bosnia, with the latter war being the most bloody and dramatic. Digging back into the much-neglected events of the late 1980s, Silber and Little show that the roots of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia lie in Milosevic's audacious decision to seize control of the Serbian Communist party by exploiting Serb nationalism. He began by making an issue of alleged mistreatment of Serbs in Kosovo—an Albanian-majority province that is nevertheless sacred territory to Serbs. Riding the wave of popular sentiment he had stirred up with help from his media allies in Belgrade, the Serbian capital, Milosevic was able by 1988 to assume control of the Serbian Communist party, which was still the dominant politi-

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cal institution in the state.

From there, Milosevic moved rapidly to install his loyalists—not only in Kosovo, but also in Vojvodina, and Montenegro. With control over four of the eight voting positions on the collective presidency (the executive authority established when Tito died in 1981), Milosevic had effectively seized control over the national government. He had gotten to his position of power by exploiting ethnic tensions. And just as a shark dies if it ever stops swimming, Milosevic's only means of remaining in power in Belgrade was to continue the demagoguery. After Kosovo, he focused on exploiting old Serb fears of the Croats and Muslims. He was willing to pursue this strategy right up to, and beyond, the point of war.

Perhaps the most insightful element of Silber and Little's analysis is their examination of the overlooked Slovene secession. Small, prosperous, and ethnically homogeneous, the Republic of Slovenia split from the rest of Yugoslavia in July 1991. Because Slovenia's war of independence was short and relatively bloodless, it has been ignored in most analyses of what happened later in Croatia and Bosnia. Silber and Little show, however, that the tacit but symbiotic relationship between the Slovene secessionists and Milosevic was crucial to much of what would follow. Once Slovenia was out, Milosevic was left with a working 4 to 3 majority on the Yugoslav presidency.

More important, the Slovene split set the stage for the later use of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) on behalf of policies that were essentially determined in Belgrade. Up to that point, the national army had actually been the most potent impartial force in the country. The executive branch—the primary political institution—was increasingly splintered by nationality. But as dedicated Communists committed to Tito's ideology of "brotherhood and unity," the national army officers maintained the military as the last national institution resisting the split-up of the country. JNA officers went to Slovenia to fight the secessionists in that spirit. But they quickly pulled out at Milosevic's behest—thus solidifying Milosevic's power and precipitating the far bloodier

conflict in Bosnia.

After Slovenia, the national army was increasingly compromised, and increasingly came to be seen, and to see itself, as a pro-Serb force. When the war in Croatia came, it was largely because Milosevic succeeded in falsely portraying the fight for Serb "rights" in Croatia as part of preserving Yugoslav unity. There was a Serb minority in Croatia resisting Croatian independence. Thus, the JNA was willing to jump in on the side of Serb secessionists from Croatia. By the time Bosnia's war began, the national army had shed its Slovene and Croatian officers almost entirely.

Dominated by Serb officers, it was a de facto instrument of Serbian policy. The result was this: Milosevic had the JNA and all its weapons, while the Bosnians were hamstrung by an international arms embargo. Not surprisingly, Milosevic's program of exploiting ethnic tension evolved into the horror of ethnic cleansing.

Though their narrative ends in June 1994, Silber and Little effectively adumbrate the Dayton accords—the essence of which, from a Serb point of view, is Milosevic's abandonment of territory seized by the very Bosnian and Croatian Serbs he had urged into war earlier. Milosevic did so to get sanctions on Serbia proper lifted. Opportunistic motivation underlay all of Milosevic's purported nationalism, so it should come as no surprise that he so quickly dumped nationalism, and those whom he manipulated into fighting a nationalist war, when it suited his own desire to remain in power.

Among the more memorable chapters in Maass's book is his meeting with Milosevic in early 1993. Whereas Silber and Little evoke the political calculations behind Milosevic's actions, Maass produces a perceptive psychological portrait. There were no notetakers or flunkies in the room as the two men talked; no heavy security. This was clearly a hands-on manager, someone who was directly responsible for everything that was done in his name. He was a man curiously lacking in affect, a perpetrator utterly convinced he was really the victim. If Maass's Milosevic were to have a credo, it might be "They hit us back first."

Maass's book shows a Milosevic who is clearly a hands-on manager, someone directly responsible for all that is done in his name.

You would never describe this man as warm, but he did not come across as cold either. His voice was unremarkable, moderate in scale, and when he spoke of wrongs committed against Serbs, his favorite subject, there was a trace of whining in it, the sound of injury. He looked me in the eye for ninety minutes and told one lie after another, and he did it with utter sincerity. He sat three feet away from me, and without smiling or sounding sarcastic, he protested in a sweet voice, "I am one of the normal simple citizens of Serbia. I don't believe I am something extraordinary."

This is hardly the only instance in which Maass's writing rises to the creative level of the best fiction. Maass visits the Serb-run concentration camps at Trnopolje and Omarska, some of the most horrible sites erected in Europe in half a century, and emerges with an account that is both descriptively and emotionally powerful. "There, right in front of me, were men who looked like survivors of Auschwitz.... As I spoke to one of them, I looked at his arm and realized that I could grab hold of it and snap it into two pieces like a brittle twig."

