

Jörg Becker

## **War Marketing. How US-American PR agencies market the ex-Yugoslav wars\***

Lecture at the “Adopt Srebrenica. International Cooperation for Memory” conference held by the Alexander Langer-Foundation from Bolzano/Italy and the Tuzlanska Amica Association from Tuzla/B&H in the House of Culture in Srebrenica/B& H, Aug. 27 – Sept. 1, 2007

### **1. Historical considerations**

Many years have elapsed since the two German brothers Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm and the great Serb philologist Vuk Stephanović Karadžić were united by a deep, intimate friendship. Indeed, for many generations anti-Serb sentiments have been the order of the day in Germany.

In the early 20th century and particularly during World War I polemic, racist jokes about Serbs appeared in German magazines. The general tenure was that Serbs are backward, uncivilized and violent. And this being the case, half truths color how they were perceived. When in 1930 Egon Erwin Kisch (who later rightly became world famous for his social reporting) wrote an article about his time as an Austrian soldier in the war against Serbia in summer 1914, he may have used graphic language to describe many events of the war but he “forgot” the numerous massacres perpetrated by the Austrian-Hungarian army on the Serb population in the villages along the Drina, though it is a known fact that he was in precisely these villages. German fascists were able to capitalize on such selective perceptions and anti-Serb sentiment in World War II. When in 1941 the Third Reich began its war of aggression against Yugoslavia the NS propaganda organ “Signal” spoke of the Germans “liberating” Croatia, and few other newspapers matched it in its hatred of Serbia. “Signal” saw in the Serbs only “conspirators”, “bandits” and “terrorists”. The “Serb national character” was a “mixture of stubbornness, (...) cronyism and corruption”.

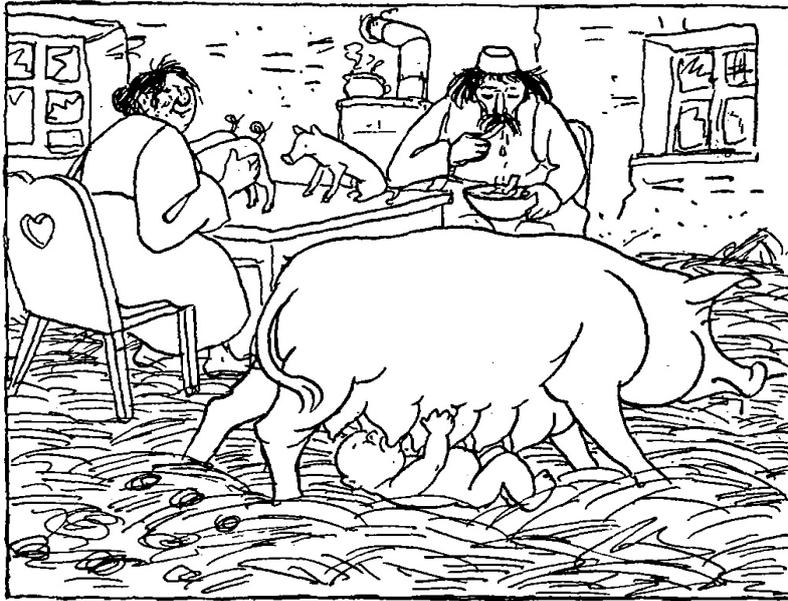
Media are not only a reflection a society but a social actor. Accordingly, mention should be made at this point of the murder of thousands of Serb civilians during the war in the Balkans at that time. According to estimates by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Croatian Ustasha working under German protection was responsible for the deaths of some 600,000 Serbs in what was then Croatia, with about 30,000 Serbs dying in the Croatian concentration camp Jasenovac. Germany’s surprise air raid on Belgrade on April 6 and 7, 1941 claimed between 1.500 and 30.000 civilian deaths, and after the Serb capitulation on April 17, 1941 some 350,000 Serb soldiers were imprisoned in German prisoner-of-war camps.

In order to fully appreciate and understand this fatal connection between anti-Serb images and the actual suffering of the Serbs in World War II, you must know some of the reasons why US-American PR agencies could be so successful in manipulating the world press today. And especially as a German academic you should be informed about the historical background if you are to present arguments that are measured, considered, free of arrogance and bias.

