

Review of David Gibbs

**Humanitarian Destruction of Yugoslavia**

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David Gibbs' book *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, which was published in 2009 by Vanderbilt University Press and was already in 2010 translated into Serbian under the name *Humanitarno razaranje Jugoslavije*, is a serious, well-written, and convincingly supported study of the reasons for Western, particularly American, intervention in the wars in post-Yugoslav countries. Gibbs contributes not only to an understanding of the nature and character of these wars but also to an analysis of American foreign policy, the relations of the U.S. and the EU, and the internal discussions within the American administrations of President George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton. The book is based on a thorough analysis of documents, of which the most convincing is the eyewitness testimony before the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague. In some places, the authors' conclusions directly confront the conclusions of other authors (for example, Sabrina Ramet, Marko Hoare, Brendan Simms and others), so this book is also important as a counterbalance and a challenge to one interpretation of the causes and course of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the one that is nearer to the so-called Croatian "official" interpretation than that of Gibbs.

Gibbs' thesis that opens the book is the following: The intervention of the U.S. in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia was not motivated by any altruistic and humanitarian reasons, but rather the motives were far more realistic. The end of the Cold War created the possibility of the rise of Europe, which had already in 1991 begun to constitute itself as an independent actor in international relations. That was evident in the idea of the creation of the Euro as a common currency, in the designing of a common security and foreign policy, and even in attempts to make Europe independent in a military sense. Such a course of affairs jeopardized the American position in Europe, particularly its status as a "European power." The unification and then the decisive behavior of Germany in the first days of the Yugoslav crisis (for example, the recognition of Croatia) further concerned the American administration. Public opinion both in the U.S. and in European countries questioned the purpose of the survival of NATO, which had become the main instrument for conducting American foreign and security policies. NATO had lost its enemy, which it now had to "create." Because of all that, America at the end of the Cold War was in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the opportunity for global hegemonic domination, and on the other – the existence of the real danger that the actual power of the U.S. was lessening in a place where it had until this time been strong: in Western Europe.

In that context, Gibbs looks also at the behavior of America in connection with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis, the U.S. took the position of

support for the preservation of Yugoslavia, respecting its sovereignty, supporting the reform-oriented Prime Minister Ante Marković, and explicitly warning all the republics (not to mention the regions) that there would not be any recognition of unanimously proclaimed independence. In those days, American officials themselves said that America “has no horse in this race.” Its foreign policy priorities were elsewhere – in Iraq, in the consolidation of Eastern Europe, in relations with Russia and China.

That orientation, however, radically changed the moment that the U.S. saw that Germany, and with it the whole European Union (even Britain), were beginning to make changes to the European continent independently, without American participation. The exclusion of America from the Yugoslav problem (through explicit statements that the “time for Europe” had come and that Europe hoped that America would grasp that), and especially the not very subtle initiatives that Germany put forth, had the opposite effect: just because of that, America began to insist on involvement in the Balkans. The German presence in the post-Yugoslav conflict was not limited only to political activity. Gibbs cites data showing, for example, that Germany established and trained the Croatian intelligence service even before the Croatian declaration of independence, and that means long before Croatia became independent. If that information is accurate, it would mean that Germany conducted a two-faced policy toward the idea of the survival of Yugoslavia and even intervened in internal Yugoslav affairs in order to create a new situation, rather than only reacting to it. According to Gibbs’ conclusion, America became active in order to prevent the predominance of Europe and Germany, and its intervention was directed at resolving Yugoslavia’s problems themselves – or even more – on preventing the domination of the Balkans by Germany (and then also by an independent Europe).

