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REFLECTIONS ON
VUKOVAR '91

First may I thank you for the honour you do me in inviting me to attend and address this conference. And may I at the outset apologise for any offence that I may cause by my candour, or lack of circumspection, in what I have to say. But I would rather be provocative than bland. You will have every right to be critical. The events that we are discussing didn't happen in my country. They happened in yours. They were traumatic, and indeed terminal, for so many thousands of people. We still don't know the accurate death toll. My only value here is that I was an eyewitness of some of those events. My experiences were fragmentary, as is the way with war reporters, rather than comprehensive. My reminiscences will also be fragmentary. I am not a historian, but occasionally had a seat at the making of history, of which news is the first draft. I was in Vukovar every day between the 15th and the 21st of November 1991. I was a witness to the closing phase of the battle, the fall of the town and its surrender. Also to the expulsion of those civilians who survived. I was a privileged outsider, carrying a letter of authorisation from the JNA. It was still one of the most terrible weeks of my life.

This is an opportune if sombre time to be holding such a conference, in the aftermath of the multiple disasters in New York and Washington, and with the conflict still continuing. These events remind us, as the siege and destruction of Vukovar also reminded us, that modern warfare has two distinguishing features that set it apart from all the wars of history. One is that we have developed ways of killing each other on an industrial scale, and in ways not even imagined in earlier times. Who would have thought of a passenger aircraft as an instrument of mass murder? The other is that civilians are not only not spared, but targeted with particular ferocity either by conventional weapons, as happened in Vukovar, or by improvised weapons, as happened in New York. The Geneva

Conventions on the rules of armed conflict might not have existed for all the use that they were in either case.

You know enough from your recent history not to take peace for granted. It may be that it has finally broken out in this part of the world. Certainly in Slovenia and here in Croatia, but about the rest of the former Yugoslavia I am not so sure. What we have in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia may be no more than an imposed ceasefire, kept in place by pressure from NATO and the European Union. Just think about it. There are young soldiers on peace-keeping duty there who were eight years old when these Balkan wars began – wars which are now, if the peace doesn't hold, in their second decade.

To my mind the pivotal events in all those years occurred not in Bosnia or Belgrade, but simultaneously here in this country in November 1991. They were the bombardment of Dubrovnik and the destruction of Vukovar. Of these, it was Dubrovnik that claimed by far the greater share of the world's attention. It was internationally renowned, as Vukovar was not. It was a cultural and architectural treasure as Vukovar was not – or not deemed to be, although in my view the town by the Danube was as historic, as precious and (apart from the eyesore of its new hotel) as beautiful.

Dubrovnik was rescued from the barbarians by its fame and by its international status. The damaged clock tower, balustrades, palaces and marble paving stones were repaired, partly through the generosity of foreign benefactors. The city was badly damaged, but not demolished and reduced to rubble. Its medieval walls served it well. It never fell, but remained in Croatian territory. (Although perhaps it should be said that, in the long perspective of history, the old city-state of Dubrovnik was a relatively new part of Croatia.)

Vukovar, by contrast, was flattened and occupied. It quite literally ceased to be. Its fall must have been for any Croat the worst day of the war. It was levelled by the bombardment of 100 heavy weapons, and thousands more lighter ones. I remember a JNA colonel standing by a battery of World War Two American howitzers outside the town and boasting that they had hit it with 2 million shells – mostly mortar shells but some heavy artillery too. I inspected one of those shells before he fired it. It had the date on the shell case: 1937. All those years it had been stored in a federal Yugoslav arsenal, awaiting the expected attack from NATO or the Warsaw Pact (the Titoists could never quite work out which), and now the people of the former Yugoslavia were using those shells on each other. It

was and remains a tragedy of epic proportions. Let us not forget that.

