



## **FAILURE, LOOKING AWAY AND NEW WORLD VIEWS**

Writer Peter Schneider on war and genocide in Bosnia 25 years ago

by Michael Roick



*Sarajevo, Source: picture-alliance / dpa | epa*

This summer marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the most serious war crime in Europe since the end of the Second World War: the genocide of over 8,000 Bosniaks in Srebrenica in July 1995 at the hands of Bosnian Serb soldiers.

“Bosnia” had already previously become, as historian Marie-Janine Calic writes, the “cipher of an extreme brutalisation of war”. The crimes associated with the taboo of “ethnic cleansing”, which ranged from mass executions and rape to torture and mutilation, reached an almost unimaginable dimension. At the bitter end, there were some 100,000 dead, countless injured and over two million displaced persons.

Certainly, the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague has convicted the main perpetrators and documented the crimes. And in the commemorative speeches on the occasion of the anniversary of the massacres in Srebrenica 25 years ago, there was a renewed call for further criminal investigation and for the crimes to be remembered. But the ex-Yugoslav peoples are far from reconciliation. Even today, the wars in Yugoslavia, which lasted almost a decade, leave many unanswered questions and, above all, a shameful picture of the international inability and unwillingness to act.

The writer, author and publicist Peter Schneider dealt intensively with the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s and took a stand early on: not for a specific ethnic group, but for the civilian population, where the Bosnian-Muslim community was the most under threat: according to the United Nations Yugoslavia Tribunal, almost 70 per cent of the civilian casualties of the Bosnian war were Bosniaks.

In his recently published volume of essays, *Thinking with Your own Head* (2020), which brings together texts from three decades (1989-2020), each of which is accompanied by a

contemporary commentary, the chapter “War in Europe” is of particular significance. In the very first text (May 1993) under the title “Serbian Barbarism and Ours”, the author condemns the comfortable attitude of “hand-wringing spectators during the genocide”, which was to be found everywhere, and states that it would be tantamount to a “moral perversion” if those who, in view of the obvious barbarity, advocated military intervention to protect the civilian population were to be portrayed as “bellicists” and “militarists”.

In the following interview, the author describes how his world of thought has changed due to personal experiences as an observer on site in the besieged Sarajevo basin. Additional excerpts from previously unpublished diary entries provide a vivid picture of the events of that time.

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## Interview

MR: Mr. Schneider, in a recent commentary on your 1993 article “Serbian Barbarism and Ours”, you write that it became a “turning point”, a “point of no return” for many of your later interventions, as well as a “starting point for lasting enmities in the German feuilleton”. Could you describe the mental-ideological conflict in Germany at the time in a little more detail?

*PS: The post-war doctrine “Never again war!” has lost none of its force even today. This one sentence formulated the consensus on which the war and post-war generation could agree. It was never my intention, and still is not, to dispute the importance and necessity of this doctrine. But if someone in Germany at the beginning of the 1990s had suggested that the sentence was firstly incomplete and secondly blurred the difference between the perpetrators and the victims, one can imagine the consternation and also the anger that this criticism would have triggered. Even to hint that it should better have said: “Never again aggression, never again racism, never again assault...” made one suspected of being bellicist. But it was clear that the people the Germans had attacked could hardly draw the same conclusion from this experience as the Germans. Of course they would defend themselves in the case of a new German aggression, so they would take up arms. In view of the ethnic expulsion wars in Bosnia, I got the impression that the post-war German consensus all too often served as an excuse for turning a blind eye to the crimes committed against the civilian population. My experience in Sarajevo – a then unarmed and completely defenceless city that was under fire from a nationalist Serbian militia for three years – hardened into the conviction that nothing would help here but international military intervention. This was new to me and overturned my previous rather pacifist convictions – I myself was, of course, also influenced by the post-war consensus described above.*

MR: Were there also positive reactions?

