Dubious Sources:  
How Project Censored Joined  
The Whitewash of Serb Atrocities  

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FOR 25 YEARS, PROJECT CENSORED has scanned the alternative press for hot stories that the mainstream media fail to cover. Each year it designates 10 top "censored" stories (along with the next 15 runners up), drawing on the work of Sonoma State University students and faculty, community volunteers, and a national panel of media judges to review the stories for relevance and accuracy. For many, these awards have become "Alternative Pulitzers," commendations for excellence in independent reporting. At its best, the project has provided a vital corrective to bias and complacency in the corporate-dominated media.

I had been on friendly terms for several years with Project Censored's founder, Carl Jensen, and, more recently, the current director, Peter Phillips. As manager of Sonoma State University's foundation for a time, I cheered with Jensen when he brought in the first modest checks from that limited circle of progressive foundations and philanthropists willing to fund critical media projects. After watching Jensen run Project Censored out of his hip pocket, I thought it a wonder that he managed, with these small grants and an enthusiastic group of undergraduate students, to turn out an annual book with a commercial publisher since 1993, plus a 20th anniversary collection in 1997. As Jensen made plans to retire in 1997, few sympathizers thought the project would survive for long. That Jensen could defy "founder's syndrome" and turn his baby over to someone else was another small miracle.

When the highly improbable comes to pass, you want to cut it a little slack. And Phillips, his anointed successor, is, like me, a lefty sociologist. When I had disagreements with Project Censored's selections over the years, I shelved them, rationalizing that the media are not my field and I was busy enough with my own work. So when I surveyed the Censored 2000 volume, I was surprised by my reaction to its treatment of Kosovo. Project Censored had given this single topic an unprecedented five story awards plus a commentary by Michael Parenti, who has served on Project Censored's national panel of judges for several years. Even more troubling, for two years in a row Project Censored had whitewashed human rights atrocities committed by Serbs in

Reliance on dubious sources and a lack of rigorous research and fact-checking have tarnished the project's reputation as a media watchdog. On the subject of the former Yugoslavia, Project Censored, I sadly concluded, had departed the terrain of the democratic Left for a netherworld of conspiracy theorists, Marxist-Leninist sects, and apologists for authoritarian regimes.

Pipelines and Lead Mines

ODDLY ENOUGH, Censored 2000's top-ranked story on Kosovo is the least substantial: story #6, "NATO Defends Private Economic Interests in the Balkans." Of the three articles cited, two are about oil from the Caspian Sea region, arguing that a pipeline has to be built through the Balkans because shipping oil across the Black Sea and through the Bosporus would be too environmentally risky. There is legitimate concern over an excessive number of tankers passing the narrow waterway near Istanbul, but the remedy given most serious consideration is a pipeline through Turkey to the Mediterranean. Although a Balkan pipeline route has been the subject of a modest feasibility study, the U.S. government continues to support a pipeline proposed by BP Amoco and Chevron from Baku in Azerbaijan to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean. That puts the pipeline through the Caucasus, nearly a thousand miles east of the Balkans.

The third article cited in story #6 is by Sara Flounders, "Kosovo: It's About the Mines," originally from a July 1998 issue of Workers World, the publication of the Workers World Party (WWP), a Leninist sect formed by the late Sam Marcy in 1959. Marcy had left the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party to give public support to the USSR for crushing the Hungarian revolt of 1956. The WWP went on to support the Kim Il Sung regime in North Korea, the Warsaw Pact suppression of "socialism with a human face" in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the Chinese crackdown on the Tiananmen Square democracy movement in 1989. Flounders is co-director of the International Action Center, a WWP front group for which one-time U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark serves as figurehead.

Flounders argues the Serbian-controlled Trepca mining complex in Kosovo is coveted by U.S. and European capitalists for its reserves of lead, zinc, copper, cadmium, gold and silver. Well, the prices of these minerals have been steady or declining for the last ten years. There's no world shortage of any of them; for most there's a glut. The fate of global capitalism hardly hangs on a polluted lead mine in Kosovo. Ironically for those who saw Slobodan Milosevic as the last defender of socialism, it was the Milosevic regime which attempted to privatize the Trepca complex and sell it to a Greek company, while it is the Kosovar Albanians who claim it is still state property. Censored 2000's story #6 amounts to little more than a conspiratorial fantasy.