Driving and dodging through the ruins at the height of the fighting, a travelling companion and I looked to see if there was any building left standing undamaged. There wasn't. Perhaps a tree unmarked? Not that either. Or even a bush? Not so much as a bush. I had never seen such destruction before or since in thirty years as a war reporter. It was like Stalingrad by the Danube. In September 1991, when I was still going in through Nustar over the cornfields to report the siege from the Croatian side, one of the fiercest battles was across the cemetery on the southern outskirts of the town. Gravestones were damaged and the earth churned up by tanks and other armoured vehicles. I remember wondering, what kind of a war is this in which it isn't even safe to be dead?

And just outside Vukovar, who now remembers the church in the village of Erdut among the vineyards? I used to visit Erdut for meetings with the Serbian warlord Arkan who was based there.

I make no apology for that. I needed access and information, and he was a source of both. Besides, if a reporter in a time of war deals only with those of whom he morally approves, he will provide a limited and inadequate account, or maybe none at all, of what is happening. Years later, when Eastern Slavonia was transferred back to Croatian rule, I returned to Erdut and thought for a moment I had taken a wrong turning. Something was missing. It was the church. Like the great church at Petrinja it had been systematically dismantled and removed by the Serbs so that no trace of it remained: as if to say, this place is ours and always had been. Such premeditated cultural vandalism, an affront to history as well as religion, is something that I never met in any other war zone. Not even in the Middle East. Nor in Ireland nor in Africa. It was, I regret, unique to the Balkan wars. So was the desecration of graveyards. And speaking of Africa may I add in passing my controversial view as a survivor of the Biafran war of secession from 1967 to 1970 that the people of Nigeria have something to teach the people of ex-Yugoslavia about peace and reconciliation after a civil war. I have heard it put this way - and it applies as much in the present Afghan emergency - that we can live together like brothers or we die together like fools. The choice is ours.

It was those dark days in November 1991, in Vukovar and Dubrovnik, which defined the rest of the conflict both in Croatia and in Bosnia for years to come. It's fashionable to blame the warlords and nationalists on both

sides, your own former President included among them. There is certainly more than enough blame to go round. But a substantial part of it must rest with the western democracies, including my own.

The twin bombardments of Vukovar and Dubrovnik were diplomatically the hinge on which all else turned. The Hague Conference, chaired by Lord Carrington, was very much in business at the time. It was seeking an acceptable constitutional solution for all the republics of the dissolving Yugoslavia. And the European Community had adopted the principled position that it would not recognise any of the republics until a settlement had been found for all of them.

But that solidarity was beginning to crack under the weight of the bombardment and the pressure of events. Through the power of television the destruction of Vukovar was brought into people's homes across Europe day by day as it happened: I know, because I returned to Belgrade every evening to write my reports and ensure that those pictures were beamed up to the satellite. There was a slight time delay in the case of Dubrovnik because it was cut off. But when those images were transmitted they had an equal or even greater impact. They showed two communities under siege, the Serbs as aggressors and the Croats as victims. The world tended to see it in black and white, although in my view it was etched in shades of grey. Whether Vukovar could have been relieved by the Croatian Army, with captured armoured vehicles from Varazdin and elsewhere, is a question for military historians and not for me. I don't know. I do know that no serious attempt to break the siege was made. The town's defenders were under orders not to surrender, but to fight to the last man. Vukovar had a sort of victim status, and its victimhood was used as leverage in the campaign to win recognition for Croatia by the European Community.

I have made this charge in a book I wrote about the Balkan wars, under the title "In Harm's Way", and I will repeat it here. Within the Community, the main protagonist of recognition was Germany, which used its diplomatic muscle on this issue more than on any other. Its commitment may have had something to do with the internal dynamics of the ruling coalition. Hans Dietrich Genscher, leader of the Free Democrats, was in his 17th year as German Foreign Minister. The CSU, the Bavarian wing of the Christian Democrats, coveted his job. Mostly Roman Catholics themselves, they made common cause with their fellow Roman Catholics in Croatia. So Genscher had to be more Catholic, if not than the Pope,

at least than the Bavarians. He was hailed as a hero in Zagreb, and for all I know still is. There was nothing wrong with that. Croatia was fighting for its life, and the people of its capital were entitled to pick their heroes.