---

\* Summary of a more detailed and longer version in German.

## Pictures 1 and 2: Habits and Customs of the Serbs



Like all warm-hearted people, the Serbs live in close community with their animals. A newborn baby is often nursed by a sow. Out of gratitude, the Serbian mother nurses the little piglets.



A popular form of entertainment among Serbs is killing the king.

Source: Simplicissimus. 14th Volume, May 31, 1909.

## 2. Public relations agencies and war

Prejudices do not simply come from nothing, but are specifically manufactured and cultivated. Generally, this comes about as an anonymous process of social manufacture, but sometimes it is possible to identify individuals. Meanwhile, social scientists are well aware that public relations agencies successfully manipulate the world press in the interest of those governments in whose pay they are when it comes to social communication about war. Arguably the Biafran War of 1967 was the first large 20th century war in which PR agencies working on behalf of the warring parties successfully influenced the global and especially the European media. For example, the British firm Burson-Marsteller Associates was one of the agencies war-waging Nigeria hired while the US-American PR agency Ruder Finn and Geneva-based ad agency Markpress worked for the breakaway provincial government in Biafra.

Three reasons can be cited for the PR agencies' success in shifting Western public opinion to favor the Biafran civil war government which paid them: 1. Using "agenda setting" the said PR agencies deliberately distributed certain emotional terms that transformed the Biafran argumentation into a European perspective (e. g. Christian, hunger blockade, genocide, terrorist bombing) and made it easier for the European press to sell the view of an African war faction to a European public. 2. The top-down communication approach used by these PR agencies corresponded on a local level in Europe and the United States with the bottom up communication approach by numerous Biafran solidarity committees who employed the same arguments. By way of example, in the United States there was the NGO Biafran Students Association created by a PR agency and which in return for payment organized political demonstrations for Biafra's independence in front of the UN headquarters. Similarly in Germany we should remember the Hamburger-based "Aktion Biafra-Hilfe" – which later resulted in the NGO "Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker" (Society for Threatened Peoples). 3. Such organized "closed communication systems" had an enormous multiplying effect, which was capable of altering the published war reporting in the Biafran government's favor.

Working on the same basis numerous US-American PR agencies were active in the various regions of ex-Yugoslavia from the early 1990s through until today with an eye to achieving Kosovo's independence. Two of the PR agencies already hired in the Biafran War, namely Burson-Marsteller and Ruder Finn, cropped up again as successful communication specialists for warring factions in the more recent wars in ex-Yugoslavia. For example, from 1991 to 1997 Ruder Finn conducted extensive PR campaigns for the governments of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the leadership of the Kosovo Albanians, Burson-Marsteller was hired by Sarajevo.

In my systematic examination of the role of US-American PR agencies in the latest Balkan wars, published in 2006 under the title "Operation Balkan. Werbung für Tod und Krieg" (Operation Balkan. Hiring for Death and War) I made the following findings:

1. From 1991 to 2002 alone, 31 US-American PR agencies and 9 PR consultants were active for all the parties involved in the wars and conflicts.
2. The work done by these 40 PR firms translated into at least 160 individual consulting contracts with a total turnover of at least \$ 12 million.
3. The most important PR agencies were: Washington World Group, Ruder Finn, Global Enterprises Group, Jefferson Waterman International and Burson-Marsteller.

4. There were, and indeed still are, numerous links between these PR agencies and high-ranking figures in US politics and the US military.

These PR agencies engaged by the warring parties essentially employed varying combinations of the following means: political propaganda, lobbying, crisis communication, information management, issues management, public affairs (in other words political communication), consulting and intelligence. PR agencies, who worked for non-Serb clients, listed the following as objectives of their work:

- U.S. recognition of the independence of Croatia and Slovenia,
- the perception of Slovenia and Croatia as modern states of West European caliber,
- the portrayal of Serb as suppressers and aggressors,
- the identification of the Serbs with the Nazis,
- the formulation of the political program of the Kosovo Albanians,
- the portrayal of the Croats, the Bosnian Muslims and the Kosovo Albanians as solely innocent victims,
- the acquisition of NGOs, academics and think tanks for the realization of their own goals,
- favorable negotiating results for the Albanian side in Rambouillet,
- cultivation of US investments in the Yugoslav successor states and
- Montenegro's secession from Belgrade.