Atrocious History

RECENT REPORTS HAVE UNDERCUT the credibility of Censored 2000's story #12: "Evidence Indicates No Pre-war Genocide in Kosovo and Possible U.S./KLA Plot to Create Disinformation." On January 16, 1999, the bodies of some 45 victims were found at Racak,
Kosovo, and documented at the sites where they were found by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Some 23 of the bodies had been found together in a gully, victims of an apparent massacre. U.S. diplomat William Walker led a group of reporters to the site and charged that Serbian police had killed the 45 Kosovars. Serb officials countered that a battle scene had been rearranged by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) to look like an atrocity. Walker has an unsavory reputation from his days in El Salvador, but there is no evidence that he had anything to do with staging an atrocity. As a European Union Forensic Expert Team was already conducting investigations in Kosovo, its Finnish Director, Dr. Helena Ranta, was asked by the OSCE to help perform autopsies on 40 of the victims who had been moved to Pristina. Her initial report on the autopsies by the team was completed on March 17, 1999 and noted that there was "no indication of the people being other than unarmed civilians." Some skepticism about the Racak event may have been warranted at this time, but Project Censored should have reserved judgment until the forensic research was completed.

Dr. Ranta's EU Forensic Expert Team returned to Racak in November 1999 and March 2000 to recover additional evidence at the gully where the 23 bodies were found. Newsweek broke a story in its April 24, 2000 issue that the team had discovered bullets in the gully, confirming that the killing was indeed a massacre as earlier reported. Dr. Ranta presented the final report of the team to the EU's Western Balkans Working Group in Brussels on June 21, 2000. The report was sealed and delivered to the ICTY in the Hague, where it became part of the evidence leading to an indictment of Milosevic. Serb officials and their allies continued attempting to spin the interpretation of the Racak killings as a hoax, arguing that the autopsies produced no definitive evidence of a massacre.

As three colleagues of Dr. Ranta's in Helsinki prepared to publish an article in the journal Forensic Science International on the Racak victim autopsies, the Berliner Zeitung repeated the claim that the autopsies showed no evidence of a massacre and that this was the final report on the matter. In fact, the FSI article, based only on the early 1999 autopsies, made no judgment about whether a massacre had occurred or not. This story was then repeated in the U.S. by the organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), by Martin Lee in the San Francisco Bay Guardian, and others.

Under pressure in Europe to counter these interpretations, the Council of the EU declassified the Executive Summary of the final report of the EU Forensic Expert Team in Kosovo in February 2001. The summary notes that bullets and bullet fragments had been found in the gully where photographs taken at the time showed the bodies to be positioned, and that DNA evidence on the bullets connected them to the bodies autopsied. In a separate interview, Dr. Ranta estimated the bodies had been shot from a distance of a couple of meters. The evidence confirmed that an atrocity had been committed.

Project Censored also highlighted three additional stories on Kosovo in Censored 2000: #10, #20, and #22, which variously blame the war over Kosovo on the U.S., NATO, the IMF, the World Bank, and U.S. and German arms dealers. Sources for these stories include two of the most prolific apologists for Serbia: Paris-based writer Diana Johnstone (#10) and University of Ottawa economics professor Michel Chossudovsky (#s 20 and 22). Johnstone, once the respected
European correspondent for In These Times, was also a source for the dubious Balkan oil pipeline tale in story #6.

What these three stories and Michael Parenti's commentary (ch. 6) lack is a balanced historical perspective on the last decade of war in the former Yugoslavia. Two points should be highlighted. First, and most importantly, the unraveling of Tito's multiethnic and politically balanced Yugoslavia was begun by Milosevic when he moved to end the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina provinces in 1989. Kosovo's Albanians lost their legislature, their Albanian-language schools and employment opportunities, and became second class citizens in a region where they were a 90 percent majority. Milosevic refused for a decade to deal with Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of a popular nonviolent movement to restore rights for Kosovo's Albanians. These actions were interpreted by the other republics of Yugoslavia as an attempt by Milosevic to establish Serbian domination of the entire country. Although there are villains on all sides of the Yugoslavian wars, Milosevic had the most power within the confederation and the greatest responsibility for its collapse.

Second, NATO intervention in Kosovo followed a brutal war in Bosnia, which reached its nadir in Srebrenica, a UN-protected "safe area," in July 1995. Some 300 lightly armed Dutch troops in the UN force were pushed aside by heavily armed Bosnian Serb forces, and 7,000 unarmed Bosnian Muslim men and boys were marched off and killed. Some 4,500 bodies were recovered by mid-2001. This event is widely acknowledged to be the largest atrocity to occur in Europe since the end of World War II. Bosnian Serb general Radislav Krstic was tried by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague, and was convicted of genocide in August 2001 for his responsibility for this slaughter.

