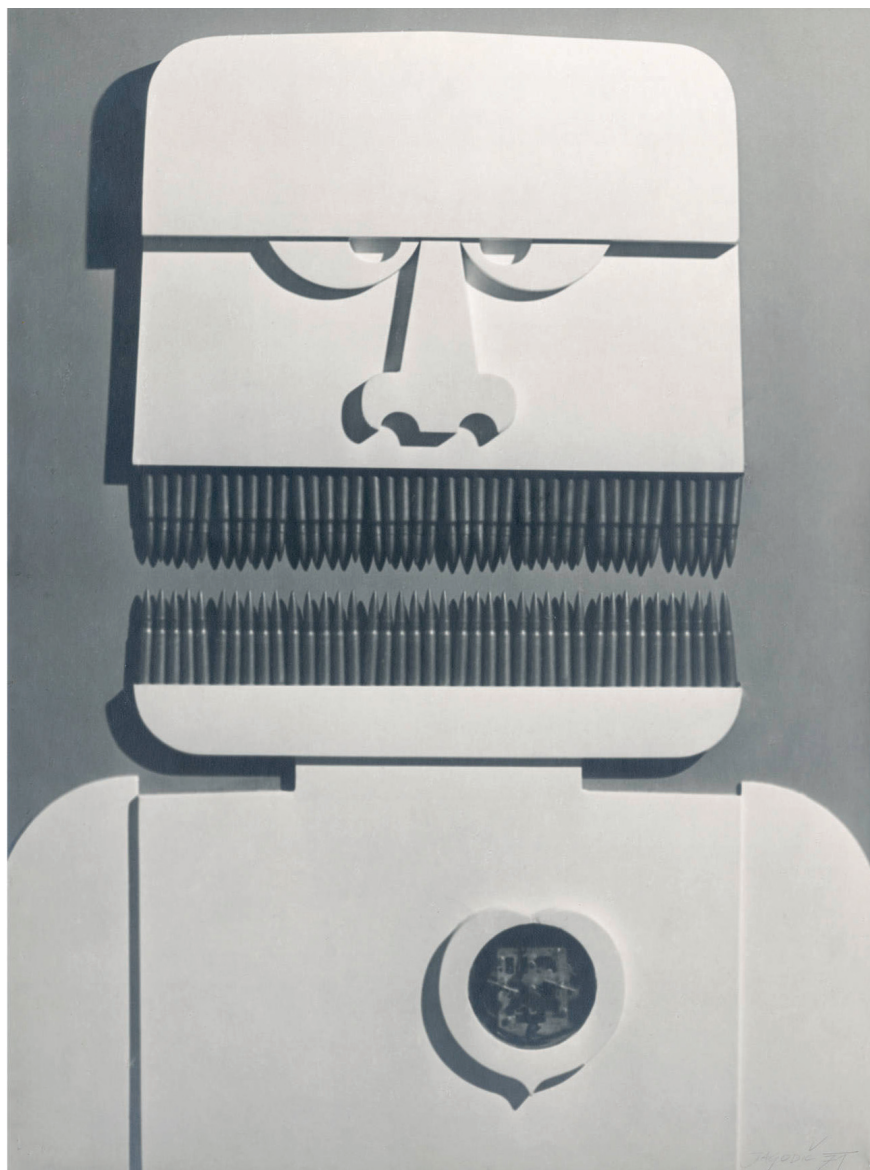


Peace Policies and Practices in Yugoslavia and Beyond



PEACE, UNCONDITIONAL!

Edited by
Sanja Petrović Todosijević and Martin Pogačar

Published by
Institute for Recent History of Serbia
Založba ZRC, Institute of Culture and Memory Studies ZRC SAZU

Series “Zbornici radova”, Volume No. 31

Series “Kulturni spomin”, Volume No. 12
Editor **Tanja Petrović**

For the Publishers
Vladan Jovanović, Oto Luthar

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ISBN 978-86-7005-208-6

The publication of this volume was made possible with the support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.
The publication was made possible by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency's research programme “Historical Interpretations of the 20th Century” (J6-0347).

PEACE,
UNCONDITIONAL!



Institute for Recent History of Serbia
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in Yugoslavia and Beyond

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Sanja Petrović Todosijević and Martin Pogačar

Belgrade, Ljubljana
2025

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Vladimir Petrović*



Stane Jagodič, *Letter from Sarajevo*, collage, 1992

Anatomy of a Lost Chance: Vance-Owen Peace Plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina in Geneva, January 1993

Abstract The Vance-Owen peace plan was the first comprehensive proposal to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Named after the co-chairs of the International Conference on the former Yugoslavia, David Owen and Cyrus Vance, it was developed in the second half of 1992, as the war in Bosnia was raging. Proposed to belligerents in early 1993, the plan was neither immediately accepted nor scrapped. In the months to come, tense negotiations demonstrated the inability of the principal actors to compromise by scaling back their maximalist goals and the international community's reluctance/inability to enforce a settlement. Drawing on unpublished and published sources, memoirs of participants, conference transcripts and trials, this paper reconstructs how this chance to shorten the war for more than two years was gambled away.

Keywords War in Bosnia, International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia, David Owen, Cyrus Vance, Slobodan Milošević, Radovan Karadžić, Alija Izetbegović, Franjo Tuđman, Ratko Mladić, Bill Clinton

Introduction

The Yugoslav catastrophe was a slow-moving avalanche. In the course of 1991, the political crisis was cascading toward a full-blown war,¹ escalating from isolated yet deadly skirmishes in the spring in Plitvice and Borovo Selo to a limited armed conflict in Slovenia in the summer into protracted warfare in Croatia, which lasted until the

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¹ Vladimir Petrović, "Becoming Inevitable: Yugoslav Descent to War Revisited," in *Repeating History 1941–1991?*, ed. Predrag Marković, Bojan B. Dimitrijević (Belgrade: Institute for Contemporary History 2022), 103–127.

end of the year.² It was halted in early 1992 by a shaky ceasefire, brokered by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Cyrus Vance, former US Secretary of State. As the first UN peacekeeping troops were deployed in the region (UNPROFOR), it soon became apparent that there was no peace to be maintained. The deadliest of the Yugoslav succession wars was about to erupt in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which declared independence following a referendum boycotted by its Serbian inhabitants. Aided by the Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslovenska narodna armija), they took up arms to carve up and secure their own territory in Bosnia, named Republika Srpska (RS). Brutal violence engulfed Bosnia very quickly, from Bijeljina in the east to Prijedor in the west in April 1992, reaching Sarajevo in May.³ Stretched between the aftershocks of the Gulf War, the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and, finally, the collapse of the USSR, the world was slow to react. Yet mounting images of atrocities, which included the displaced population as well as concentration camps and mass executions, were a stark reminder of the brutality of war “in the heart of Europe” and the inability of European actors to put a stop to it.⁴ Its main mechanism, the European Community's Conference on Yugoslavia, failed to produce tangible results, apart from providing an arbitration opinion that Yugoslavia was in a state of dissolution.⁵ In its stead, a more robust institution was announced – the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia (ICFY).⁶ At its opening in London in August 1992, the Yugoslav war was finally recognised as a grave threat to collective security. Chief EC mediator, Lord Peter Carington, passed the coordination onto his successors, the two co-chairmen of ICFY – Lord David Owen and Cyrus Vance, who assumed responsibility for forwarding the peace talks in the former Yugoslavia, with a primary focus on swiftly putting the war in Bosnia to an end.

The Vance-Owen peace plan (VOPP) was the first comprehensive proposal to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Named after the co-chairs of the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia, David Owen and Cyrus Vance, it was developed in the second half of 1992, as the war in Bosnia was raging. In addition to Vance and Owen, a group of associates worked on the plan, most notably Martti Ahtisaari and Herbert Okun.⁷

² *Dokumenta Predsedništva SFRJ I–III*, ed. Kosta Nikolić, Vladimir Petrović (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd 2010/2013).

³ *Bosna i Hercegovina u vreme raspada SFRJ 1990–1992, Tematska zbirka dokumenata*, ed. Kosta Nikolić (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, Fond za humanitarno pravo, Beograd 2011).

⁴ On the reaction of the international community to the Yugoslav crisis see James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). The European (lack of) policies have been scrutinised by Jakov Glaurdić, *The Hour of Europe: Western Powers and the Breakup of Yugoslavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁵ Maurizio Ragazzi, “Conference on Yugoslavia Arbitration Commission: Opinions and Questions arising from the dissolution of Yugoslavia,” *International Legal Materials* 31, no. 6 (1992): 1488–1526.

⁶ “International Conference on the former Yugoslavia: Documents adopted at the London Conference,” *International Legal Materials* 31, no. 6 (1992): 1527–48. More in *Srpske političke elite i Londonska konferencija*, ed. Vladimir Petrović (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju 2015), 5–40; Bertrand Ramcharan *International Peace Conferences* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁷ Documents related to the drafting of the plan are published in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, ed. David Owen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 13–199.

