

## **Fanning the Flames of Ethnic Hatred**

**David Parnas, Member of Canadian Pugwash, former President of Science for Peace**

**Hamilton Spectator**

**July 2, 1999**

By consistently identifying people by their ethnicity, the feature article, "Polloshka's List" (Hamilton Spectator, 25 June), encourages its readers to hate members of a specific ethnic group. Beginning with sentences like, "Pick up the dead and bury them, the Serbs told ...", "Ordered by the Serbs to dispose of the dead ...", and "The Serbs knew what Polloshka was doing ...", the article creates the impression that all Serbs were functioning in unison, first attacking innocent civilians and then ordering members of the victim's ethnic group to dispose of the bodies. The facts given later in the article refute that impression.

The story could have been reported without engendering hatred. Consider how the article would have sounded if it read, "Pick up the dead and bury them, city officials told ..." or "Ordered by city officials to ...". In fact, the people who gave those orders were officials. Responsible for public health, they had no choice but to make sure that the dead were buried. Had the author identified the people by the job rather than their ethnicity, it would have been clear that burial orders are not evil acts, but necessary ones. The remainder of the article never suggests that those officials were the killers; they are associated with the killers only by shared ethnicity. It appears that the author was deliberately trying to make your readers hate Serbs.

The article engenders hate in other ways. Because, it is filled with gruesome details, most people would stop after the opening paragraphs. Only sections of the article that are less likely to be read, those at the end of the article, reveal that the regular Serbian Army units did not participate in the burning and killing, but tried to stop it. In other words, contrary to the impression created by the early paragraphs, the killing was committed by some individuals, not by all Serb forces.

Further reading reveals that, at the times that the killings occurred, there were major battles with KLA units going on near the town. Readers are not told whether the victims were involved in anti-government military action; the victims too are characterised primarily by their ethnicity.

Referring to people by their ethnicity in this way, leads readers to view Serbs not as individuals but as a uniform group of heartless beasts. This is exactly what the Nazis did to the Jews in preparation for the Holocaust. Is it any wonder that my Serbian acquaintances have been encountering ethnic hatred right here in Hamilton? Some parents have forbidden their children to play with children of Serbian descent. Hateful epithets, based on ethnicity and national origin, have been shouted at peace protesters - even those who are not Serbs. This is not consistent with Canadian principles. We believe in judging individuals by their actions, not their ethnicity.

The article in question originated with the Washington Post. More than a decade ago, one of their reporters told me how the White House pressured them to publish articles with a pro-government "spin". The article reports the basic facts but creates an impression that is not supported by those facts.

There is plenty of evidence that some Serbs, and some Albanians, committed (and are now committing) atrocities in Kosovo. We must never condone such acts, but we must never forget that they are committed by individuals not by ethnic groups. The bombing of Yugoslavia has fanned the flames of ethnic hatred and NATO troops are now fighting in vain to put out the fires. We do not need more hatred in this world and we do not need articles designed to create ethnic hatred here in Canada.