In light of the centrality of the Srebrenica atrocity, it shows breathtaking audacity for Michael Parenti in his Censored 2000 commentary to refer to Srebrenica only to mention killings by Bosnian Muslims in the area in 1992, three years before the infamous massacre. In his comments appearing as chapter 6, "The Media and their Atrocities," Parenti writes disparagingly about accounts of atrocities in Bosnia: "Hyperbolic labeling takes the place of evidence: `genocide,' `mass atrocities,' `systematic rapes,' and even `rape camps'--camps which no one has ever located." (p. 208) Parenti continues this denial in his recent book, To Kill a Nation.

To the contrary, solid evidence of systematic rape was presented in the recent trial of Serb army commander Dragoljub Kunarac and two paramilitary leaders who were charged with presiding over the rape, torture, and sexual enslavement of dozens of women during 1992 and 1993 in the southeastern Bosnian town of Foca. Sixteen brave Bosnian women had testified against Kunarac and his colleagues. Women's groups and human rights advocates around the world hailed the guilty verdict by the ICTY, delivered in the Hague on February 22, 2001. For the first time, an international court ruled that the systematic rape of women in wartime must be considered a war crime and a crime against humanity. People on the Left ought to be equally enthusiastic about this precedent.

Interestingly, for someone with such strong views about contemporary Yugoslavia, Parenti has almost nothing to say in his several related articles and books about its principal post-WWII leader, Marshall Tito (Josip Broz). Tito led the first Communist country to break with Stalin in
1948, was a leader of the non-aligned movement, and supported interesting experiments in worker self-management. Perhaps Parenti's silence on Tito is explained by his greater sympathy for the Soviet Union, as evidenced in the chapter "Stalin's Fingers" in his Blackshirts & Reds, which attempts to belittle the crimes of Stalin. 13

Practicing Denial

SHOULD I HAVE SEEN THIS COMING? Censored 1999 selected as its #17 censored story, "U.S. Media Provides Biased Coverage of Bosnia." The primary article concerned the visit by British Independent Television News (ITN) in August 1992 to Bosnian Serb detention camps at Omarska and Trnopolje. The issue revolved around whether a widely-publicized photo of an emaciated Muslim man leaning against a barbed-wire fence presented a misleading picture of the camps. On August 5, 1992, the ITN team of Penny Marshall and Ian Williams, accompanied by reporter Ed Vulliamy of The Guardian, visited and filmed at the Omarska and Trnopolje camps, reporting that grim things were happening to Bosnian Muslims at the hands of the Bosnian Serbs running the camps. A still shot from ITN video of an emaciated Bosnian Muslim man standing behind barbed wire was picked up by numerous media around the world and used to illustrate various news stories on ethnic cleansing and brutality by the Serbs. The emaciated man was Fikret Alic, who had been transferred to Trnopolje from the Keraterm camp, where, according to an interview with Vulliamy, he had been ordered to help dispose of the nearly 200 bodies of men killed in the massacre in Room 3 on July 24, 1992. 14

Ormarska, Trnopolje, and Keraterm were three notorious detention centers operated in 1992 by Bosnian Serbs near the municipality of Prijedor. Although Trnopolje had been cited by the ICTY as a place of systematic rape of women, in its description of its #17 story Project Censored commented, "American journalists who repeated unconfirmed stories of Serbian atrocities could count on getting published. On the other hand, there was no market for stories by a journalist who discovered that Serbian `rape camps' did not exist." (p. 73) The ICTY indictment of the former mayor of Prijedor, Milomir Stakic, includes the following excerpts from descriptions of the camps:

The conditions in the Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje camps were abject and brutal. Bosnian Serb military and police personnel in charge of these facilities, their staff, and other persons who visited the camps, all of whom were subject to the authority and control of the Crisis Staff, killed, sexually assaulted, tortured, and otherwise physically and psychologically abused the detainees in the camps....

At Omarska, prisoners were crowded together with little or no facilities for personal hygiene. They were fed starvation rations once a day and given only a few minutes to go to the canteen area, eat and then leave. The little water they received was often foul. Prisoners had no changes of clothing and no bedding. They received no medical care.

Killings and severe beatings of prisoners were commonplace. The camp guards, who were both police and military personnel, and others who came to the camp and physically abused the prisoners, used all manner of weapons during these beatings, including wooden batons, metal rods and tools, lengths of thick industrial cable, rifle butts and knives. Both female and male
prisoners were beaten, raped, sexually assaulted, tortured and humiliated. Hundreds of the detainees, whose identities are known and unknown, did not survive the camp....

Keraterm camp was located at a former ceramics factory in Prijedor. Conditions for prisoners were similar to those in Omarska camp.... Many detainees were executed in the camp. On one night in July, 1992, more than 150 military-aged men from the "Brdo" region were executed.