Through their mediation, in consultation with the relevant international actors, at the very beginning of 1993, the key protagonists of the Bosnian disaster were brought to the negotiating table in Geneva. The participants included Alija Izetbegović, Radovan Karadžić and Mate Boban, as well as Franjo Tuđman and Dobrica Ćosić and military leaders Ratko Mladić, Sefer Halilović and Milivoj Petković.

What were the chances for this peace initiative to succeed? British Prime Minister John Major put that question to Lord Owen over a New Year's Day lunch just before the negotiations opened. “Fifty-fifty”, replied Owen, a seasoned politician whose career was marked by many defeats, leading the British satirical newspaper *Private Eye* to summarise their conversations sarcastically:

John Major: I'm afraid it's a lost cause.

David Owen: I'm your man.

A day later in Geneva, Owen observed the gathered political and military leaders from the former Yugoslavia:

They were all sitting around the same table for the first time since the London Conference in August, and used the opening session to let off steam. Cy Vance explained that the work would continue in two working groups: one chaired by Martti Ahtisaari which would deal with constitutional issues, including the proposed provincial map for the administrative boundaries within Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the other presided over by the UNPROFOR Commander, General Nambiar, on military issues.⁸

And so, the plenary negotiations opened on 2 January 1993, with the co-chairs presenting a draft peace plan which envisaged the cessation of the conflict.

⁸ David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 89.

Presentation of the Vance-Owen plan in Geneva (2–4 January 1993)

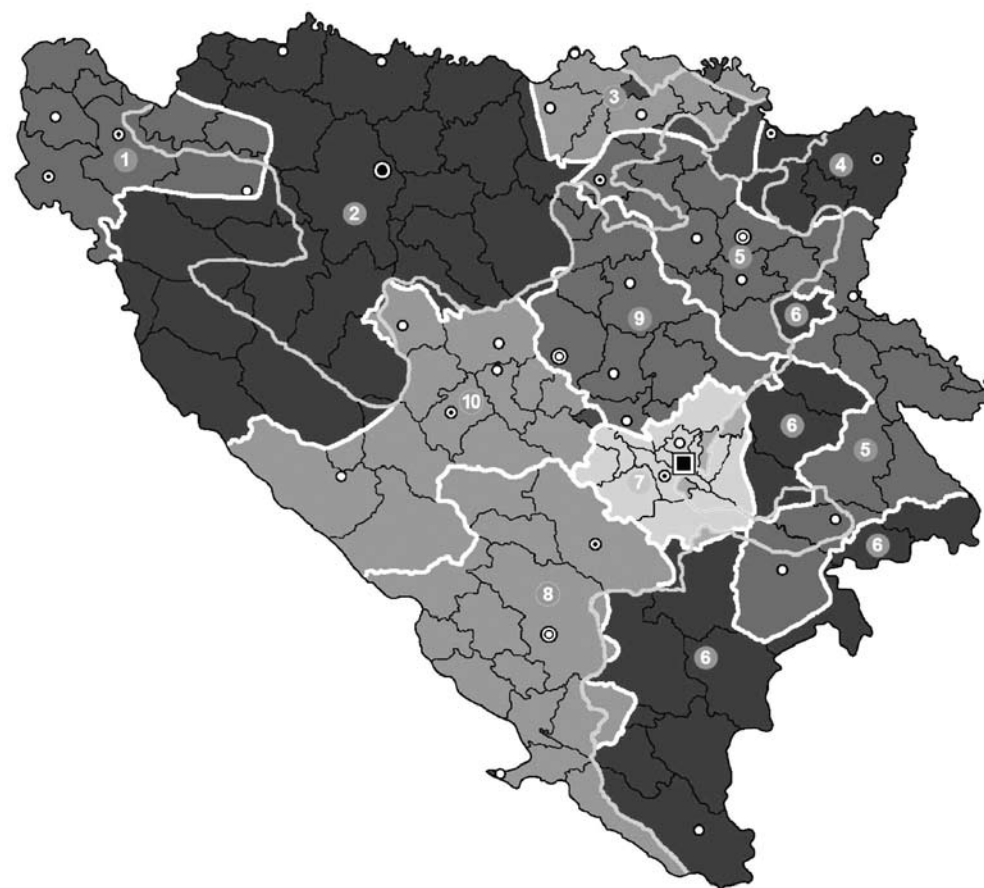
In the first phase of the Geneva Conference, after the welcome speeches, two documents were presented: the *Agreement Relating to Bosnia and Herzegovina* and the *Peace Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Vance and Owen presented the proposed political agreement to the delegations led by Alija Izetbegović, Radovan Karadžić and Mate Boban. It outlined the principles for the future constitutional framework of the state, mapped the division into areas, defined the relationship between provinces and central authorities and harmonised cooperation in humanitarian efforts. In essence, the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina was confirmed, although watered down by decentralisation into ten provinces, *de facto* ethnically carved but territorially unconnected. The content of the second document, which referred to the implementation of the armistice, the lines of demarcation and the dynamics of gradual development, was presented by UNPROFOR Commander Satish Nambiar, to be signed by the commanders of the belligerent armies, Ratko Mladić, Sefer Halilović and Milivoj Petković.⁹

Dobrica Ćosić recalled the overall atmosphere:

Vance and Owen, as representatives of the United Nations and the European Community, but certainly acting on the orders of the great powers, organised the most ambitious negotiations on war and peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina so far, demanding that, in addition to representatives of warring parties and military commands, Tuđman and I participate [...] They brought their plan for the constitutional arrangement of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. These were the most difficult negotiations in Geneva so far. There are insurmountable contradictions between all of us involved.¹⁰

These contradictions appeared as soon as the welcome speeches of declarative support for the peace process gave way to the actual negotiations.¹¹ At its core were the territorial issues. Namely, the assembled warlords were familiar with some of the military and

political solutions in earlier versions, but the crucial novelty which they were awaiting was the maps. Owen and Ahtisaari worked on them until the very start of the gathering in secrecy and with delicacy: “We were careful not to label any provinces Serb, Croat or Muslim, contrary to the impression given by some newspapers and commentators, putting only numbers and place names on the map”, said Owen.¹² However, the text of the plan did define the nationality of both the head and the deputy head of each province, indicating that ethnic carving of the country was *de facto* built into the plan.



The map of the Vance–Owen Peace Plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina, David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995).

⁹ The text of the plan is reproduced in *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, ed. Vladimir Petrović (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2010), I, 7–13.

¹⁰ Dobrica Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi 1992–1993* (Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 2004), 230 (translation by Vladimir Petrović, which is always the case if the original is in a South Slavic language).

¹¹ Introductory speeches are reproduced in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 206–8. The supplementary catalogue of historical documents as listed in *Lord Owen's Papers to be uploaded onto the VOPP section*, (Lord Owen's Papers), 66–74, last modified 13 September 2024, https://libguides.liverpool.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=31121178.

¹² Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, 90. On carving up the territory, see “Memo from Lord Owen to Martti Ahtisaari on adjustments to maps (31 December 1992),” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 198–199.

	Capital	Head	Deputy
1	Bihać	Muslim	Serb
2	Banja Luka	Serb	Muslim
3	Bosanski Brod	Croat	Serb
4	Bijeljina	Serb	Muslim
5	Tuzla	Muslim	Serb
6	Nevesinje	Serb	Muslim
7	Sarajevo	Special status	Special status
8	Mostar	Croat	Muslim
9	Zenica	Muslim	Croat
10	Travnik	Croat	Muslim

The table shows data on 10 provinces according to the Vance–Owen Peace Plan.

One could read the mood of the conference participants directly from the map. Neither Izetbegović nor Karadžić hid their dissatisfaction. Izetbegović was surprised by the provision on the special status of Sarajevo, which was supposed to be extraterritorial, and he objected to the ethnic demarcation of the provinces. At the same time, Karadžić noticed that the Serb side was expected to withdraw from a significant part of the territory. He deemed that unacceptable: at the time of the talks, the Serbs controlled almost 70% of Bosnia, which the map would reduce to 45%, grouped in three unconnected provinces.

Izetbegović was also dissatisfied with the maps. He stated that Province No. 1 (Bihać) was unacceptable as it validated the effects of ethnic cleansing. Ključ, which had been 50 per cent Serb and 48 per cent Muslim before the war, should be included in Bihać province. Second, Izetbegović criticised the configuration of Province 5 (Tuzla), saying that it was unnatural. Instead, he suggested its division into two provinces – one around Tuzla and another around Goražde. In addition, he reiterated his prior position that the Tuzla province should have access to the Sava River through Brčko, which he described as a Muslim town before the war. Third, Izetbegović stated that with regard to Province 6, the opštinas (municipalities) of Čajniče and Rudo should be included in the Muslim province.