*PS: I only received explicit applause for my essay from Marie-Luise Beck and Ralf Fücks from the Greens, from Dany Cohn-Bendit, André Glucksmann and Bernard Henry Lévy. Mike Levitas, who published the article on the “Opinion” page of the New York Times, which he was in charge of at the time, called it the best “op-ed” of the year. Most opponents were content with invective such as bellicist, warmonger, renegade, etc.*

*But there was another reason for my change of heart. From the reactions of almost the entire left and liberal German public to the Polish strike movement Solidarność and to General Jaruzelski’s coup d’état, I had observed how the invocation of peace and world peace became an instrument of repression against a legitimate freedom movement. In fact, even before my critical reflections on the German post-war consensus, I had already begun to struggle with the sentence “There is nothing more important than peace”, although it came from my idol*

Willy Brandt<sup>1</sup>. The comments of Rudolf Augstein, Theo Sommer and Helmut Schmidt occasioned my observation. "We regret that this (General Jaruzelski's coup) became necessary", said the German chancellor as he got off the train during a visit to the GDR. He could have said yes, we regret that this – the coup – has happened, that the General did not negotiate with Solidarność etc. But no, he said that this – the coup – was "necessary", and so he needlessly took the side of the putsching general. Helmut Schmidt, who is known to be the favourite chancellor of the Germans, made similar statements about the protest movement in Tian'anmen Square. I only add here that in my eyes the courage and persistence of the Solidarność movement contributed decisively to the fall of the Wall – an opinion that I can prove just as little as Helmut Schmidt can prove his own. That an initially unsuspecting principle such as the defence of peace can degenerate into an instrument of repression was something I knew through exchanges with my friend Thomas Brasch, who used many examples to illustrate how every democratic movement in the GDR, no matter how small, was stifled with the warning "You are also for peace, aren't you?"

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(Peter Schneider was in Sarajevo in January 1994, at the invitation of *Reporters without Borders*, to make a documentary film there with a local Bosnian station. At that time, the city, which is located in a basin, was under multiple bombardments every day. Looking back, he writes that "probably nothing has changed, even overturned my previous view of the world as much as my visit to Sarajevo". When asked what exactly had caused this change, he refers in the interview to previously unpublished diary entries: two longer entries from January 1994 make it clear how his own view of the world changed.

### **Diary entry 13.1.1994**

*"The dead of Sarajevo conquer the city metre by metre. There's no more room in the cemeteries. The living have cleared the children's playgrounds, the parks, the football stadium and made room for their dead. Three quarters of the football stadium, near the Olympic complex, is covered with graves. The living say it will soon be overcrowded. The mathematics of death obeys a simple extrapolation: since the beginning of the year, the monster on the mountains, which spews out of hundreds of pipes and claims human lives every day, has destroyed about 200 citizens of the city. Three to four times as many have been injured. The expression "injured" must be explained. It rarely means wounds that can be healed. Usually it means shattered hips, torn arms and legs, severed fingers and hands. If it continues like this – and according to the opinion of all those I have spoken to, it will continue like this far into the future – this will result in 3,000-5,000 dead, and three to four times as many injured, in a year. Where to put all these dead people? In the urban parks, whose trees have long since been used for heating – even the roots have been dug out – you can see unadorned poles rammed into the ground everywhere. Meanwhile, the dead are advancing further into the asphalted city centre. They occupy the garden in front of the community centre, the lawn next to the garage, the public places. Even at the funeral ceremonies, the living can only participate at the risk of death. Open spaces are training grounds for the snipers, where they test their riflescopes – on living, on running objects. For a bull's eye, so the people here say, there is a bonus of between 400-500 DM. Ten of the mourners each run to the dug up grave, hastily murmur their last greeting, throw their flowers on the grave, run back to make way for the next group of ten. The gravediggers have one of the safest and at the same time most dangerous jobs in the city. A*

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<sup>1</sup> see Peter Schneider's article "The Warning of this Peace", in: *Kursbuch* 68, 1982

gravedigger digs 1.30 cubic metres a day, and the demand is increasing. Yet since he has to work in open space, he is constantly in the sights of the riflescopes. Since the beginning of the war, the dragon on the mountains has devoured about 10,000 people, including 2,000 children – according to the inhabitants.