Trnopolje camp was established at the site of a former school and adjacent buildings in Trnopolje village. It was the largest camp and the location to which Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat women, children, and the elderly were taken. The hygiene facilities were grossly inadequate. Minimal rations were provided on a sporadic basis, with female detainees eventually being allowed to leave the camp to forage for food in the surrounding village. The camp served as the staging point for the mass deportation of all those who survived the initial attacks and camp regime. It also served a much more sinister purpose: the sexual assault, rape, and torture of many of the women detained there by camp personnel, who were both police and military personnel, and by other military units from the area who came to the camp for that specific purpose. In many instances, the women and girls were taken from the camp and raped, tortured, or sexually abused at other locations. In addition, many prisoners both male and female were killed, beaten and otherwise physically and psychologically maltreated by the camp personnel and other Serbs and Bosnian Serbs who were allowed into the camp. 15

The ICTY trial of Keraterm camp security commander Dusko Sikirica ended with a guilty plea agreement in November 2001, and in March 2001 former Prijedor mayor Milomir Stakic was arrested in Belgrade and transferred to the Hague to stand trial for crimes committed at the three camps under his jurisdiction.

Weaving a Fabric of Deceit

SUPPORTERS OF THE MILOSEVIC REGIME and apologists for the Bosnian Serbs began a long propaganda campaign in the mid-1990s to obscure what really happened at the camps near Prijedor. Unraveling this fabric of deceit takes us along the fringes of the Stalinoid Left, and reveals how Project Censored got caught up in the whitewash. The impetus for the cover-up began with the trial of Dusko Tadic, the first case completed through conviction and sentencing by the ICTY.

Tadic was the former owner of a cafe in Kozarac, a town near Prijedor, and a member of the reserve traffic police. He was arrested in Munich, Germany, in February 1994 and brought to the Hague to stand trial for numerous heinous crimes, including the beating and torture of several men at the Omarska camp on various dates between June 18 and July 27 of 1992--the last of which took place within 10 days of the visit to Omarska by the ITN crew. The Tadic trial began in May 1996 and lasted through October.

The final witness for Tadic's defense was German freelance writer Thomas Deichmann, who appeared as a media expert, presenting an argument that witnesses against Tadic could identify him only because numerous news stories on German television had made Tadic's image well known. After a long string of prosecution witnesses had claimed to have known Tadic for years,
Deichmann's testimony was evidently not persuasive, as the court issued a guilty verdict in May 1997 and a sentence in July 1997. Among the many offenses cited in the sentencing judgment for which Tadic was found guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt" was a particularly horrendous sexual mutilation of a man at Omarska. 16

After the Tadic trial, Deichmann visited Trnopolje in December 1996 and talked with Bosnian Serb officials about the camp, which had been closed down shortly after the ITN visit in August 1992. He wrote an article for the German magazine Novo, which was then translated and published in the British journal Living Marxism in February 1997 under the title "The Picture that Fooled the World," claiming that the famous ITN photo of Fikret Alic had been staged to falsely portray the facilities as concentration camps and the Serbs as modern-day Nazis.

Deichmann pointed out that the ITN news team was shooting from within a barbed-wire enclosure at men who had come to the fence to talk with them.

Living Marxism (later renamed LM) was started in 1988 by members of a British Trotskyist splinter, the Revolutionary Communist Party. In an article titled "Living Marxism--Festering Fascism?" British journalist George Monbiot described LM's curious ties to right-wing writers and think tanks. 17 Deichmann's article "The Picture that Fooled the World" is also reprinted in the IAC book NATO in the Balkans, along with chapters by Michel Chossudovsky, Lenora Foerstel, and IAC associates Ramsey Clark, Sara Flounders, and Richard Becker, and Workers World Party founder Sam Marcy. 18

ITN filed a libel suit against LM for the charges in the Deichmann article, and in March 2000 a British court found that LM had presented no credible evidence to support its charges that ITN had set out to deceive its viewing public. The court awarded ITN a large financial judgment of £375,000, bankrupting LM. Deichmann's well-traveled article next appeared in modified form--with a summary of his Bosnia story and general commentary on the impact of media on political leaders--in the magazine Covert Action Quarterly (CAQ), following an unusual set of events.