Concluding his initial remarks, he stated that he would reserve his right to comment on Sarajevo later.¹³

Karadžić followed with his list of changes:

First, with regard to Province No. 1 (Bihać), he asserted that the logical division was along the Una River. According to Karadžić, Muslims live on the western bank of the Una and Serbs live on the eastern bank. The Serbs living on the eastern bank are not willing to live in a Muslim province. Nonetheless, Karadžić indicated some flexibility with regard to the opština of Sanski Most [...] Karadžić then stated that he would have to discuss with the Croats the situation involving Kupres and Glamoč in Province No. 10. Karadžić declared that Province No. 5 was unacceptable. He agreed with President Izetbegović that the province should be divided into two areas. The first province would be west of the opštinas of Kalesija and Kladanj. The second would include Čajniče, Rudo and parts of Goražde and Foča. Almost as an afterthought, Karadžić mentioned that some negotiation might be needed with regard to Province No. 3 (Posavina), which we had thought critical to the Bosnian Serbs. Mate Boban offered few objections to the proposed map, describing it as “fairly objective”.¹⁴

Actually, the Croatian side was pleasantly surprised by the chunk of territory they thought they were to control. However, with the Bosnians and Serbs objecting, a consensus was not in sight. The Serbian side showed some openness to both proposed agreements, but only in principle and as a basis for further negotiations, opposing the formulations of the constitutional principles. The Bosnian side did just the opposite, embracing the constitutional principles but expressing reservations about the envisaged relationship between the provinces and the central authorities. Presidents Ćosić and Tuđman were also at odds, one claiming that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had no military presence in Bosnia, and the other that both Bosnia and Croatia were victims of Yugoslav aggression.¹⁵ In addition, on the following day (3 January), quarrels continued over the military document regarding the dynamics of the withdrawal of troops, the creation of new demarcation lines and other transitional arrangements. In this atmosphere of mistrust, Vance and Owen scheduled a new session for 4 January, reminding the participants “that the success or failure of the talks depended primarily on them. The ultimate choice was theirs – peace or war”.¹⁶

13 “ICFY Memo from Peter Beshar to Co-Chairmen on afternoon session of Working Group (2 January 1993),” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 209.

14 *Ibid.*, 210.

15 “Record of First Plenary meeting of ICFY Peace Talks /2 January 1993),” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 206–7.

16 “The Pentagon Peace Talks: 2–4 January 1993,” *Lord Owen's Papers*, 80.

Accordingly, Owen recalled:

At the close of the meeting on 4 January the Bosnian Croats accepted our three-part package in full – the constitutional principle, the cessation of hostilities agreement and the map. For the Bosnian Serbs, Karadžić said the map was ‘acceptable as a basis for negotiations’. He rejected constitutional principles 1 and 2 which precluded a state within a state and generally kept the cessation of hostility options open. It was obvious that they would never accept the map unless and until they were completely isolated. Meanwhile, we were contemplating asking Ćosić if he would consider it appropriate to include Milošević in his delegation next time. We thought that after the election result Milošević would be readier to put pressure on Karadžić – and more effective in doing so – than Ćosić and so later it proved.¹⁷

Seeing that there was no readiness to sign the peace package on the spot, the co-chairs proposed a break during the Orthodox Christmas holidays and scheduled a new round of negotiations for 10 January.¹⁸

Discussing the plan in Belgrade (5–9 January 1993)

“What should we do?” Dobrica Ćosić was wondering:

I have the impression that Serbia and Montenegro will pay for the Bosnian Serbs’ engagement in this war. I am very worried about our future. I decided to address the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro tomorrow, on Christmas Eve, and inform them about the conversation in Geneva and the situation in which our country has found itself. With this speech, I will try to gain the support of the people for my policy of historic compromise.¹⁹

However, the winter holidays did not bring calm, but an escalation of violence. In the night between 7 and 8 January, the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s troops from Srebrenica attacked and looted Kravica and surrounding villages, killing no less than 36 people,

including civilians.²⁰ On the very same day in Sarajevo, a Vojska Republike Srpske (Army of Republika Srpska, VRS) soldier shot Bosnian deputy prime minister Hakija Turajlić, even though he was in a United Nations vehicle, under UNPROFOR protection. This horrified the peace conference co-chairs, who strongly condemned the killing and demanded that Karadžić and Mladić prosecute those responsible.²¹

However, Karadžić and Mladić were busy with a very different task – strengthening their own positions by presenting their Geneva engagement at the meeting of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska (NSRS), which met in Bijeljina on 8 January. NSRS deputies were unified in defiance, competing to most eloquently formulate their shared message – not to give up a single inch of territory. Such a jingoistic tone dominated the session that Mladić himself warned: “We don’t need to be so fiery and menacing [...] I don’t know how we will appear up there in Geneva due to this situation”, he said, referring to the murder of Turajlić. However, the deputies applauded Turajlić’s death, and they conditioned the delegation not to go below a set threshold in the continuation of the negotiations.²² In such circumstances, the question was whether the Bosnian Serb representatives would even show up at the second round of the Geneva negotiations, let alone what their agenda would be.

This agenda was discussed on 9 January in Belgrade, where the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Dobrica Ćosić, convened a session of the Council for the Harmonisation of Positions on State Policy (CfH) in its expanded form. In addition to the members of the body (Dobrica Ćosić, Slobodan Milošević, Momir Bulatović, Života Panić, Ilija Đukić, Radoje Kontić), the leadership of Republika Srpska (Radovan Karadžić, Momčilo Krajišnik, Ratko Mladić, Nikola Koljević) and the Republic of Serbian Krajina attended the meeting. The Bosnian Serb leadership was unanimous in rejecting the plan at the cost of an all-out confrontation with the international community. Momčilo Krajišnik pointed out: “The basic fact is that we cannot accept the ultimatum put before us by the European Community and the United Nations: to recognise Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state”.²³ Radovan Karadžić elaborated:

In our deep conviction, the proposals were calculated so that the Serbs would reject them. The map is provocatively anti-Serbian, and so are the constitutional principles [...] Therefore, they do not want only to deprive us of our rights by force; they even seek our cooperation in our destruction. That is completely clear to us and that is why we cannot accept.

17 Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, 91. He referred to the December 1992 elections in Serbia in which Milošević defeated the opposition candidate Milan Panić.

18 David Binder, “Bosnia’s Bitter Enemies Sit Down and Talk in Geneva,” *New York Times*, 4 January 1993.

19 Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi 1992–1993*, 231.

20 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) Judgment, Prosecutor v Naser Orić, paragraphs 659–669, last modified 13 September 2024, <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/oric/tjug/en/ori-jud060630e.pdf>.

21 *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 223.

22 ICTY Court Records, Prosecutor v Slobodan Milošević: P538.6.1, Transcript of minutes of RS Assembly Meeting, 24 session, 8 January 1993, 1–2, 23, last modified 13 September 2024, <https://icr.icty.org/>.

23 Ibid., P469.40; Stenografske beleške sa proširene sednice Saveta od 9. januara 1993. Translated from *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, I, 38.

Their counter-proposal was formulated by Nikola Koljević:

We have been thinking about this idea for a long time – there is a need for an all-Serbian assembly. We think that would be a very important and big step, unlike the small ones we have used so far, trying to tactically outwit people who are much more cunning than us.²⁴

Such an assembly was supposed to be a decisive step towards the unification of the entire Serb ethnic space.

This was exactly what the presidents of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro, Dobrica Ćosić, Slobodan Milošević and Momir Bulatović, did not want to hear. They were convinced that a unilateral rejection of the plan would lead to even tighter sanctions, possibly even military intervention. Slobodan Milošević was particularly worried about the damage that an economic meltdown would cause to his rule. He insisted on continuing the negotiations and did not hesitate to criticise the leadership of Republika Srpska:

Don't evoke our strategic goals here and now; they are clear. There is no one here at this table who does not share that opinion. Our strategic goal is for the Serbian people in the Balkans to be free and equal [...] Although the proposed plan, as well as some of its points, seem unfavourable for now, we should work to turn them and bring them in line with our cause by using its main favourable component. Namely, the plan accepted demarcations on the basis of ethnicity; it already distinguishes according to the ethnic principle, which was until recently ruled out. [...] Therefore, I would be in favour of a "soft and pragmatic" approach to the existing conditions and circumstances, rather than for the momentary confrontation. We should be probing the international environment for the opportunity to take things further [...] It would be best to bring Alija [Izetbegović] to the brink so that he would be the one to reject the plan.²⁵

Karadžić was unimpressed by this argument, emphasising his experience with international negotiators: "I have to tell you that they are real bandits; they are criminals, completely immoral, ready to cheat [...] Believe me, it would be a disaster for us to accept this".²⁶ However, as the session progressed, deep animosities and differences became apparent among the Serb leaders:

²⁴ Ibid., I, 41–42, 46.

²⁵ Ibid., I, 62–65.

²⁶ Ibid., I, 72–3.

Slobodan Milošević: Why did you kill the Deputy Prime Minister yesterday? You didn't need that at all.

Radovan Karadžić: We arrested the man, and we will punish him. We will do as we agreed and never endanger our motherland, Serbia or Montenegro; we will "untie our boat" from you in the sense that there is no responsibility for Serbia and Montenegro.

Slobodan Milošević: This is not about "untying the boat".

Dobrica Ćosić: Who can sacrifice you? Who can make the decision today to sacrifice the Serbian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Radovan Karadžić: Then I want to tell you one thing: we are deluding ourselves that we will improve the plan at a later stage.

Slobodan Milošević: We have already reached that stage; we already outsmarted them; that's what it's about. [...] With small corrections, these will be excellent borders. How much of Bosnia and Herzegovina is within these borders?