Of all the European countries, the British were most apprehensive of the results of the piecemeal recognition of Croatia and Slovenia. Not from any pro-Serb bias, but because of the facts of the case. Lord Carrington, chairman of the Hague Conference, former Secretary General of NATO and a highly respected British politician, wrote on the 2nd December 1991 to Hans Van Den Broek, the Dutch president of the Council of Ministers, to try and forestall the decision: "An early recognition of Croatia would undoubtedly mean the break-up of the conference. There is also a real danger, perhaps even a probability, that Bosnia-Herzegovina would also ask for independence and recognition, which would be wholly unacceptable to the Serbs in that republic. This might well be the spark that sets Bosnia-Herzegovina alight". And so indeed it happened, just as Lord Carrington predicted. With the Hague Conference torpedoed, Bosnia was left in a sort of limbo to be fought for by its constituent peoples, with the Serbs striking first. In the judgement of Warren Zimmerman, the American Ambassador in Belgrade, "War in Bosnia now became virtually inevitable". It was slow to start, as civil wars usually are. But having started, it was unstoppable for three and a half years.

The complicating factor was that the British at the time were also negotiating the Maastricht Treaty on the strengthening of the European Community, and seeking concessions from the Germans on the opt out clauses of the Treaty. The British Conservatives, then as now, were divided on Europe, and the Prime Minister John Major needed something that he could present to his own party in the House of Commons as a victory. On 10th November 1991 he visited German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the Chancellor's bungalow in the government compound in Bonn. It was a discreet evening meeting: no press conference or briefing, not a word to the waiting journalists, nothing ever said about it. That was unusual. But the British got their concessions from the Germans, and were reminded of those concessions ten days after the final Maastricht negotiations, in the meeting which agreed on the recognition of Croatia in December 1991. It was, if not a formal deal, an expedient understanding of mutual favours. And so it is my view that, for reasons of the political convenience of their governing party, the British played a significant part in condemning the people of

Bosnia to a war in which 200,000 of them lost their lives and 2 million their homes. It was unprincipled, dishonourable and a disgraceful chapter in our politics and diplomacy. I expect you in Croatia to have a different perspective on it, but we the British should look back on it with shame.

I was not aware of it at the time, although I sensed that something was clearly wrong; but pieced it together later from documents passed to me by, and discussions with, the diplomats on the circuit. There were not very many of them, we became good friends, and as Bosnia, collapsed into warfare and bloodshed on a scale much greater than anything in Croatia, we had to ask ourselves, could not this have been avoided? Of course, it could have been. But it wasn't.

Two days after the meeting in Bonn I travelled to Belgrade to report on the increasingly heavy fighting in the Croatian war. Again, I make no apologies, even to this audience, for having done it from the Serbian side of the lines. I am not a hero, although I have known a few heroes (even in journalism) most of whom are now deceased, and I have always sought to survive my wars as well as to report them. There is not such category as posthumous journalism, and dead journalists have filed their last stories.

In Belgrade I went to see Lord Carrington, who was rushing around the city with maps and trying to save the negotiating process. I then hired a young man who had the gift of tongues that I lack. His name was Vladimir Marjanović. He was fluent in Serbo-Croatian, German, French and English, spoke passable Japanese, and having done his national service as the officer commanding a JNA arsenal in Serbia he knew the calibres and ranges of all the weapons that would be in action around us. He was also to play his own part in the Vukovar story as an accidental conscript. In extreme circumstances I volunteered him to be the interpreter for the International Committee of the Red Cross at the surrender of the Croats on 18th November.