As an example of that, Gibbs cites the American insistence that Bosnia-Herzegovina also proclaim independence although the president of Bosnia-Herzegovina Alija Izetbegović himself considered that such a move would lead directly to war. In his book *Bošnjaci nakon socijalizma*, Šaćir Filandra wrote about the controversies within the Bosniak (then: Muslim) nation around the question of independence. As was also the case with the majority of people in the former Yugoslavia (Gibbs cites public opinion polls that confirm this), neither could the majority of people in Bosnia-Herzegovina even imagine independence. However, Gibbs argues, Germany urged that independence on Slovenia and Croatia, and America on Bosnia-Herzegovina. These two foreign powers – the potential European hegemon and the potential global hegemon – competed in power and influence over the fate of the Balkan peoples. America’s destructive role in relation to Bosnia-Herzegovina is also seen in the encouragement of Bosnians and Herzegovinians and Bosnian-Herzegovinian politicians to reject all peace projects and plans created as part of European policy in order to wait for an American plan. Gibbs analyzes the case of the rejection of the Cutileiro, Vance-Owen, and Owen-Stotenberg plans, which – had they been accepted – would have led to more or less similar political results as the Dayton plan, but several years before Dayton. That would have saved many people’s lives. But peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina would then benefit Europe, rather than America. However, America was more concerned about its position in the new world order than about people’s lives or about peace in Europe. Gibbs attributes the longevity of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina primarily to the rivalry between Europe and America and only after aggressive behavior of parties involved in the conflict. Parties to the conflict behaved in a way made possible by foreign actors and also as aggressively as possible. Gibbs in this case says that blame for the conflict is relative, partially

amnestying Slobodan Milošević and Serbia from the thesis (today widely accepted) that they were the main or even the only ones guilty of the tragedy in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In these aspects, Gibbs' approach is somewhat speculative and contrary to fact: He asserts that the other two sides in the conflict (Bosniak and Croatian) would have behaved equally aggressively if they had had the exact same amount of power in their possession. Admittedly, in some places there are examples of that – Bosniaks were guilty in initiating an attack on Croats, and Croats of the same policy against Serbs and Bosniaks in regions where they dominated.

Gibbs' book also reveals differences within the American administration itself and the evolution of the positions of the same actors. For example, the State Department, in the period before the recognition of Croatia, opposed any kind of intervention, but after the German political intervention, changed its position and became a major advocate of intervention. This about-face was not only on the part of the institution but also individuals – for example, Lawrence Eagleburger, a renowned expert on Yugoslavia. Cracks were also visible in the Pentagon: on the one hand, the army was under pressure from the public because of the “passive stance” toward the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (which Gibbs says did not really exist because America was involved even before the beginning of the war in intervening politically in favor of separatism), and on the other hand, was cautious when it comes to the intervention of ground troops – because of memories of Vietnam. Colin Powell, for example, was an opponent of intervention, but a large number of admirals and generals were advocates.

When it comes to the behavior of local actors (in Bosnia-Herzegovina itself and in the countries around it), Gibbs offers a far more sophisticated portrait than is usually the case in Croatia. He does not excuse anyone, but reflects that some of the current assessment of the role of institutions and individuals are based on ideologies and wartime propaganda. Ideologies and propaganda are also one of the reasons for the unsatisfactory understanding of the nature of that conflict: Milošević is regarded in the West as a “Communist,” and Slovenia and Croatia as “democracies,” which in reality was not only inaccurate but untrue. However, it succeeded because Cold War rhetoric and practice remained alive and well even after the end of the Cold War. Those who are accustomed to seeing the world in “black and white” (Communism vs. Democracy) suppressed evidence which could have brought color into the picture.

Gibbs describes himself as a leftist and from this position raises an interesting question: why have leftists – former opponents of imperialism and of foreign intervention in sovereign countries, internationalists and opponents of nationalism – now embraced the ideology of humanitarian intervention, including American? The interventionists themselves explain this reversal through the idea of useful and morally justified intervention, in that context speaking of “genocide,” “ethnic cleansing,” and “a new Hitler” whenever they prepare for a wartime intervention. Gibbs' book calls into question that altruistic “argument.” The intervention of the U.S. in the Yugoslav crisis was not at all altruistic but rather was guided by concrete realistic interests which were the expression of American foreign policy strategies in post-Cold War circumstances. Through intervention, the U.S. achieved its goals: establishing its own power globally and in Europe, preventing the creation of a competing defense and foreign policy structure in Europe, finding a new “reason” for the survival of NATO, shaming Europe and in this way preventing them from doing serious damage to American economic, political, and

security interests. These are the goals, rather than saving the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina, that were the primary motive of American interventionism in the Balkans.

Gibbs' book represents an excellent, original, and persuasive argument which relativizes the argument of previous interpretations and poses an alternative to them. The translator has done an excellent job, but the book would have been even easier to read if the proofreading and editing had been better. David Gibbs' book *The Humanitarian Destruction of Yugoslavia* is recommended for all those who want a more balanced and reasoned discussion of the causes and consequences of the Yugoslav crises and wars in the 1990s.

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