Radovan Karadžić: About 40%.

Slobodan Milošević: That will increase above 50%, because there is a disputed 20%.²⁷ [...] I'm telling you that Alija will not accept this.

Radovan Karadžić: Alija will accept all this.

Slobodan Milošević: No way!²⁸

Exasperated with this defiance, Milošević asked for the debate to be kept secret and abandoned further discussion, threatening that he would not attend the peace talks: "I insist that no reports on the talks be made public. No need to show our cards. I will try not to go, unless that would harm the country. I'm sorry, I have to go now, but you continue".²⁹

Caught between these two positions, Dobrica Ćosić increasingly resembled some characters from his novels, who so frequently lamented over tragic Serbian disagreements:

I sense an obvious rift between those Serbs who, living among Muslims and Croats, learned that there is no just agreement with them nor freedom for them, and the conviction of Serbs from Serbia in the principles and their own skill to survive

²⁷ Ibid., I, 94, 112.

²⁸ Ibid., I, 116.

²⁹ Ibid., I, 129.

even in the most difficult circumstances. In their historical experience, Serbs are not a unified people. Even our current interests are not completely aligned. This disunity, alongside our current differences, could be fatal for the future of the Serbian people as a whole [...] The Serbs from Republika Srpska and the Serbs from the Republic of Serbian Krajina left the “oval room” of the Palace of the Federation disappointed and unhappy. That is where socialist Yugoslavia disintegrated. Perhaps the Serbian nation and its political unity crumbled here today.³⁰

It was unlikely that such a delegation could position itself constructively at the next negotiating session.

So close, yet so far: The second negotiation round in Geneva (10–12 January 1993)

In such circumstances, the second plenary session in Geneva, held on 10 January, showed no signs of progress. The Croatian side again expressed its readiness to sign both documents, while the other two parties attempted to outwit one another. Radovan Karadžić proved to be particularly unwavering, Owen recalled:

When he did arrive in Geneva he was on the defensive, though still determined to hold out against the proposed constitutional principles. It was Milošević who suggested over lunch the face-saving formula of merging the first two constitutional principles of the Co-Chairmen’s draft without substantive changes. In the evening in the Hotel de Bergues the Serb façade of unity cracked and Vance and I witnessed late at night Ćosić, Milošević and the Montenegrin President, Bulatović turning on the Bosnian Serb leaders, who included General Mladić, demanding that they negotiate seriously. Splitting the Serbs was something we had to achieve, not for its own sake but because otherwise the Bosnian Serbs would remain totally intransigent. Without pressure from Serbia and Montenegro the Bosnian Serbs would never give an inch, for they were not pragmatists, like Milošević, but ideologues, Serb nationalists who did not want a single Muslim to live on the territory they claimed for themselves, and preferably no Croats either [...] After Milošević had made it clear that Belgrade would not go on supporting the Bosnian Serb army and had ensured that General Mladić understood this, a tired, incoherent and somewhat broken Karadžić next day caved in at the eleventh

hour [...] But even so, he did not sign, insisting on taking even this issue back to Pale for the endorsement of his Assembly. This small breakthrough did however sustain the Conference, for we had now achieved, on the three documents before the Conference, six of the nine signatures we needed. The Croats had signed the constitutional principles, the map and the cessation of hostilities agreement. The Muslims had signed the constitutional principles and the cessation of hostilities. The Serbs had signed the cessation of hostilities.³¹

However, any chance of a breakthrough dissipated the following day, detonated by a bomb that exploded on 11 January at the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s command in Gornji Vakuf.³² It was difficult to shake off the impression that the parties to the conflict were trying to gain advantage on the ground and thus strengthen their negotiating positions. As the conflict was bound to spread among Croats and Bosniaks in the region, the Croatian and Bosnian delegations came to such odds that the consequence was a temporary suspension of Geneva negotiations.

The Bosnian delegation was particularly thrown into disarray, which became apparent at the session of the state presidency held in Sarajevo on January 11. The discussion was dominated by despair and mutual accusations. Members of the Party of Democratic Action (Partija demokratske akcije, PDA) accused the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ) of undermining the country, whereas the HDZ representatives accused the PDA and its leader, Bosnian President Alija Izetbegović, of monopolising the state. Presidency member Miro Lasić was particularly critical of the activities of the negotiating team.

Let us first see what is happening in Geneva. I must say that I am very dissatisfied. I am completely uninformed about the positions and moves of our delegation in Geneva. I find it hard to believe that, although the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina is at stake there, someone like me, who is a member of the collective head of state, has no idea about the concept. The President of the Presidency is also making some moves. I am not sure in which capacity – as a legitimate head of his people or as the President of our Presidency.³³

30 Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi 1992–1993*, 246.

31 Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, 96–7. Eventually, the Serbs also conditionally accepted the constitutional principles. Radovan Karadžić offered to correct them, and hence the entire day was spent on comparing these versions. “Izveštaj generalnog sekretara UN o aktivnostima na Konferenciji,” in: *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, 177–179.

32 ICTY Judgment, Prosecutor v Dario Kordić and Mario Čerkez, para 559–563, last modified 13 September 2024, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/kordic_cerkez/tjug/en/kor-tj010226e.pdf.

33 “Magnetofonski snimak 183. sjednice Predsjedništva Republike Bosne i Hercegovine,” in *Dokumenti Predsjedništva BiH 1991.–1994.* ed. Tomo Šimić, *National Security and the Future*, 2 (8) (2007): 7.

Much like the Serbian side, the Bosnian side was now speaking with two voices at the second plenary session, which reconvened in Geneva on 12 January. While the Bosnian minister for foreign affairs Haris Silajdžić warned that Bosnia was under siege, Bosnian Prime Minister Mile Akmadžić openly sided with the Croats:

Mr. Silajdžić stated that, even as the peace talks were going on, Sarajevo had been shelled and people were dying. People were also dying from hunger and cold. He stated that the most urgent issue was to place all heavy weapons under United Nations control. [...] Mr. Boban requested that the floor be given to Prime Minister Akmadžić of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He warmly welcomed the peace efforts of the Co-Chairmen and expressed appreciation for their statements of condolences at the heinous murder of Mr. Turajlić and Mr. Gogala. After stating that there was no consensus on the composition of the delegation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which could be decided only by the people of the country, he reiterated that the Bosnian Croat delegation accepted the document proposed by the Co-Chairmen. He appealed for efforts to continue to bring the parties closer together.

The situation took a surreal turn with the constructive attitudes of Tuđman, Ćosić and Milošević at this session:

President Tuđman expressed his surprise at the fact that, after all the efforts made, agreement had not been reached on the constitutional principles. He noted that that could mean not only continuation of the war, but also its expansion. He referred to an agreement he had proposed between the Republic of Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and he urged the Co-Chairmen to use their good offices to help to achieve normalisation of relations between the two countries.

The presidents of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro, who took part in this session, were also positioning themselves as peacemakers:

President Ćosić stated that, in view of the fact that the constitutional principles guaranteed equal rights for all peoples, and taking into account that the Constitution itself would be worked on through consensus, the constitutional principles were acceptable to his delegation. He appealed for continued efforts to be made in the search for peace. President Milošević stated that he shared the views of President Ćosić and that the constitutional principles proposed by the Co-Chairmen were acceptable.³⁴

34 United Nations (S/25100, 14 January 1993): "Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the International Conference on the former Yugoslavia," in *Srpske političke elite i Vens Owenov plan*, I, 180–182.

However, these statements were miles away from the position of the Bosnian Serbs. Dobrica Ćosić described in his diary the discord which was growing behind the scenes:

Extremely dramatic negotiations on the acceptance of the constitutional principles of the new Bosnia and Herzegovina and the maps of ten autonomous provinces, according to which about 500,000 Serbs would live in provinces where Muslims would be the majority and some Croats, which Karadžić cannot accept [...] For two days and one night we argued, quarrelled, reconciled [...] Milošević, Bulatović and I, with Foreign Minister Đukić and our political and military advisers, decided to accept Vance and Owen's plan, sacrificing some important Serbian interests in order to achieve peace and get rid of the sanctions. During the negotiations, Milošević proved to be an extraordinary tactician in this political and diplomatic battle [...] On the first day, we failed to convince Karadžić, Koljević, Krajišnik and Buha [...] They are fanatical and stubborn politicians. They did not abandon their positions despite any arguments, because they were deeply aware of the injustice. They staunchly believe in the military might of their army and their responsibility before it and before the people for the political outcome of that terrible war. Milošević tried to convince Karadžić and his comrades to accept the constitutional principles and maps both with the strength of political logic and with harsh threats and insults [...] In the morning I learned that the leaders of Republika Srpska had left the hotel unconvinced and desperate [...] Still, at the final session of all the delegations chaired by Vance and Owen, I disagreed with the views of the representatives of Republika Srpska [...] I left Geneva, unsure that any peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina was close.³⁵

Faced with such cacophony, Vance and Owen had little choice but to propose a ten-day break and schedule a new round of negotiations for 22 January. At the same time, the co-chairmen embarked on a broad diplomatic initiative to gain international support and put pressure on the parties to the conflict to stop hostilities and accept the proposal. To that end, Lord Owen briefed the representatives of the European Community, urging them

to use their influence with both sides to accept the proposals currently on the table. The Bosnian Serbs should be left in no doubt that the concept of a state within a state was totally unacceptable to the international community. Izetbegović on the other hand should be persuaded that the proposals were the best the Bosnian Muslims were likely to get.³⁶

35 Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi 1992–1993*, 25.