In war reporting for television, access is everything. Without access there are no pictures - and without pictures there is no story. So in company with Vladimir Marjanović, and with not very high hopes, I paid a call on the head of the JNA's public information service, Colonel Šušnjar. He was not a front line warrior but an academic sort of soldier, and almost certainly within the old JNA structure he would have had an intelligence background. He had studied the precedents, he told us, of military me-

dia relations in time of war. Unfortunately from our point of view, the precedents that he had studied included the operation by the British Task force to recapture the Falkland Islands in 1982. It had been a journalists' nightmare, in which I was lucky not to have taken part. Luck plays as large a part in reporting wars as in fighting them. Censorship in the Falklands was strict and access restricted: indeed if the Royal Navy, known to us as the "silent service", had had their way there would have been no press access at all. They would have sailed away secretly and reported the outcome later. Only at the insistence of the Prime Minister were a few British reporters allowed to travel with the Task Force, and no foreign reporters at all.

Fortunately for us, Colonel Šušnjar was not impressed by the Falkland Islands model. As the war in Croatia intensified he set up a system of forward press centres, mainly for the benefit of the Belgrade press, but from which the foreign press were not excluded, and were even made welcome. From his point of view he had a story to tell about the defence of Yugoslavia. That night a fax came through to us in the Grand Hyatt Hotel inviting us to report the following morning to the forward press centre in the border town of Sid. We duly made the journey, to be greeted by coffee, briefings, more documentation and a JNA captain in an armoured vehicle who escorted us through a dozen road blocks to a western suburb of Vukovar. Since references to the JNA in this conference are unlikely to be generally complimentary, I should like at this point to pay tribute to their press operation, which was by the standards of those times remarkably open and transparent – certainly more so than anything run then or since by the British Ministry of Defence.

We arrived in Vukovar on the morning of the 15th of November. The JNA had made the crucial breakthrough on high ground in the centre of the front, to the west of the town. Resistance was still fierce, and from a Croatian perspective I would think that the word "heroic" would be justified. Whatever moved was sniped at. A colleague from the rival British network, ITN, made the mistake of showing himself at a church window and was badly wounded. The JNA had mobilised an anti aircraft gun and were using it as a heavy machine gun, firing laterally at what remained of the Croats' positions. An informal ceasefire was agreed early in the afternoon of the 17th of November. The surrender was signed on the 18th. The war in Vukovar was over, at a terrible price in human lives – and some of those were lost after the surrender.

What was striking at the time was how few JNA officers were to be seen on the ground where the heavy fighting was done. They were there in force at the rear headquarters, and all present and correct at the signing ceremony. But the actual fighting was done by others – a battalion of reservists who (we got the impression) were extremely reluctant to be there. Roaming the streets were bands of irregulars, wildly dressed and wildly behaved, who seemed to us to be operating well outside the regular chain of command. They wore recognition badges, strips of coloured rags tied to their epaulettes, to enable their own side to distinguish friend from foe. But they seemed to have free rein to do what they wished in the streets.

The capture of Vukovar had taken much longer than anyone in Belgrade expected. All soldiers agree that street fighting is the worst sort of fighting, and avoid it if they possibly can. The bombardment of the town was as heavy as it was because the opposition was so fierce and the infantry were making little headway. Artillery is a terrible weapon, as anyone knows who has suffered under it. But it is limited. It substitutes for infantry, up to a point. It prepares the terrain but cannot hold it. Battles are won only by boots on the ground.

The JNA at the time was just about the only fully functioning federal institution left in Yugoslavia, and I suspect that it was beginning to fall apart and lose faith in itself. I noted in my diary at the time: “Some officers are much more peace-minded than the world gives them credit for, and deeply unhappy with the task entrusted to them”. They were also under pressure from Belgrade, as if their careers depended on it which they probably did, to deliver a long overdue and clear-cut victory. Those officers were mostly Serbs, but it was not entirely a Serbian army. Some of the soldiers were Serbs, some Albanians and some Bosnians. The next year in the Bosnian war I met one of the Muslim defenders of Sarajevo who as a JNA soldier had been assigned to the federal assault on Vukovar, and had deserted. Why give your life for a country that you didn’t believe in, and which had to a significant extent ceased to exist?