Terry J. Allen, the respected 9-year editor of CAQ, and her two assistants were fired in May 1998 by CAQ's corporate officers Louis Wolf, Ellen Ray, and Bill Schaap. Allen says she was fired because she "refused to be bullied by Wolf, Ray, and Schaap into publishing whacko-conspiracy theories and articles that served their agenda but failed to distinguish between facts and political fairy tales." Among the "inferior or polemical material" proposed by the publishers was "a story presenting Serbia as the blameless victim of Bosnian aggression." 19 Under editorial direction from the publishers, CAQ then published Deichmann's modified article as "Misinformation: TV Coverage of a Bosnian Camp" in its Fall 1998 issue, along with an article by Diana Johnstone, "Seeing Yugoslavia Through a Dark Glass." 20

Meanwhile, Project Censored director Peter Phillips was invited to present a paper in Athens, Greece, in May 1998, at a conference which brought together a group of radical journalists, most of whom were anti-NATO and pro-Serb. Alternatively titled "The Media's Dark Age: a 21st Century Dialogue" or the "International Conference on the Ownership and Control of the Media," the meeting was co-hosted by the Andreas Papandreou Foundation and Women for Mutual Security (WMS), directed by Margaret Papandreou. The WMS affiliate in the United States is represented by Lenora Foerstel, an International Action Center activist. Other IAC
speakers at the conference included Ramsey Clark and Sara Flounders, whose conference papers were published in Censored 1999, along with those of two other participants. Phillips met Deichmann on this trip and apparently accepted the credibility of his story on the Bosnian camps. Project Censored selected the Deichmann and Johnstone stories from the Fall 1998 CAQ for its #17 story for Censored 1999.

After LM was bankrupted by the ITN libel suit, the only place to find Deichmann's original article, with photos, has been Jared Israel's website, Emperor's Clothes. 21 Jared Israel also produced a 30-minute video, "Judgment," on the ITN visit to Omarska and Trnopolje camps, in cooperation with Deichmann and the Milosevic-controlled Serbian television station RTS. A military escort and an RTS video crew accompanied the ITN team, and RTS appears to have spent most of its time filming ITN filming the inhabitants of the camps. "Judgment" describes Omarska as a "detention center for POWs" and Trnopolje as "a refugee camp." Keep in mind that as a witness in the Tadic trial, Deichmann knew very well what the evidence was about atrocities at Omarska. Aging New Lefties may recall Jared Israel's earlier notoriety for helping destroy Students for a Democratic Society in 1969 as a member of the Maoist Progressive Labor Party. 22

WHAT SHOULD PROJECT CENSORED have known, and when should they have known it? Project Censored had ample opportunity to learn about the horrors at Ormarska, Trnopolje, and Keraterm camps. The Dusko Tadic trial outcome had been posted at the ICTY website since the announcement of the guilty verdict on May 7, 1997 and the sentencing judgment on July 14, 1997. Numerous articles and book reviews covering war crimes in Bosnia appeared in both the mainstream and the alternative press. 23 CAQ's firing of Terry Allen in May 1998 was well known among the alternative press and should have been taken as a warning signal by Project Censored. All this information was readily available long before Censored 1999 went to press in late 1998 with its credulous acceptance of Deichmann's sectarian viewpoint.

Once committed to defending Deichmann's story on the alleged distortion of the Bosnian detention camps' benign character by the Western media, it was a small step for Project Censored to accept the interpretation of the January 1999 Racak atrocity in Kosovo as a hoax. In June 1999, well before Project Censored's judges had chosen the top censored stories for that year, Peter Phillips issued an op-ed piece titled "Disinformation and Serbia: U.S. Media Bias," in which he linked Omarska and Racak as examples of "demonize-the-Serb stories." 24

In my view, Project Censored needs to recover its grasp of a working distinction between facts and ideology, between reporting and propaganda. I hope those associated with the project can review its mission and methodology and get it back on track to becoming a fresh, exciting, and serious source of criticism of the contemporary media scene. 25 If Project Censored chooses to oppose intervention in the Balkans, it can find grounds for doing so without falsifying history and denying war crimes.

NOTES


5. See Dr. Helena Ranta's report on the autopsies at www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/kosovo/Kosovo-Massacres2.htm.


8. The Executive Summary of June 2000 is available, along with related news reports and interviews with Helena Ranta, on the Balkan Witness website (www.glypx.com/BalkanWitness/racak.htm).


14. Vulliamy's reports on the Bosnian camps and on the ITN/LM libel trial are available on the web at www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/itn/. (Diana Johnstone was also represented in Censored 1999 with an article supporting the #17 story.)


an article about the ITN libel suit against LM which challenged the substance of Deichmann's article.


25. For links to further discussion in the alternative media of Project Censored's purpose and methodology, see Tim Redmond, "The Censored Debate," on the San Francisco Bay Guardian website, April 19, 2000: www.sfbg.com/censored-debate.