36 "Extract from Report by UK Mission, Geneva, on Lord Owen's briefing of EC representatives (5 January 1993)," in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 221.

While the members of the European Community were at least declaratively united behind this plan, a gap was opening up on a global level. Russia, which agreed in principle with the proposal, believed that the time had come to offer Serbs “carrots” in addition to the “stick”.³⁷ Simultaneously, the new US presidential administration of Bill Clinton, who had been inaugurated on 20 January, was already considering new measures, from raising the arms embargo to bombing Serb positions. According to Anthony Lake, Clinton’s national security adviser, the purpose of these announcements was to persuade the Serbian side to agree to a peace arrangement. However, the two conference co-chairs were concerned that the Bosnian side might use the announced change in the American position as an inspiration to persevere in rejecting the peace plan while expecting a US intervention.³⁸ Aware that international support for their plan was declining, Vance and Owen intensified their efforts, hurrying across the Balkans in an attempt to persuade the parties to agree before time ran out.

Talking peace while waging war: Sarajevo, Zagreb, Pale, Belgrade (13–22 January 1993)

Despite this diplomatic effort, the situation in Bosnia was getting out of hand. On 15 January, a shell killed 15 people in front of the Sarajevo Brewery.³⁹ Around this time, the Croatian Defence Council (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane, HVO) also began bombing Gornji Vakuf, where the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina captured members of the HVO.⁴⁰ As the Bosnia and Herzegovina presidency meetings were completely dominated by discussions about the conflict in that area and the tensions in the Lašva Valley, the delegation for the second round of negotiations in Geneva was barely constituted, despite Vance and Owen’s visit to Sarajevo.⁴¹ Their attempt to mediate between Izetbegović and Akmadžić failed. The new delegation attempted to reflect the broadest possible consensus between the SDA and opposition parties: besides Alija Izetbegović, it included Muhamed Filipović (Muslim-Bosniak Organisation, MBO), Miro Lazović (Social Democratic Party, SDU), Haris Silajdžić (SDA), as well as senior Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina officers Stjepan Šiber and Sefer

Halilović.⁴² However, the absence of HVO members from this delegation was noticeable. The Croat members of the presidency, Franjo Boras and Miro Lazić, did not take part. Bosnian Prime Minister Mile Akmadžić accompanied the co-chairs on their way from Sarajevo to Zagreb to their meeting with Tudman and Mate Boban, leaving little doubt about whose side he was on. At that meeting, Boban expressed doubts about the sincerity and good intentions of the Bosnian government.⁴³ Owen had a number of ideas during this conversation. As he understood that the key to the negotiations was Posavina, he proposed to return Brčko to the Bosnian side, bringing their border back to the Sava River. The Serbs would be compensated by a corridor connecting the Banja Luka and Bijeljina provinces but through Croatia. The Croatian side would be compensated with an equivalent territory in the hinterland of Dubrovnik.⁴⁴

In his progress report to French President Mitterrand, whose administration showed some openness to changing the internationally recognised borders, Lord Owen summed up the meagre results of these interventions:

President Tudjman said that he could not give up Posavina Province and allow it to be merged with Banja Luka Province because of the likely reaction from Croats who had throughout the war maintained their position along the Sava River. He could, however, agree to a corridor perhaps as much as 20 km wide through Posavina, provided a similar corridor ran down from Bihać to Livno. When this proposition was put to President Izetbegović he flatly rejected it. He felt that it would encourage the concept of a Greater Serbia. The guaranteed ‘through way’ was as much as he could accept. My own view is that he will not shift from this position even if offered more territory by the Serbs, in which case we will not change our map, since we have already made it clear that we will not do so unless all three parties agree. I think that President Izetbegović will accept our map and put the onus on the Serbs to do likewise. Whether they can be persuaded to do so, I do not know.⁴⁵

It was not surprising that Owen could not tell what the Serbian position would be, since the Serbs did not know either. At a session held in Pale on 19 and 20 January, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska agreed with Karadžić’s acceptance of the Constitutional Principles for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the deputies again proved to be a tough crowd,

37 “Note delivered by Russian Ambassador, Geneva, to Co-Chairmen (10 January 1993),” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 224.

38 “Report by Robin Renwick, UK Ambassador, Washington, on his meeting on Yugoslavia with Clinton’s National Security Adviser (14 January 1993),” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 228.

39 ICTY Judgments, Prosecutor v. Stanislav Galic, paragraph 436, last modified 13 September 2024, <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/galic/tjug/en/gal-tj031205e.pdf>.

40 For the prehistory of this conflict see Mijo Beljo, “Sukobi Armije Republike Bosne i Hercegovine i Hrvatskoga vijeća obrane u Gornjem Vakufu tijekom 1992. godine,” *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 2, (2016): 389–410.

41 “Report by Lord Owen’s Private Secretary on Co-Chairmen’s visits to Sarajevo and Zagreb, 20–21 January 1993,” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 248.

42 “Magnetofonski snimak 185. sjednice Predsjedništva Republike Bosne i Hercegovine,” in *Dokumenti Predsjedništva BiH 1991.–1994.*, 11.

43 “Report by Lord Owen’s Private Secretary on Co-Chairmen’s visits to Sarajevo and Zagreb, 20–21 January 1993,” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 250–251.

44 David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, 99.

45 “Letter from Lord Owen to President Mitterrand following their meeting on 14 January 1993,” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 235.

advocating the “inalienable right to self-determination”. Arguing against any compromise, Radoslav Brđanin at the Bijeljina session had attacked the position of Dobrica Ćosić, as it “disappointed our fighters a lot [...] It may be good for a novel, but it is not good for the people”.⁴⁶ Now in Pale, he extended his criticism to the entire Yugoslav leadership, threatening “that the time had come to see who is faithful and who is a traitor”, evoking a Serbian proverb.⁴⁷ The vice-president of Republika Srpska, Biljana Plavšić, an outraged opponent of the peace deal, said she agreed with this:

I prepared well for the discussion. I had perhaps the most detailed analysis of the constitutional solution. Of course, I previously consulted with several people who are experts in this matter, so my analysis in the assembly had repercussions. What I knew as a layperson was enough to understand that this is a cantonised territory with a strong central administration. Also, it was clear to me that without clear territorial solutions, there was no place for talk about the constitutional system. We already had a lot of bad experiences, so there was a suspicion regarding the territorial offer. I was in favour of rejecting the constitutional part, and asking for maps first. The conclusion of the assembly was wiser – the constitutional solution was not rejected, but whether it would be accepted depended on the territorial solutions.⁴⁸

In effect, Karadžić let the deputies blow off steam, whereas in reality, “the Republika Srpska Assembly accepted the continuation of the Geneva negotiations with certain conditions. Radovan Karadžić won, shrewdly and skilfully”, observed Dobrica Ćosić.⁴⁹ Against such a background, Ćosić hosted another meeting of the Council for the Harmonisation of Positions on State Policy, held in Belgrade on 21 January, in order to circle the wagons before the negotiations reconvened. Like the Bosnian side, the Serbian side was primarily concerned about the maps and wanted to amend them. “This war, as Professor Koljević said, is being fought only for the sake of maps. [...] If we do not ‘unpack’ the maps, I am afraid we will be blamed if we sign it”, insisted Momčilo Krajišnik, the Republika Srpska Assembly speaker.⁵⁰ Milošević saw things differently. He believed that the maps could be amended at a later point, regardless of the ceasefire and future withdrawal to the provincial borders: “Since the provinces are not ethnically defined, there is no return of forces to the borders of those undefined provinces”.⁵¹ He proposed that the constitutional principles should

be accepted immediately, as well as the accompanying military paper, which included an immediate ceasefire.⁵² However, the Bosnian Serb leadership was not prepared for the risk. They were also quickly growing independent from Milošević.⁵³ Although they still needed support from Serbia, they were also aware that Milošević could not politically afford to cut them loose if he wanted to stay in power. Radovan Karadžić in particular realised that he was becoming a true alternative centre of power. His attitude even inspired the writing of a folk song:

Radovan, oh you iron man, our first leader after Karađorđe

Defend our freedom and faith on the freezing Geneva Lake⁵⁴

Dobrica Ćosić tried to bridge these differences. He recalled:

We had not reached an agreement in principle, which cost us dearly in Geneva. Today [...] I think that now we have reached the highest degree of agreement [...] I suggest we go to Geneva with a firm principle. And that is: we cannot accept the existing map proposal; we must fight resolutely to change the formulation they have offered us.⁵⁵

However, as no one trusted anyone at that table anymore, the largest delegation so far was assembled. Apart from the Bosnian Serb delegation, the presidents of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro, as well as their foreign ministers, travelled to Geneva too. Meanwhile, at a meeting at 10 Downing Street, Owen described to Prime Minister John Major on 22 January his vision of what they could expect in Geneva:

On the assumption that Dr Karadžić says ‘yes’ to the Constitutional Principles on Tuesday we will resume our plenary meeting on peace negotiations. [...] These negotiations will concentrate on the map of the proposed ten provinces for Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serbs and Muslims are each demanding more territory. We know from Milošević that he will deliver a deal if there is a land corridor

46 ICTY Court Records, Prosecutor v Milošević: P538.6.1, Transcript of minutes of 24th RS Assembly Meeting, 8.

47 ICTY Court Records, Prosecutor v Milošević: P538.6.2, Transcript of minutes of 25th RS Assembly Meeting, 15, 22.

48 Biljana Plavšić, *Svedočim* (Banja Luka: Triprint, 2007), II, 10–11.

49 Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi 1992–1993*, 265.