*In Sarajevo, the reporter is in some ways further away from the events than in front of the television at home. The risk of being hit by a grenade or sniper is omnipresent – there is no safe place in the city. The strange benefit of proximity is disorientation. What the domestic television does and what is missing in Sarajevo is the interpretation of events, the overview. Detonations, shots can be heard every few minutes. It is impossible to guess from which direction they are coming, whether, whom and how many they hit, whether to duck or run. The audible flight noise of a grenade before impact lasts three to four seconds. In this time you can walk 10 to 20 meters, but in which direction? These are abstract sounds that you get used to on the first day, knowing that for two, three or five people they might be the last they hear – more unrhythmic than lightning or thunder, just as uncontrollable. Here you only find out a day or two after the European television viewers where and how many people were torn apart. But they count differently in Sarajevo.”*

#### **Diary entry 12. 1.1994**

*“On this day, the news reported four dead. On the same day, three people gather at a table in Sarajevo and tell their stories. One of them, an American correspondent, while driving to a research meeting picked up from the street a young woman torn to pieces by a grenade; she died in hospital. His French colleague found an old man dead on a bridge. A Bosnian journalist hears on the phone that a relative has been killed by a sniper. Between the three of them they witnessed three deaths on that day – by chance, one might say – and altogether, they wonder, and are only half interested, have there really been only four? The news is much more fictional than the experiences. It is not the number of deaths in Sarajevo that interests them, but their names. The politicians and the people who prepare the television news ask about the quota. As long as it is only five a day, that must be the calculation, the situation is stable.*

*On the question of intervention, Europeans can save themselves the effort of lying. Nobody here in Sarajevo expects anything from the Europeans except parcels. “That’s NATO”, they say mockingly, when an unidentified aircraft can be heard above the clouds of the city. The joke is too stale and too old to make people laugh. “You’ve had two years to come to our aid. Now we know. We’re written off”. The determined speeches of Western leaders at the NATO summit in Brussels were decoded here using a simple key. The threats of an “airstrike”, which was worth headlines in the Western press, lacked a little something called an ultimatum. The only message from Brussels, which could be heard in Sarajevo like a grenade impact, was the word “if”: “If Sarajevo is strangled by the Serbian besiegers, then the NATO decision of August 1993....” He whose stomach is full can at least laugh about it. The daily terror from the mountains above Sarajevo has long since translated the conditional of the NATO masters into the perfect. There is no water, no light, nothing to eat, every adult has lost 10 to 20 kilos – the fifty-year-old cook in the Jewish community whom I interviewed today is the thinnest cook I have ever seen, he weighs the same as a boy. And everyone knows that Sarajevo, the wretched favourite of the international press, is a land of milk and honey compared to other Bosnian cities such as Mostar, Tuzla, Vitez and nameless villages where people have long since died of hunger and women, children, old people are dismembered alive because of the crime of belonging to the wrong ethnic group. Why are Europeans not at least honest? Why do they not admit that human rights in Bosnia-Herzegovina are not worth the life of a single soldier to them? That, at least, is something we could talk about, say the people I spoke to. Although it will not be easy to explain to your children why the 12 or 15 most powerful nations*



*in the world were unable to stand up to a loud-mouthed, ill-equipped psychopath constantly threatening World War III. Sure, you'll probably find an explanation. It's less likely that we will survive this most interesting explanation.*

*No one I meet here has any hope. No one expects any effect from an article I write or that someone else writes. One learns in Sarajevo that mere presence, testimony, compassion, which changes nothing, is accepted as a gift."*

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- Interview continues -

MR: 25 years after the tragedy of Srebrenica, Adama Dieng, UN Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide in New York, says: "We recognise how the international community and also our own organisation failed to prevent this tragedy". Do you feel that the international community has learned from these events and drawn sufficient conclusions?