Maass dares to be highly personal in his account, and most of the time this imparts strength and honesty to his recollections. But sometimes the risks inherent in this approach overtake him, and he lapses into hyperbole and shrill accusation. Milosevic is not literally responsible for "the murder of at least 200,000 people," since the death toll in Bosnia was probably not quite that high, and since not all of the dead were actually "murdered." Many died in combat, and some of

them were pro-Milosevic Serbs.

Thus the Auschwitz analogy is plausible in some ways, but problematic in others—and Maass is not sufficiently careful about making these distinctions. For example, he quotes uncritically a joke that used to make the rounds in dark, freezing Sarajevo: "What's the difference between Auschwitz and Sarajevo? In Auschwitz they had gas." I never used to laugh at this tasteless joke. It always made me a bit uneasy, in fact: Sarajevo's problems were bad enough without inviting ridicule by likening the city to a Nazi death camp. In Auschwitz, they didn't have a hospital, a United Nations airlift, sporadic television, a foreign press corps, and sufficient if not abundant food.

In another personal moment, Maass reveals that Bosnia taught him what it means to be Jewish. Growing up secular and unpersecuted in America, he was only dimly aware of the plight of his illustrious ancestors, the Warburgs, (wealthy Jewish bankers who were expropriated and expelled from Hitler's Germany) until Bosnia led him to research their fate. It is appropriate and commendable that witnessing such contemporary human suffering should have led Maass to reflect on the continuity between the persecutions of the past and those of the present, and to place himself on one tangent of that great chain of inhumanity.

In another sense, however, it is sad that Maass came to a new identification with Judaism by way of another comparable group's experience of victimization. "I am now more aware of the fragility of human relations," he writes on the book's last page, "and more aware of what being a Jew can mean." But surely Jewishness and the Jewish people are not defined by the hostility others feel toward them; Jewishness does not "mean" a latent eligibility for extermination. Bluntly, the Holocaust alone does not, and probably should not, define Jewish identity in the modern world, and Maass leaves us wondering why he would imply the opposite. He is on much firmer ground instructing us on the universal lessons taught by Bosnia about the awesome capacity for evil—the "wild beast"—which lurks inside every individual and group, and which can all too easily be unleashed when politicians and citizens surrender to the passionate summons of the tribe. □

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Constitutional Buchananism

Daniel Lazare sees a mess, and proposes absolute majority rule as a way to clean it up

BY LLOYD CUTLER

The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralyzing Democracy

Daniel Lazare, Harcourt Brace, \$25

Daniel Lazare describes himself as a freelance journalist who writes about race, drugs, and urban policy. He has no training or reputation as a constitutional scholar. But he has plainly read a great deal about the framing of our constitution, the writings and thinking of the Enlightenment, and the commentaries on the Constitution from de Tocqueville and Jeremy Bentham to Woodrow Wilson and Charles Beard.

Unfortunately, the conclusions he distills from this research strike me as being as wrong-headed as they possibly can. He views the checks and balances of the constitutional system as freezing the nation's ability to deal decisively with problems from slavery in the first half of the 19th century to the drug culture, urban decay, and environmental damage in the second half of the 20th. In short, he blames the Constitution for every imaginable modern ill.

Lazare offers this doomsday scenario: In 2020, California threatens to secede from the union unless its representation in the Senate is increased to be in proportion with its population. In response, the House of Representatives passes a resolution abolishing the Senate, wins popular approval of this decision by a national referendum, and thereafter runs the country by its own majority rule. Lazare approves of this course. It would be justified, he argues, by the principle that "we, the people," having proclaimed the Constitution in the first place, can amend or abolish it through our elected representatives in the House, without fol-

lowing the amendment procedure specified in Article V. What the president, the courts, the armed forces, and the press would be doing while all this is going on, Lazare does not explain.

One cannot help but note the similarity of Lazare's preference for majoritarian absolutism with that of Pat Buchanan. Buchanan would have Congress set aside Supreme Court constitutional decisions, though even he would probably acknowledge the need to amend the Constitution to do this. Not so Lazare, who would have the House alone seize all the government's powers by coup d'état.

Lazare correctly points out that we have had at least one such coup before, namely when the Philadelphia Convention convened to propose amendments to the Articles of Confederation. Under those Articles, it would have required unanimous approval of all 13 states for any such amendment to be adopted. Instead, the Constitution was drafted from scratch; the framers pronounced by fiat that it would take effect when only nine of the 13 states had ratified it. All this was, of course, very different from what Lazare now envisions, because ultimately all 13 states did ratify. And while the meaning of the original Constitution has certainly been stretched by judicial opinions and executive actions, no one has ever tried to alter its express terms except by following the difficult amendment procedure laid out in the document itself.

Lazare would encourage the House majority to leapfrog Article V because he believes that it absolutely bars any amendment changing the equal suffrage clause—the right of all states to the same

Lloyd Cutler served as counsel to President Carter from 1979 to 1980 and to President Clinton in 1994. Along with Douglas Dillon and Nancy Kassebaum, he has been co-chairman of the Committee on the Constitutional System.