50 *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, I, 226–228.

51 Ibid., 234.

52 Ibid., 191.

53 More on this rivalry in Nina Caspersen, *Contested Nationalism: Serb Elite Rivalry in Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 146.

54 On the growing cult of Karadžić see Paweł Pawlikowski’s 1992 documentary “Serbian Epics,” YouTube video, 7:56, 28:01, accessed 13 September 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UTmiTsmHQ4>.

55 *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, I, 237–238.

through Posavina province linking in effect Banja Luka with Serbia. We know that Izetbegović is implacably against this, believing that it will tip the balance of our proposals towards an eventual Greater Serbia and it is hard to disagree with that assessment. We will not shift off our map unless all three parties agree to any modifications. [...] Much may depend on how the Muslims or the Serbs react to messages coming out of the Clinton Administration. [...] President Clinton would be seen to be taking action and we might be able to persuade him of the dangers of lifting the arms embargo for the Muslims. [...] Lifting the arms embargo will in my judgement make it virtually impossible to achieve a negotiated settlement. Izetbegovic will be encouraged to block negotiations and continue fighting. The Russians will feel compelled to let sophisticated arms reach the Serbs and the war will intensify. [...] If we as Co-Chairmen think either the Serbs or the Muslims are blocking a successful negotiation then we will bring a comprehensive package of measures to the Security Council for their endorsement and ask for the necessary measures to be taken for their implementation. If the Serbs are blocking, in the first instance, implementation might require the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, under threat of total isolation, to stop all but humanitarian supplies to Bosnian Serbs. If the FRY refuses then, in addition to total isolation the Security Council should authorise military measures to be taken against the Bosnian Serb armed forces. Military measures should not involve the use of ground forces. There are more than enough forces fighting each other at the moment. All that is needed is to tilt the balance against the Serbs and in favour of the Muslim and Croatian forces on the ground. This can be done by the selective use of air power. But it should not be done unless the Security Council has backed a specific Peace Plan and the key Islamic countries are thereby committed to upholding the implementation of that plan. To tilt the balance of power against the Serbs without such a Peace Plan being in place will, in my view, be totally irresponsible and in effect for the West to underwrite a Jihad. There is, of course, a risk that intervention from the air might provoke the Yugoslav army to come in and fight with the Bosnian Serbs. The risk is in my view worth taking; for if they are prepared to take on the world community in such circumstances, they are certainly prepared to take us on in Kosovo, and far better to face this issue in Bosnia-Herzegovina which is already a mess than waiting until Kosovo erupts, and with it the whole Balkans. If the Muslims are blocking a settlement, then the case for imposing the arms embargo far more resolutely becomes overwhelming.⁵⁶

56 "Draft Letter from Lord Owen to Prime Minister John Major, David Owen," in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 259–261.

All the options seemed to be covered. Vance and Owen printed new, slightly altered proposals for their peace package. The pens were on the table, and the Palace of the Nations, the UN's headquarters in Geneva, awaited the arrival of prospective signatories.

Last chance: The third negotiation session in Geneva (23–30 January 1993)

Predictably, the pens remained holstered for a while, as the guns were talking again. This time, in Dalmatia, a sudden Croatian attack on the Maslenica Bridge on 22 January led to 114 Croatian casualties and between 350 and 450 Serbian fatalities. The day after, the talks in Geneva reopened but dragged on through the last week of January. During the discussion, all the parties except the Croats had a number of objections to the Agreement Relating to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also to the annexes to the Peace Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵⁷

It was a difficult meeting. [...] Karadžić stressed that the main concern of his delegation was the security of the Serbian people, that 650,000-700,000 Serbs would remain in provinces likely to be controlled by Croats and Muslims. They wanted a referendum. In reply to Karadžić I made clear that this was impossible in a time of war.⁵⁸

As an agreement was not at hand, some of the negotiators remained in Geneva, while others left the city. While the Serbs were stalling, on 24 January, the Bosniak and Croat sides agreed on a system of interim administration in their six provinces, which would have a ten-member multi-ethnic executive body in addition to a governor from one ethnic group and a vice-governor from the other.⁵⁹ Thus, Izetbegović and Silajdžić reached an agreement with Boban and Akmadžić on borders and temporary administrations in five provinces (Mostar, Bihać, Zenica, Tuzla and Posavina), while Travnik remained a subject of dispute. Izetbegović and Boban even signed an agreement on 27 January, calling for an urgent cessation of hostilities, "as the clashes are useful only to the aggressor".⁶⁰

57 "Nacrt mirovnog plana predložen 30. januara 1993," in *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, I, 249–259.

58 Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, 99.

59 "ICFY Memo from Peter Hall, 24 January 1993," in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 270.

60 "Zajednička izjava," last modified 13 September 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20171201055005/http://www.slobodanprljak.com/MATERIJALI/RATNI%20DOKUMENTI/Anex_genezi_sukoba_hvo_i_abih2/3376.pdf.

This turned out to be just one of many hollow agreements, but the Bosnian Serb leadership could not have known that at the time. According to the already established custom, the Bosnian Serbs went to Belgrade for consultations, demanding the unification of Serbian lands. Nikola Koljević, then vice-president of Republika Srpska, remembers:

We held a meeting in the Federation Palace with Dobrica Ćosić, who was not too fond of our idea. He believed that politically it was not a good time for the Serbian people to show their desire for unification [...] Ćosić had just returned from Greece. He says that both Mitsotakis and Karamanlis think they should wait. Such advice is also coming from the Russian ambassador Shikin, who says that time is on our side. We should act peacefully, leaving the blame to the Croats and Muslims [...] Another topic we discussed was holding an all-Serbian assembly to pass a declaration on the Serbian national question. Ćosić promised to talk to Milošević and Bulatović, but our brothers across the Drina still believe that small moves and tactical manoeuvres are better than a public and decisive act.⁶¹

Ćosić went to Geneva unsure about what was to be done there:

Geneva. They drive me in an armoured car from the airport to the hotel, then from the hotel to the Palace of Nations, which is one of the ugliest buildings in Europe. [...] Karadžić accepted the proposal of Co-Presidents Vance and Owen, seemingly according to the decision of the Republika Srpska Assembly. Actually, he was acting according to the ultimatum that Lord Owen and Cyrus Vance had served us about ten days ago. Milošević, Bulatović and I used this blackmail to persuade him, until half past one at night. I will never forget the fateful night when the Serbs from Republika Srpska were to agree to give up the state they had started creating and accept life in a monstrous and artificial Bosnia. They were to agree to live in passive “provinces”, with 48 per cent of their compatriots outside those borders. They were to annul the goal of their liberation struggle. And to think that we from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia forced them to do all that...⁶²

It was clear that the Serbian side would agree to the proposed plan only under extreme and consistent pressure.

61 Nikola Koljević, *Stvaranje Republike Srpske. Dnevnik 1993–1995* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2008), I, 65

62 Ćosić, *Piščevi zapisi 1992–1993*, 269.

In the meantime, progress in the working groups in Geneva was minuscule. The Bosnian delegation had a number of objections to the regulation of relations between the central government and the provincial government, and the proposed interim government.⁶³ Koljević noted in his diary:

No notable news from our people in Geneva [...] This shows in fact the lack of seriousness of this phase of the conference. The day before yesterday, I received information from Viktor Andreyev that “someone” was preparing for the end of the conference [...]. I think that the Croatian attack was carried out in agreement with Vance and the Europeans. They reckoned that one significant Serbian military defeat would be the best psychological and political pressure on the Serbs in Geneva [...] I met with Karadžić. He also doubts the conference will yield a significant outcome, but he thinks that the most important thing for now is for that not to be blamed on us.⁶⁴

Summarising the situation before the last plenary session scheduled for 30 January, Owen wrote:

We are not certain as to whether President Izetbegović or Dr Karadžić will sign up on Saturday: both are eyeing the other to see who might move first. Neither wants to be seen to be the first to break up the Conference or to refuse to sign.⁶⁵

However, to Owen’s surprise, they seemed to have stopped playing chicken:

The third plenary session of the Conference had made surprising progress after the initial anger over the Croatian government’s military action had abated. We brought Izetbegović and Karadžić together, after talking to them separately, and made real progress on a draft paper on the structure of an interim government. [...] They agreed on a small central area of Sarajevo which would be governed by consensus rule. [...] Next day in Geneva, after more than a dozen lengthy bilateral and trilateral meetings, at the final plenary session Cy Vance said these had reinforced our view that the map submitted by us was just and equitable, based on the fundamental premise that Bosnia-Herzegovina would remain a sovereign, independent, multi-ethnic state. The map did not accept the results of ethnic

63 “ICFY Memo from Peter Beshar to Co-Chairmen on Drafting Session with Mr Trnka of Bosnian Government,” in *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 276–278.