*PS: The establishment of the International Criminal Court in The Hague was one of the most important reactions of the international community to the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. I have spoken to torture victims from Turkey, Bosnia and Syria. For the victims of abuse, the feeling that no one outside the torture chambers will ever know of these atrocities and that the perpetrators act in the certainty that they will never be held accountable for their crimes and can do whatever they want with the prisoners is just as bad as the torture itself. This certainty has been shaken by the outcome of the criminal proceedings in The Hague; it is all the more incomprehensible that the institution has now been dissolved.<sup>2</sup>*

MR: You note in your book that throughout the entire period of the Balkan wars, even among intellectuals, there was hardly a German voice of any weight that took sides here. How can that be explained?

*PS: Yes, there have been few, all too few German voices on the ethnic frenzy in former Yugoslavia. In my view, the most important reason for this is the incomplete and one-sided lesson from the German past. Had it been said – based loosely on Amos Oz – that there should never again have been aggression, racism, assault, then there could have been quite different reactions, especially in Germany. Was it not for the Germans in particular, in the face of racist potentates such as Milošević and Karadžić, to allow a historical reminiscence: Stop, this reminds us of something. These human butchers are of course not Hitler, but they are doing something similar – no, not the same, but something somehow comparable, something that we Germans in particular must put a stop to by all means. Of course, it was much more convenient to speak of a quite normal civil war in which one should not interfere.*

*The Tribunal in The Hague has clarified the question of who bears responsibility in this so-called "civil war in which one should not take sides" (Heidi Simonis). Of 161 accused, 90 were convicted with final effect – 62 of whom were Serbs; most of the 28 other convictions were against Croats, the single-digit remainder against Kosovo–Albanians, Bosnian Muslims, Montenegrins and Macedonians. The mass murder in Srebrenica, which cost the lives of about 8,000 Muslims, is clearly attributed to Karadžić's Serbs according to all available sources. In his "report", Peter Handke did not accuse the Serbs, but the media: "Can't you see how media-compatible the tortured and raped people look into the eyepiece of the photo reporter ...". On the NATO attack against Milošević, which took place much too late, Handke returned with the*

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<sup>2</sup> Comment MR: The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia ceased its activities at the end of 2017. New or yet to be completed proceedings are the responsibility of its successor institution, the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals (MICT).

*statement that NATO had “created a new Auschwitz.” Of all the questionable Auschwitz comparisons, this was probably one of the craziest.*

MR: Wouldn't one think that when the keyword “ethnic cleansing” – which the Association for the German Language named “the worst word of the year” in 1992 – is mentioned, all the alarm bells would start ringing, at least among intellectuals? Why were there no appeals, no manifestos, no unmistakable demonstrations demanding that the civilian population be protected?

PS: *Since many people in the German public may have forgotten the comments on the Bosnian war or were too young to follow them, I would like to illustrate the mood here with a few quotes from the early 1990s.*

*The German peace movement could not agree on a joint resolution on the war in Bosnia. Instead, a spokeswoman during the traditional Easter march thought of the following: “Since 2p.m., Germany has been at war. This is the third part of the tragedy.”*

*The outrage was not directed at the butchers in Bosnia, but at the AWACS mission of the German Air Force in Bosnia, which carried out reconnaissance flights there under UN supervision. The preservation of the old world view – the fixation on an alleged German militarism – was more important than the mass murder in the middle of Europe. The German PEN cancelled its participation in the international PEN conference planned in Dubrovnik with the lyrical explanation that it was now necessary to “create the appropriate conditions for the freedom of the word”. The necessary talks for this were “better to be held in a place outside the former Yugoslavia with its hopeless and tragic present” (sic!). Instead of taking the floor against Tudjman's synchronised press under the eyes of the world public, they met on the island of Hvar for “literary soirees”. There, according to the German PEN president, it should then be possible, “free from possibly false partisanship”, to set up a “sign of peace”.*

MR: Weren't there other voices in Germany at that time?