In large measure, then, the street fighting was left to the Serbian irregulars of the Territorial Defence. I can legitimately call them Chetniks, because that was what they called themselves. They were carrying nationalist emblems, the Serbian flag and the white eagle. They were singing nationalist songs, some of which caused great offence here in Croatia when the footage was shown on television. I didn’t censor them out on grounds of good taste, since war is

not a good taste business, and I tried to show things as nearly as possible as they happened. I don't apologise for that, either.

One detail that comes to mind is the combat boots. War is a time of looting and plunder, and the defenders of Vukovar had helped themselves liberally to yellow "Timberland" style boots liberated from the BATA factory at Borovo Selo. Their yellow boots were a distinctive part of their uniforms. The Serbian irregulars wore similar boots, but had blacked them over lest they be mistaken for Croats.

The question of the chain of command is an important one, and will be crucial at any future war crimes trial. Were those irregulars inside it or outside it? That there had been a problem was admitted by the JNA command, although they claimed to have solved it. I made a note of what an officer told me: "All armed formations wherever they come from are under our command and obeying our orders. All other groups have been sent away".

"All other groups" was almost certainly a reference to Arkan's so-called Tigers, operating to the north of Vukovar. Arkan himself held the federal army in contempt, as he did all communists. "They see red", he told me. "They see the sky red. They see the earth red. It's Comrade major this and Comrade captain that. They have no motivation". Then he whipped out a huge silver crucifix from under his shirt to show what a devout Orthodox Christian he was.

The notorious photograph of Arkan and his fighters at Erdut, including a real baby tiger from the Belgrade zoo, shows them posing on a tank captured from the Croats near Vukovar at that time. One day when I called on them, Arkan and his men were digging in against an expected attack, not by the Croats but by the JNA, who they felt were planning an operation to seize the tank.

There was one prominent JNA officer in the centre of Vukovar at that time. I will not judge him myself, since I hope that in due course his actions will be judged by the war crimes tribunal at The Hague. He was Major Veselin Sljivancanin, now wanted by the tribunal. It was he who denied access to the hospital at Vukovar to the delegate of the International Red Cross, Nicholas Borsinger, while the Serbs went through it picking out 200 men who, they believed, had taken part in the fighting. So far as I know those men were handed over to the Territorial Defence Force and not seen alive again.

That was the peculiar horror of Vukovar - and I cannot claim to have reported it all at the time, because I

didn't know it all. War crimes were committed, and prisoners killed, by the irregulars; while the regular forces were maintaining a façade of correctness and due process. This was the point of the surrender ceremony. The JNA actually included our BBC team in their armoured convoy to the event, in the outbuilding of a vineyard on the edge of the town. We were the official observers, to show that the Geneva Conventions were being respected. Looking back on it now, I would say we were being manipulated. My interpreter acted as Mr. Borsinger's interpreter, since his was not equal to the task. Interpretation is not a technicality. Lives depend on it. The agreement was that the women and children could go where they wished, and indeed buses would be provided for them to such handover points as Dvorovi in Bosnia. The men would be treated as prisoners of war under the Geneva Conventions. The agreements were not kept, certainly as far as the men were concerned. And Mr. Borsinger, a real hero of the International Red Cross, was expelled from the country two days later for his efforts to save the lives of innocent people.

By agreement, a JNA tank went in to remove the truckful of explosives that was parked across the Croats' last bastion in Vukovar. I have seen few more tragic sights in my life than the exodus of the thousands of survivors from the town, under armed guard, on the afternoon of the day of surrender. Some elderly men were carrying guns, which they laid down at the feet of the Serbs. These were broken down old weapons, and come to that they were broken down old men. The sniper rifles had been prudently hidden away: to be suspected of having been a sniper meant certain death. And I have to confess that I didn't even do my job especially well. The sight of that shuffling column of thousands of defeated people reduced me to absolute silence. I would like to have spoken to them but had nothing to ask them. It would have been an intrusion into their private grief. The report that night on the BBC News was a mismatch between the most eloquent pictures, and words which were not adequate to them.

