

Karadzic, photography and revisionism

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The [trial of Radovan Karadzic for genocide in Bosnia has begun](#) in The Hague despite the accused's boycott of the proceedings.

Amidst all the legitimate issues this trial will provoke, one problem stands out – the Karadzic trial has already become another plinth upon which the revisionists who seek to deny the systematic ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs in Bosnia can parade their prejudices. And in this pernicious denial, the claims about the alleged fabrication of pictures from Bosnian Serb concentration camps continue to circulate and play a role.

Last week, BBC Radio 4's "Moral Maze" [hosted a discussion on the Karadzic trial and war crimes generally](#). On the panel was Claire Fox, and interviewed as "expert witnesses" were David Chandler and John Laughland. (Thanks to [Gary Banham](#) for the pointer to this programme). What was never disclosed during the discussion was Fox's and Chandler's earlier association with the infamous attack by the [Revolutionary Communist Party's](#) journal *Living Marxism* on journalists who in 1992 reported on the Bosnian Serb concentration camps in the Prijedor region of Bosnia.



Photo: Ron Haviv, Bosnian prisoners, Trnopolje, 1992. Source: <http://photoarts.com/haviv/>

As I have detailed extensively in my investigation "[Atrocity, Memory, Photography](#)," a network of individuals originally associated with the RCP used the fundamentally flawed

1997 article “The Picture that Fooled the World” to claim the western media (especially ITN) fabricated images of emaciated victims in Bosnia in order to legitimize US military intervention in the region. The simple fact that the 1992 reports did not lead to any such response, and that the claims about the journalists have been proven wrong, has never deterred them from persisting with the argument – as in [this April 2009](#) article by Edward Herman.

Herman, of course, is a sometime co-author of Noam Chomsky’s, and last week also saw Chomsky’s role in the perpetuation of this revisionism revisited. Chomsky gave the Amnesty International lecture in Belfast on 30 October. [Al’s Patrick Corrigan said](#) Noam Chomsky’s message is as relevant for people in Belfast as it is for those in Beirut, Baghdad or Beijing:

We all have a responsibility to stand up for justice and to stand against those who would take away the human rights of the most vulnerable.

But not Bosnia, it seems. The Balkans are something of a blind spot for Chomsky, for he has become directly and indirectly associated with the revisionists. As I write in the second part of “Atrocity, Memory, Photography,” Chomsky lent his support to *Living Marxism*’s case against the journalists on the grounds of “free speech.” Although on one occasion he later back-pedalled by saying he wouldn’t have supported *LM* if its campaign dishonoured those who suffered in the Bosnian War, he nonetheless maintained that the journalists who witnessed the Bosnian Serb camps in 1992 “happened to be caught up in a story which is probably not true,” and that “*LM* was probably correct”. Under the guise of an absolutist defence of free speech, then, Chomsky has taken a particular, partisan and unethical stance on the conduct of the Bosnian War and its victims. For the oft-praised intellectual who bases his arguments on “fact” these statements are nothing short of shameful.

This background led Ed Vulliamy, *The Observer* journalist who was at Trnopolje and other camps in August 1992, [to write an outraged open letter to Amnesty](#) protesting the organisation’s failure to hold Chomsky to account for these views and for giving him another public podium in the name of human rights.

Chomsky certainly gets an easy ride from sympathetic media. On 7 November, [Seamus Milne wrote a hagiographic paean for *The Guardian*](#) to the man he described as “the closest thing in the English-speaking world to an intellectual superstar.” Milne concluded his story by declaring that “in the Biblical tradition of the conflict between prophets and kings, there’s not the slightest doubt which side he represents.”

Such adoration is prompted by their shared antipathy to US foreign policy. As far as it goes, there’s nothing wrong with a critical approach to American security strategies, but when the opposition to “US imperialism” becomes its own absolute and distorts any other

considerations, then we have entered the terrain of political fundamentalism. And when fundamental opposition to any policy associated with the US leads individuals to sympathise with the policies of Milosevic, Mladic and Karadzic in the name of a progressive politics, then we are in very dangerous territory.

