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Season in Hell: Understanding Bosnia's War

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“Objectivity Is Impossible in the Face of Genocide”

Vulliamy, Ed. *Season in Hell: Understanding Bosnia's War*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994. 370pp. \$22.95

OUR TELEVISION SCREENS ARE FILLED with images of war. Of them all, those that make the greatest impression are from Bosnia. Each night we watch terrified civilians in Sarajevo living day to day under the constant threat of a quick and silent death from a sniper's bullet. There are starving prisoners of war, devastated rape victims, and a multitude of newly orphaned children.

Many view this war simply as the continuation of the historical quest of Serbia and Croatia for Bosnia. It is for this reason that the West has been reluctant to get involved. Vulliamy, however, refutes this idea. He demonstrates that the war is actually about which of the two major ethnic groups in today's Bosnia-Herzegovina (Croats and Serbs) will ultimately control the territory currently dominated by the Bosnian Moslems.

Before the war began, Bosnia's population was 47 percent Moslem, 34 percent Serb, and 17 percent Croat. When Yugoslavia collapsed, the new governments of Croatia and Serbia encouraged their compatriots in Bosnia to exert pressure on the new Bosnian government to enhance their joint nationalistic interests. Of course, the best way to protect those interests was to make portions of Bosnia part of a "Greater Serbia" or of a new Croatia. However, the people of Bosnia do not live in convenient ethnic enclaves but are spread throughout the country, and when it was realized that in such a multiethnic society peaceful annexation was impossible, the leaders turned to military force. When military action failed to dislodge the Bosnian Moslems from areas

dominated by the Serbs, Serb leaders adopted the policy of "ethnic cleansing." If the Bosnian army could not be defeated, at least Bosnian civilians could be forced from their homes and the land given to the "more deserving" Serbs.

The solution most often offered by desperate diplomats is simply to divide the country, each side getting some territory—no winners, no losers. The result, however, has been continued fighting and more carnage. Whatever the solution, there will be many losers. *Season in Hell* is a literary montage of the losers.

The author presents a cacophony of depravity of which no real army is capable. In fact, the Serbs appear more a heavily armed band of thugs than an army. It is not surprising that there are few large-scale confrontations between the opposing military forces. Instead, the war is conducted by artillery shelling, snipers, out-of-control freelance warriors who engage in mass rape and deportations, and siege warfare tactics not appreciably different from those of the Middle Ages. It is the civilians who are bearing the brunt of the military's wrath. In fact, the primary strategy against the Moslems appears to be nothing more than an ongoing, escalating string of atrocities: maternity clinics are targeted, Red Cross volunteers are attacked, civilians are deliberately shot, and prisoners of war are tortured. Very little, if anything, is done to punish the perpetrators or to prevent future violations.

Even if the Croats, Moslems, and Serbs were somehow equally responsible for starting the war, Vulliamy provides page after page of evidence clearly showing that it is the Serb forces that are mostly responsible for the carnage. Violations of the laws of war are so numerous that one can only conclude that they are committed with the tacit, if not the express, approval of those who claim to exercise military command over the troops. When confronted with overwhelming evidence of atrocities, the response of the accused leadership is nothing more than a rehash of the historic feuding now presented as the cause of the war, and the idea that if the tables were turned, the other side would do exactly the same thing.

Ed Vulliamy is a British journalist who visited the forces of all three factions. He saw the destruction close-up and understands fully the despair of the people. He is aware of the need for objectivity in a story but admits that it is impossible to be objective in the face of genocide. How can one be objective when confronted with overwhelming evidence of a soldier's brutal rape of a six-year-old child? In such cases objectivity approaches complicity.

Although the author does make a commendable attempt to explain the background of this war, he does not fully meet the promise of his subtitle, *Understanding Bosnia's War*. For this reviewer at least, "understanding" the war implies some acceptance of the methods employed in its prosecution. No military professional can accept what is happening in Bosnia.

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Vulliamy concludes that the international community mistakenly identifies the Bosnian conflict as a humanitarian crisis and has therefore responded to it by sending professional soldiers to care for its victims. The author suggests that a more appropriate course of action would be to give the Bosnian government the aid and weapons it needs to defend itself and prevent the atrocities in the first place.

If the peace process does result in the creation of a smaller Bosnia accompanied by Serb or Croatian cantons, what of the hatred that is sure to follow? When war crimes are committed on such a large scale and go unpunished, the victims of those crimes are not likely to forget. Bosnia's war of inhumanity will certainly make it easier for us to understand at least one reason for what will surely be the next war in the former Yugoslavia—a war of revenge. As a portrait of the war's carnage and as a prognostication for the future, *Season in Hell* is to be recommended.

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Haass, Richard N. *Intervention: The Use of American Military Force in the Post-Cold War World*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1994, 258pp. \$24.95

Richard N. Haass provides an excellent, brief (156 pages of text plus notes, eight appendices, and index), and concise introduction to the history of intervention, the issues surrounding its methods, and its expected future. Haass is well qualified to address this topic. He taught at Harvard University and worked with both the State and Defense departments before serving as a senior member of the National Security Council staff in the Bush administration.

This book is highly recommended for anyone in the national security community and for students of U.S. foreign policy, given the immediacy of the issue and the likelihood that in the future we

will often confront circumstances conducive to intervention.

Intervention is a more complex phenomenon than is commonly understood, and a virtue of this book is that Haass makes it understandable. He begins by reviewing the debate over intervention and recaps recent cases. He then elucidates its vocabulary, identifying fully a dozen forms of conduct ranging from deterrence and preventive measures to war. Midway within this spectrum are found those forms of intervention so recently the focus of U.S. action and public discussion: peacekeeping, peacemaking, nation-building, and humanitarian assistance. All of these are discrete activities, Haass explains, and each must be understood in order to avoid confusion of efforts and expectations.