64 Koljević, *Stvaranje Republike Srpske*, I, 57.

65 “COREU Report from Lord Owen on Peace Talks on Bosnia, (29 January 1993),” in Lord Owen Papers, https://libguides.liverpool.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=31121178, 88., accessed: 3 June 2025.

cleansing but was on the contrary designed to reverse them, and it struck a fair balance in the allocation of land, natural and industrial resources. [...] All three parties signed the constitutional principles; the Bosnian Croats and, somewhat to our surprise, the Bosnian Serbs signed the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. Izetbegović, having previously agreed, now said his reservations on heavy weapons precluded him from signing. On the map Karadžić got far closer to signing than we had anticipated, and I am convinced he would have signed if Izetbegović had signed. [...] Both Vance and I thought Karadžić had been told by Milošević to settle. Many of those close to the Conference, diplomats and journalists alike, felt like us that if Izetbegović had agreed to sign the map that day Karadžić would have done so too. We were certainly closer to an agreement than any of us could have imagined a week earlier. Why did Izetbegović not sign? In essence because he sensed that Karadžić might sign if he did and he felt encouraged by US attitudes to hold out for a better deal.⁶⁶

Owen was guessing, as he felt that the plan was slipping through his fingers. It was not even certain who had signed what, as out of nine signatures, three were missing. Crucially, Bosnian and Serbian acceptance of the maps was needed. Nothing was certain during the somewhat confusing atmosphere of the last hunt for signatures, as noted by Koljević:

The principles are supposedly signed by everyone. After all, the Croats have been signing everything from the very beginning, but this time our side was also signing the constitutional principles. Again, it is uncertain what the Muslims did – some claim to have signed, some not. We decided to sign the principles in order to absolve ourselves of that part of the responsibility for the collapse of the conference [...] Our people made remarks on the maps, but Vance and Owen did not allow any discussion. They put a military paper forward. I don't know if the clause on arms control and withdrawal has been removed, but our people are going to sign in any case, and the Muslims are not. The question is whether it is again a Muslim game. Will they sign later? Or is it really the position that Sarajevo radio constantly emphasises: that no one has the right to sign anything that is not a unitary Bosnia? It remains to be seen.⁶⁷

Immediately upon its delegation's return from Geneva to Sarajevo on 2 February, the Bosnian Presidency held a meeting during which Alija Izetbegović revealed the reasoning behind his position:

We did not accept the map, as you know, and you know the reasons. I don't think you are angry that we did not accept it. [...] As the talks went on, the map was distorted into an ethnic map. [...] There, in our opinion, the conference failed, it broke up; there was no agreement. These two [Vance and Owen] took those papers and travelled to New York to present them to the Security Council to arbitrate in this matter.⁶⁸

Izetbegović also indicated to the members of the Presidency for the first time that he was considering accepting the maps that had been offered:

As far as I am concerned, I would think about signing that paper for the sake of our people who are slowly getting scattered around the world and who find it very difficult to endure as refugees. They are slowly getting lost. Some practical reasons have led me to seriously consider accepting this map if it would allow 600,000 to 700,000 of our people to return to their homes and continue to fight at a later stage. [...] We did not get a military victory, so we could not dictate the conditions, but we managed to defend part of the territory. [...] I personally would be pleased if that map at least allowed these people to return, I think it would be acceptable. That is only my opinion, of course, and I would certainly not accept it without consulting you, but I am sharing here with you my personal reasoning on that point.⁶⁹

Two-track strategies in Sarajevo and Belgrade and the failure of the Geneva negotiations

Not everyone shared Izetbegović's reasoning. Bosnian Presidency member Mirko Pejanović feared that signing would compromise "the political victory of the idea of Bosnia and Herzegovina's statehood".⁷⁰ He did not accuse Izetbegović, but he used the opportunity to criticise the attitude of the Prime Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mile Akmadžić. This topic was picked up passionately by Muhamed Filipović:

We don't even have a prime minister! He stabbed us in the back in Geneva. [...] Excuse me, but our position collapsed there. We had been building it for three-and-a-half months, and he wrecked it the moment he stated that he did not recognise

⁶⁶ Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, 104–105.

⁶⁷ Koljević, *Stvaranje Republike Srpske*, 58.

⁶⁸ "Magnetofonski snimak sjednice Predsjedništva RBiH i predsjednika stranaka održane 2. februara 1993. godine," in *Dokumenti Predsjedništva BiH 1991. –1994.*, 13–14.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18.

that there was a single and common delegation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And he is the prime minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina! He has been delegitimised.⁷¹

It is interesting that Izetbegović proved to be more conciliatory towards Akmadžić, claiming that the relations within the coalition should not be further strained and emphasising the need for cohabitation between the government and the presidency.⁷² He thus fuelled fears that he would eventually accept the partition of Bosnia, reflecting the view pithily summarised by a graffiti that had appeared recently on a state building: "Sign, Alija, let it be ours, even if it is as big as a backyard [*avlija*]."⁷³

Muhamed Filipović vehemently opposed this position:

I think that our delegation had no other way out of the situation in which we found ourselves. Our mandate was our imperative. We were not allowed to agree to any solution that implied the ethnic division of Bosnia. Since this map proposed by the co-chairs practically inaugurated and introduced the principle of ethnic division as the basis of the solution [...] we had no choice but to remain consistent in refusing to allow Bosnia's future to be defined by such an internal division and the constitution of provinces with significant competencies, which would function as a parallel state [...] We simply cannot accept any solution that legalises ethnic cleansing and eliminates the possibility of our people returning to their place and thus securing their rights.⁷⁴

Izetbegović responded, mixing metaphors with the language of political realism:

We were confronted by a terrible machine which overthrew the state. We are now trying to consolidate it as much as we can in such a situation. [...] We are trying to stay afloat so that the ship called Bosnia does not sink. Simply, it is a ship with hundreds of holes. One should try to somehow keep it afloat and reach the shore. [...] The world is not helping us. On the contrary, the world is pushing us to negotiate. [...] We now have some kind of liberated space of approximately 45 per cent of the territory, which might be increased by a further 12 to 15 per cent, so it would be 60 per cent free territory. So let us continue to fight for that 40 per cent by political and other means. That would be one possibility. The other way would simply be to take the risk, cancel further talks and continue the war by calling upon all forces to fight for Bosnia, but I am always mindful of our delicate geopolitical position.⁷⁵

71 Ibid., 20.

72 Ibid., 30–31.

73 Muhamed Filipović, interview with the author, 2016.

74 "Magnetofonski snimak...", 17–18.

75 Ibid., 14, 24–25, 27.

He saw some chance for the improvement of that position in the New York round of negotiations, given the new tones coming from the US administration, which did not enthusiastically stand behind Vance and Owen: "As I've been informed, these two gentlemen have great difficulties in America [...] They have great difficulty in convening a session of the Security Council, which is opposed chiefly by the Americans. That is the latest news I've had this morning."⁷⁶

Izetbegović was well informed, judging by Owen's letter to the British ambassador in Washington:

I am to put it mildly not happy with the Administration's conduct. Now we have this Administration briefing the press in a way that could not but stiffen those Muslims who want to continue the war. We have Sacirbey openly telling everyone that the U.S. Administration has said that they should not feel any need to sign the map.

He urged that this attitude be changed, particularly since he thought that an agreement was within reach: "I have not spent five months sweating my guts out for this settlement package to see it blocked by a new American Administration, particularly when all the signs are that it will have the support of the European Community and the Russian Federation".⁷⁷ For the same reason, he kept up the pressure on Milošević not to withdraw his support for the plan, to which end he went to Belgrade several times. However, there he hit a rubber wall, as he could not discern whether Milošević was unable or unwilling to squeeze out further concessions from the Bosnian Serbs. He concluded that Belgrade, much like Sarajevo, also pursued a two-track strategy.

As it happened, Milošević and Owen had a chance to revisit this issue more than a decade later when they met again in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, where the accused Milošević had an opportunity to question Owen in the witness box:

Well, you said yourself, Lord Owen, that we spent hours and hours putting forth arguments for reasons to accept those peace plans. Now, do you consider that we should have used force against Republika Srpska, perhaps, which, apart from presenting arguments, that's the only other thing that we could have done, use force. Did you really think we should have used force, that the Serbs should attack the Serbs in order to resolve some of these outstanding problems?

76 Ibid., 16.

77 "Personal telegram from Lord Owen to UK Ambassador, Washington, sent by UK Mission, Geneva, 29 January 1993," in: *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan*, 279–280.