Just how the successful work by these agencies was conducted can be inferred from the comments by a leading manager of the Ruder Finn PR agency under contract to the governments in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and the leadership of the Kosovo Albanians:

“Our work is not to verify information. We are not equipped to do that. Our work is to accelerate the circulation information favorable to us, to aim at judiciously chosen targets. (...) Speed is vital. (...) The first statement counts. The retractions have no effect ” (quoted from Merlino: *Les vérités yougoslaves ne sont pas toutes bonnes à dire*, Paris: (Albin Michel, 1993), p. 126f.).

This particular manager described his having persuaded three of the largest Jewish organizations in the United States to publish a full-page protest ad in the New York Times, in which the Serbs were compared with the Nazis, as one of his greatest PR coups:

“Immediately, there is a noticeable change in the language used in the media, accompanied by the use of terms that are highly emotionally charged such as ethnic cleansing, concentration camp etc., and all of that evokes a comparison with Nazi Germany, gas chambers and Auschwitz. The emotional charging was so powerful that nobody dared to contradict it so as not to be accused of revisionism. We had hit the bull's eye” (quoted from Jacques Merlino: *Les vérités yougoslaves ne sont pas toutes bonnes à dire*, Paris: (Albin Michel, 1993), p. 127f.).

This current example of press manipulation brings us full circle. The historically rooted anti-Serb prejudices continue to be virulent and PR agencies have systematically and deliberately employed these prejudices to manipulate public opinion in the media war.

Precisely as a German these facts strike me as especially malicious for a double reason: 1. It is particularly insidious to compare the Balkan people who suffered the most under the Nazis with the Nazis. 2. Even though there may be doubt about whether it is possible to use the

German Holocaust against the Jews in a comparison, comparing the German Holocaust with the recent Serb crimes (as e.g., here in Srebrenica) is totally out of place and absurd.

### **3. Yesterday's thoughts for tomorrow**

I not only want to speak about the past but also the present and future. And now – shortly before a possible unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo – I read in serious German newspapers sentences such as the following: “There is no ruling out military action by the Serb central government against the region largely populated by Albanians” (FR, July 18, 2007). Or: “Moreover, volunteers are forming in the underground on the Serb side – as yet independently of the government or even against their will. They want to use force to fight for a Serbian Kosovo” (taz, July 27, 2007). Perpetuum mobile: Once again the violent Serbs are to blame for everything. See above.

Thinking over the past years I would have wished that NATO had thoroughly read Ivo Andric's novel “The Bridge over the Drina” (1945) prior to their military intervention as then they would have properly understood the conflicts in Bosnia and not continued to misunderstand them through to the present day.

One of the central revelations of this novel is that the peaceful (not necessarily friendly) coexistence of various groups in Bosnia only became armed conflict when the “Schwabens” (= Austria-Hungaria) entered Sarajevo. Divide et impera.

Ivo Andric also supplies assurances when it comes to analyzing and solving the conflict:

“Who knows. Maybe these monsters, who through their actions order, clean, alter and do up everything, only to immediately devour and destroy it, will spread over the entire earth, perhaps from the whole, wide world they will make a barren field for their senseless building and deathly destruction, grazing land for their insatiable hunger and incredible appetites? Everything is possible but one thing cannot happen, namely that the great, compassionate people disappear once and for all, who erect lasting structures at God's command so that the earth is more beautiful and man can live on it more easily and better. Were they to disappear that would mean God's love on earth has been distinguished and destroyed. But that cannot be.”

And let me add a similarly wise quotation from Ivo Andric:

“In this great and strange battle that has been waged in Bosnia for centuries between the two religions and, under the cover of religion, has been waged over the country, power, and an outlook on life and the world, the opponents stole not only each other's women, horses and weapons, but also their songs.”

I would like to close from an Islamic perspective with a view to my Muslim friends and colleagues from Sarajevo. The word Islam comes from the Arabic word Silm and means as much as reconciliation, peace, devotion and obedience. And the 5<sup>th</sup> surah in verse 32 in the Koran holds the well-known message:

“If anyone killed a person not in retaliation for murder or to spread mischief in the land, it would be as if he killed the whole of mankind. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the whole of mankind.”