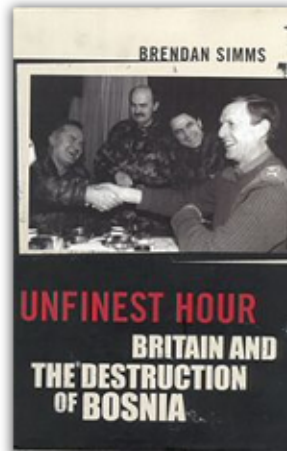


Book Review

By James Pettifer

Britain and the destruction of Bosnia

Brendan Simms



TLS

How the Serbs were appeased

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Brendan Simms

UNFINEST HOUR

Britain and the destruction of Bosnia

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Brendan Simms's fine book explores the nature of British policy in the Bosnian war that ended in 1995. It is now slipping into the past, and the succeeding Kosovo conflict has given added distance, and names like Vitez and Tuzla have a historic ring. The blurb describes *Unfinest Hour*, with justification, "a brilliant polemic and an important 'first draft' of history which tackles what is still the most raw and disturbing issue in contemporary Europe". Dr Simms has cast a penetrating, unsentimental gaze at the record of the Major government, and Douglas Hurd and Malcolm Rifkind as Foreign Secretaries, and lifted many stones to record the unpleasant life underneath. He has a clear perspective, coupled with great industry and diligence in his research, and has managed to talk to hundreds of political actors, although perhaps fewer of the military leaders. The outlines of the story are well known, with the profoundly Serbophile key decision makers in the Government, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Army swimming in a murky sea of sentimentality and bogus history about Tito and the Second World War, Germanophobia after the Croatian conflict, appalling anti-Americanism, and Orientalizing ideology about the Balkans. Simms, who is a lecturer in History and Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, targets their "conservative pessimism", particularly in the case of the post-Suez generation like Hurd, and in some ways the book is a very Peter-house volume, focused on the rights of the free nation state. His argument is particularly effective because it starts from the general perspective of the legitimacy of Bosnia to exist and defend itself against aggression, rather than liberal or led internationalist or humanist assumptions. Simms argues that John Major and Hurd betrayed the Tory tradition of the nation and its rights over Bosnia, as they also did in their tangles with the European Union. The clear vision Margaret Thatcher had about the real nature of Milosevic's Serbia is contrasted to the woolly-minded indecision and incompetence of her successors.

The British Army comes in for some particularly crisp and uncomfortable analysis, as does Dr David Owen, who was Major's man throughout his time as main Bosnian negotiator. This book will not make comfortable reading for them, or for Malcolm Rifkind, Lord Carrington, General Sir Michael Rose or the Royal Welch Fusiliers (over Gorazde), among many others. Simms's volume breaks new ground in that it examines the role of prominent officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence and "Balkan experts" with an extraordinary degree of personal detail.

In general, Simms sees British Balkan policy as having a momentum of its own, a wandering, diplomats being drawn by horses that were so

blinkered they were prepared to threaten the special relationship with the US for the sake of appeasement of Serbia. This is clear in Simms's account of the crisis of spring and early summer 1993, when, as he puts it, "US confidence in European policy - and that meant British and French policy - towards Bosnia had completely collapsed." "The appeasement of the Serbs", observed Ivo Daalder, who was soon to join Clinton's National Security Council staff, "has really hurt the image of Britain." Simms is particularly strong on the issue of the arms embargo, where it is obvious from the material he quotes from the Defence Intelligence Service, there was clear knowledge in Whitehall hands that it was only benefiting the Bosnian Serbs. At a political level, the then UMPROFOR Director of Information reveals the extraordinary hobnobbing with the now indicted Pale war criminals by senior British officers and officials in General Rose's entourage, with "lavish meals and quite a lot of alcohol", a few hours away from the heart of darkness in the Muslim enclaves.

Simms has a relentless, almost mathematical quality in his writing, with the consequences of each grim decision leading to the next betrayal set out with fluent, unanswerable logic. His explanation of the "how" element in the way events unfolded is masterly, and makes this a book of the highest quality. He is perhaps a little less surefooted on the "why" side. As an Irishman, and although he has had the benefit of working with Norman Stone, there is a touch of the outsider in some of his judgments. He does not quite see the power of the hidden wiring in Whitehall, the entrenched anti-Islamic assumptions in much of the SIS, Joint Intelligence Committee, and military intelligence worlds, and the still largely unknown levers Belgrade can pull in a few British elite circles. As Carole Hodge has shown in *The Serb Lobby in the United Kingdom* (1999), the lobby is an elitist and limited force, but it does contain some powerful individuals in key institutions. Now, over Kosovo, it remains to be seen if the right conclusions have been drawn by the Blair government

The absence of specialist centres for Balkan Studies in British universities is important here, as it allowed some of the really outlandish constructions about what Titoist Yugoslavia was actually like - particularly if you were not a Serb or a Communist - to go largely unchallenged in the media and in Parliament in the early stages of the war. It is unfair to expect the average MP, civil servant, or army officer to have a detailed knowledge of Yugoslav history. But others should have done. The real message of this important book is not only about the tragic betrayal of Bosnia, but also about a crisis in the mechanism of the British Government and public and parliamentary debate about foreign policy. It will be a seminal text for those assessing the implications of modern humanitarian war.