I would like at this distance, after ten years, to salute two possibly forgotten heroes of the siege and the events that followed. One of them was a Croat and the other a Serb. The Croat was the last ditch commander of the defence of Vukovar. He operated under a "nom de guerre", an alias in time of war. He had been ordered to fight to the last man, and in the final negotiations in the vineyard, with two colleagues beside him, he tried to get through to Zagreb to obtain authorisation for the surrender. The communications failed. He surrendered anyway, and saved

lives that would otherwise have been lost – though fewer lives than would have been lost, if the agreement had been kept in its totality.

The Serbian hero in my view was Captain Zoran Stanković, chief pathologist of the JNA at the time of the siege and after the surrender. He went about his business, in the days that followed, among the hundreds of bodies transferred to the makeshift morgue in the old brick factory in Vukovar. He did his professional duty respecting the dead in every meaning of the word respect, and (I believe) was demoted twice as a result. There followed a period of years in which anguished families on both sides were kept waiting, as they exchanged “pathologists” protocols, 20 or 30 on one side for 20 or 30 on another, the documents identifying the dead and certifying the reasons for their death.

I knew two Captain Stankovićs in these wars, both of them heroes. Zoran Stanković was one. The other was Miloš Stanković, a British Army officer of Serbian origin who served as adviser and interpreter to Generals Sir Michael Rose and Sir Rupert Smith, the British UN commanders in Sarajevo in 1994 and 1995. He was later falsely arrested by the British Ministry of Defence Police under suspicion of having spied for the Bosnian Serbs. He saved lives which without him would have been lost. I make no apology for my friends, especially when they are heroes. My friend Miloš Stanković had a good phrase for these conflicts. He called them *necrowars* – that is, wars in which it is harder to exchange dead bodies than live ones, and in which the dead matter more than the living. In front of this distinguished audience, I dare to suggest that’s worth thinking about. Looking back after ten years on the wars of ex-Yugoslavia, I increasingly come to wonder, what were they for? And have they not taught us that it is time to revive the letter and the spirit of the Geneva Conventions? Those Conventions were drafted for reasons, which are more valid and relevant today than they ever were.

I don’t know if after ten years the events in Vukovar are as well-remembered in Croatia as they should be. Perhaps they are. Or perhaps like the British you like to remember your victories and forget your defeats; or disguise your defeats as victories, as we do. It is commonplace to say that time heals all wounds. In this case I don’t think it does. It doesn’t heal the wound of Vukovar. The wound of Vukovar will be with the people who lived there and in Serbia and they will remember it in this generation and the generation after it and the generation after that. You live your history more here, and the past casts longer shad-

ows here, than anywhere else in the world. We should surely be willing to forgive but not to forget. Indeed to forget would be to dishonour those who have died, on both sides.

In the end, I would argue, there were no winners at all in this matter but only losers. In Vukovar the Croats lost a priceless part of their heritage which can never be retrieved. The Serbs inherited a ruin, which they annexed and occupied for a while and in due course handed back. They lost self-respect and gained nothing from it but grief. Yugoslavia ceased to exist as they had known it. Its dream of brotherhood and unity died, which had been born (if my memory serves me correctly) at an inaugural party meeting in a riverfront house in Vukovar itself. It was not an ignoble experiment. But the possibility of Yugoslavia's patchwork of peoples living among each other peacefully was gone, perhaps for good. Nor did the international community cover itself with glory.

The best lesson to be drawn from it is a simple one: lest we forget. That is why we are gathered here in Zagreb at this sombre anniversary. The best homage we can pay to the past is to learn from it – to learn not to repeat its mistakes, and our mistakes in it. We all made those mistakes, and I did too. The Germans have a phrase for it: “Nie wieder”. Never again.