PS: *The only group in Germany that took their outrage about the horrible news from Bosnia to the streets and translated it into a courageous relief action for the victims of mass rape were women from The Greens (Die Grünen). A good part of the intelligentsia exhausted its energies in warning against the participation of German ground troops in a possible UN mission in Bosnia, which was not even up for debate. Helmut Kohl and Volker Rühle were in complete agreement with the Left on this point: German soldiers, “our children”, were not available due to historical responsibility. One only wondered why the children of the other neighbouring nations, the French, the Belgians, the English for example, who were attacked by the Germans in those days, should be available for this task. Were their parents less concerned about the lives of their children, did they not know the horrors of war as well as the Germans?*

*“We stand here for one of the best traditions, that war is not a political tool”, exclaimed SPD Member of Parliament Günter Verheugen. “We Germans do not want war”, his party colleague Mrs Wiezcorek-Zeul seconded on a talk show. And the others, who see no other means than intervention, “want” war? Indeed, the claim of a special German role, for the Germans to be a moral role model, cannot be ignored. Horst Eberhard Richter, a leading figure in the peace movement, gave an example of this in a television interview: the Professor said that the Germans in particular, because of their special historical responsibility, have the chance to set an example to the world that today's problems can no longer be solved by war.*

MR: But haven't many people thought like that?

PS: *In the heat of an argument with an opponent of intervention, who had just celebrated his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got carried away with the question of whether there was any value for a German*

*which had to be defended, if necessary, with his own life. Instead of an answer, he hummed a Nazi song to me, in which blood sacrifice for people and fatherland was celebrated. He had had to learn it at school. The hummed argument seemed to need no further comment. With such slogans the despiser of life with the moustache had led the Germans into a murderous war which had cost 50 million people their lives.*

*Marek Edelman, the last surviving commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, said on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this uprising: "There is mass destruction in Bosnia, and Europe is behaving in a similar way as towards the ghetto fighters of those days". When a surviving victim of the Nazi massacre in Warsaw draws such a comparison, the warnings of guilt-ridden Germans about such comparisons seem somewhat strange. Even the commotion caused by Hans Magnus Enzensberger's comparison of Saddam and Hitler could only be explained by a kind of negative German megalomania: how dare anyone compare this backwoods moustached Arab sheikh with our incomparable monster Hitler!*

*Even the opinion that one does not know who is friend or foe in Bosnia proved to be a weak excuse for inaction. This much is known: not only the Serbs, but to a lesser extent also the Croats and, in individual cases, the Muslims carried out ethnic cleansing in their ancestral or conquered territories. It has never been a matter for Europeans to choose between the Serbs, the Croats and the Muslims. Partisanship could only ever be directed towards the victims of aggression: the civilian population on all sides. The first and most important task of a European intervention would have been to keep the warring parties apart and prevent further killing.*

## **Peter Schneider**



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Born in Lübeck in 1940, Peter Schneider grew up in Freiburg, where he began his studies of German, History and Philosophy. He was one of the most important figures of the 1968 movement. His story *Lenz* became a cult book at that time. In addition to short stories, he has written novels, screenplays and reports as well as essays and speeches. His most important works include *Lenz* (1973), *Der Mauerspringer* (1982), *Paarungen* (1992), *Rebellion und Wahn* (2008), *Die Lieben meiner Mutter* (2013) and *Club der Unentwegten* (2017). He describes his current book *Denken mit dem eigenen Kopf* (2020), which for the first time brings together essays from the last 30 years, as "a kind of novel about the development of my mind". It is about historical turning points, own mistakes and the abandonment of old certainties.