Owen replied:

Well, I don't think it was necessary for you to use force. I think it was necessary for you to cut off fuel supplies, anything other than bare humanitarian necessities, and to cut off ammunition, cooperation and many other things. There were many areas where I think, in retrospect, you must ask yourself could you have forced them to reconsider that.⁷⁸

The prosecutor asked Owen what Milošević's real goals were. Did he harbour hopes of uniting all the Serbs in one state in the long run? Owen responded:

He was a pragmatist. Only he could answer that, and I think he certainly wouldn't rule it out. It was certainly possible to believe that Republika Srpska would go into Serbia and Herzeg-Bosnia, as the Croats would call it, would go into Croatia longer term. But against that, I think at times President Milošević was telling them that the world had moved on, and [...] would not allow Bosnia-Herzegovina to be partitioned. In my heart, I think he was intellectually at least -- had come to recognise that Republika Srpska would stay outside Serbia but would be so closely linked that to all intents and purposes, for as far as the average Serbian citizen is concerned, they would be linked but there would be always absence of a formal link. But I don't know.

Prosecutor Geoffrey Nice continued: "Indeed you make the point that his ambition was for the retention of personal power, and you use the analogy of riding the tiger of nationalism and finding it difficult to get off it in order not to be bitten by it."

"Yes. And of course he was eventually bitten by it", Owen said.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ ICTY, Prosecutor v Milošević 28469-28471, accessed on June 3, 2025. https://www.icty.org/x/cases/slobodan_milosevic/trans/en/0311031T.htm.

⁷⁹ ICTY Transcripts, Milosevic case (IT-02-54): 28403-5, accessed on 3 June 2025, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/slobodan_milosevic/trans/en/0311031T.htm.

Suspension of the Geneva negotiations

After a full month of hunting for signatures, the international negotiators ended up empty-handed. They managed to get the Croatian signatures and conditional Serbian consent to both agreements. The Bosnian delegation refused to sign the military agreement until the dynamics of troop withdrawals to the newly established provincial borders were specified and a heavy weapons control mechanism was defined but supported the constitutional principles. Therefore, some progress had been made, but an insurmountable problem had emerged. While Izetbegović increasingly believed that the plan could be acceptable if it would secure the rapid withdrawal of opposing forces to the assigned provinces and enable the equally swift return of the refugees, it was precisely this possibility that worried the Serbian side. This was clearly expressed by Serbian Foreign Affairs Minister Vladislav Jovanović:

The thing that needs to be explained to us is whether the fear of spoiling the demographic composition of Bosnia is well-founded. Would these provinces make it difficult or impossible for Muslims, for example, to settle freely in Serbian lands? I remember that Mr Karadžić once pointed out that danger.

Milošević's answer was cold as ice: "That danger does not exist, they will not 'run' back there".⁸⁰ However, Sarajevo demanded the urgent withdrawal of units to the new demarcation lines and a swift return of the refugees, which was unacceptable for Belgrade. Even Croatian support for the plan was more declarative than substantive, given the war engulfing the valleys of Cetina, Lašva and Neretva.

Noting that this phase of negotiations had failed, the co-chairmen closed the Geneva talks on 30 January. Owen did not hide his disappointment in his closing speech:

For nearly five months, we have negotiated non-stop from early in the morning until late at night here in Geneva, in Sarajevo, in Zagreb and in Belgrade. All this time a savage war has raged. [...] Let no-one argue that time is on his side, time to endlessly consult, time to protract the negotiations. This war has got to be brought to an end. Delay means more loss of life, more destruction of property and even more important, reduces the chances of the three peoples living together again as neighbours. [...] Whatever the arguments, however sincerely held are the negotiating positions, there comes a time when discussion has to be brought to a head. We now will take this dispute to the Security Council, in

⁸⁰ *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, I, 56–7.

effect the world's parliament, for a final decision to be taken. We, as Co-Chairmen, will recommend to the Security Council that they endorse this comprehensive settlement and if in spite of that one or more parties continue to reject the settlement, then we hope the Security Council will use the necessary powers whether they be political, economic or military to impose this settlement.⁸¹

A key reason for the failure of the Geneva negotiations was the “two-track strategy” pursued to some degree by all the participants. They deeply mistrusted not only their enemies and the international mediators but also their closest associates. Amidst a lack of basic trust and internal cohesion, the Bosnian and Serbian sides “played chicken”, trying to blame each other for interrupting the negotiations and stalling to see who would back down first. The Croatian side built up a façade of being a constructive partner at the negotiating table while concurrently undermining the peace process by escalating the conflict on the ground. Finally, the international community no longer stood unanimously behind the peace plan, with the Americans slowly but publicly pulling out.⁸² In such circumstances, the co-chairmen presented a report on the failure of the Geneva talks on 3 February in New York, seeking the support of the Security Council for the proposed plan, aware that there was no agreement between the Americans, the Russians and the European Community. For months, representatives of the Bosnian, Serb and Croat sides discussed the documents of this plan in Geneva, New York and Athens, as well as in Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo, trying to adjust the peace solution to their wartime goals and political ambitions.

Thus, all actors attempted to outwit each other in Geneva, gaining nothing and losing valuable time. Although a compromise was at hand, none wanted to be perceived by their own community as a compromiser, preferring staying in power to a conflict resolution. The Vance-Owen plan was probably not a just peace settlement. But the precedent of making a mockery of negotiations set in Geneva was replayed many times over – during the definitive rejection of the Vance-Owen plan by the Bosnian Serb Assembly in May 1993, during the discussions on the Owen-Stoltenberg plan and the Contact Group plan.⁸³ It took many deaths and much suffering, as well as an air campaign, to finally reach a peace agreement in late 1995 at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio.

If the outcome had been different, the war would have been shortened by almost three terrible years. Well over half of the 100,000 fatalities of the Bosnian War would not have happened. There would have been no Srebrenica. The Old Bridge would still stand in Mostar, as would the Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka. There would have been no Operation Storm. Even the protagonists would have done better, having in mind that Slobodan

Milošević died in the UN detention unit while standing trial at the Hague Tribunal, which also sentenced Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić to life imprisonment and Milivoj Petković to 20 years in prison. Sefer Halilović was acquitted at The Hague, while only death prevented the indictment of Mate Boban and probably Franjo Tudman. Ironically, had they signed the peace agreement in Geneva, they would probably have lived more comfortable lives, especially given that the discussions about the creation of an International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in January 1993 had not yet entered their final phase.

It is a justice of some kind that, with the creation of The Hague Tribunal, these leaders were held accountable somewhere. The documents on which this analysis largely rests saw the light of day during those proceedings. However, if one considers the irreparable damage done by the breakdown of the negotiations, it is hard not to stray into the domain of alternative history. Let us imagine that the ICTY, or some other international criminal court, was already clandestinely established at that time. After all, some wise people from the Yugoslav region called for such an institution to be established even before the war started in earnest.⁸⁴ Let us then imagine that on the last day of the negotiations in Geneva, indictments against these political and military leaderships were served instead of coffee and refreshments. They would have been held responsible for the crimes that had already been committed, preventing them from committing even greater crimes. And, who knows, perhaps their successors would have given more serious thought to the consequences of their actions.

Summary

The collapse of Yugoslavia culminated in an atrocious war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995). The efforts to put a stop to that war were institutionalised at the London Conference in August 1992 through the creation of the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia. The Co-Chairmen of this body, British Lord David Owen and former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, developed a comprehensive peace plan to that end in the second half of 1992, as the war in Bosnia was raging. The Vance-Owen peace plan was proposed to the belligerents at the very beginning of 1993. It was neither immediately accepted nor was it rejected outright. Throughout January, tense negotiations ensued in Geneva, with three rounds of talks (2–4, 10–12, 23–30 January), during which the principal protagonists of the conflict were brought into direct communication for the first time since the outbreak of hostilities. The talks were interrupted by escalations of

81 “Remarks by Lord Owen at Plenary Session, 30 January 1993,” in *Srpske političke elite i Vens-Ovenov plan*, I, 261–262.

82 Peter Pringle, “Clinton to upstage Vance-Owen talks,” *The Independent*, 10 February 1993.

83 Kosta Nikolić, “Unija tri republike: mirovni plan za Bosnu i Hercegovinu iz 1993,” *Istorija 20 veka* 1 (2022):149–178; Mesud Šadinlija, *Između pravde i realpolitike. Odnos mirovnih planova i vojnih operacija u Bosni i Hercegovini 1992-1995* (Sarajevo: Institut za istraživanje zločina protiv čovječnosti i međunarodnog prava Univerziteta u Sarajevu, 2018).

84 Mirko Klarin, “Nirnberg Sada,” *Borba*, 16 May 1991.

violence in Bosnia and ran in parallel in Zagreb, Sarajevo and Belgrade. These internal discussions revealed not only the inability of the principal actors to compromise by scaling back their maximalist goals and the international community's reluctance and/or inability to enforce a settlement, but also bitter rivalry and disunity within the warring camps. This atmosphere of duplicity reduced the space for peacemaking, ultimately leading to the termination of this stage of negotiations. Drawing on unpublished and published sources, memoirs of participants, conference transcripts and trial case files, this paper reconstructs how this chance to shorten the war for more than two years was gambled away.

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