In Milne's report there is no mention of Bosnia or Karadzic. Perhaps that is because Chomsky and *The Guardian* have clashed previously on his attitude to the war in the Balkans. In 2005 Emma Brockes interviewed Chomsky after he was nominated as the world's leading intellectual. Brockes commendably asked some tough questions of Chomsky including his apparent endorsement of Diana Johnstone's book *Fools Crusade*, which has a revisionist chapter on Srebrenica.

Chomsky objected to the way the interview was written up, and [his supporters endorsed his concern](#). That interview is no longer available on *The Guardian* after [the paper apologised to Chomsky for its presentation](#), though it can still be read [here](#). And it deserves another read in order to understand Chomsky on the Balkans.

In the subsequent controversy, Chomsky sidestepped the issue of what he really thought and said about Bosnia with the same freedom of speech defence he used in relation to *LM*. As *The Guardian's* readers' editor wrote in upholding his complaints, "Both Prof Chomsky and Ms Johnstone...have made it clear that Prof Chomsky's support for Ms Johnstone, made in the form of an open letter with other signatories, related entirely to her right to freedom of speech."

This is not a full and fair statement, as "freedom of speech" for Chomsky masks what appears to be a much deeper commitment to the revisionist account of the Balkan wars.

Chomsky's original involvement came about after an interview with Diana Johnstone, discussing her book's claims about the Balkans, appeared in the summer 2003 issue of the Swedish magazine *Ordfront*, illustrated with the famous photograph of Fikret Alic at Trnopolje. That interview prompted a media storm in Sweden (including the resignation of the magazine editor and an apology to survivors of the war), a seemingly partisan account of which can be read [here](#). I cannot comment on the details of the whole issue – except to note that this document on the Swedish debate also takes *LM's* position with regard to the Trnopolje pictures – but in relation to Chomsky we can see two things from this. First, Chomsky signed a statement that said:

We regard Diana Johnstone's *Fools' Crusade* as an outstanding work, dissenting from the mainstream view but doing so by an appeal to fact and reason, in a great tradition.

This "outstanding work" calls the truth of the Srebrenica massacre into question, and continues to recycle the canard about the pictures from the Bosnian Serb camps originally published by *LM* (Oliver Kamm has [more details here](#)). The letter Chomsky

signed did go on to say “but whatever opinion one may have of that book, there are more fundamental issues at stake, namely freedom of expression and the right to express dissenting views.” Nonetheless, it is clear [Chomsky thinks highly of Johnstone’s book](#). In a letter to Swedish friends, Chomsky engaged the substance of the debate in that country to defend particular points in Johnstone’s book, amongst which he includes further favourable references to *LM*. In general Chomsky concludes:

Johnstone argues – and, in fact, clearly demonstrates – that a good deal of what has been charged has no basis in fact, and much of it is pure fabrication.

This is a long way beyond defending people’s right to speak even if they are wrong. If you think this is all passé, then remember that the veracity of a 17-year-old picture remains the foundation for revisionist accounts of the Bosnian War. It is a curious testament to the power of imagery, but one we should never let pass without critical comment.

Although Chomsky and allies claim the mantle of progressive politics for their critiques of their Balkans, they are in partnership with British conservatives and Eurosceptics such as John Laughland, who has detailed his primary concern for the plight of the Bosnian Serbs [here](#), or Daniel Hannan (see [here](#)). This replicates the alliances between the *LM* crowd and the libertarian right in the US.

Although these individuals argue in terms of the threats to “free speech” they are in privileged positions from which they contribute regularly to the mainstream media, frequently appearing on the BBC, writing columns for national newspapers and contributing to on-line journals with the time and space to peddle their disinformation. The voices that go unheard most often are those who were photographed in the Bosnian Serb camps of the Prijedor region. It is their freedom and speech progressives should be most concerned about, and if the Karadzic trial can contribute to that goal, it will have been worthwhile.

[This post appeared on a previous version of my personal website on 9 November 2009. On 10 August 2020 I took the text from my archive to produce this PDF so it could be re-posted on ‘Balkan Witness’. Other than some reformatting and the correction of some spelling errors and hyperlinks (where possible, though some remain broken) and the addition of page numbers, no other changes have been made to the original text - David Campbell].