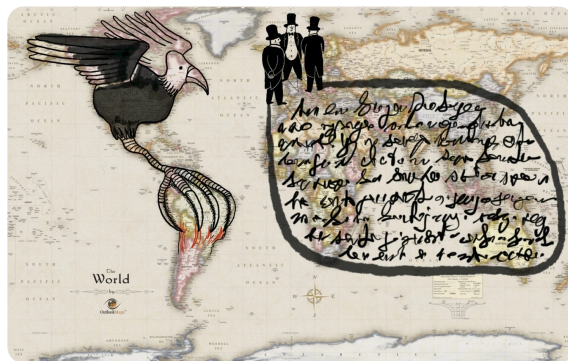


Troubles with the East(s)

Bojana Piškur

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As part of the publishing thread 'Towards Collective Study in Times of Emergency' curator and art historian Bojana Piškur explores the interconnect histories of Palestine and former Yugoslavia. Moving across the Bosnian war and genocide in 1995, the unfolding genocide in Palestine, the history of former Yugoslavia – its formative role in the Non-Aligned Movement and solidarity with Palestine – back to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire Piškur points to entangled threads, solidarities and 'troubles'.



Drawing by Djordje Balmazović.

I.

The genocide of the people in Gaza has been allowed to happen, just as the genocide of Bosnian Muslims was allowed to happen in the 1990s. Like the Palestinians today, Bosnians experienced the consequences of the international community's silence in the face of unfolding war crimes and crimes against humanity. ¹ Silence in the context of war means turning a blind eye. Silence also means forgetting: 'the world forgets, as it has forgotten Bosnia'. ²

1. It would be more accurate to say the silence of liberal Western governments and their institutions, including academic and art institutions. Since October 2023, millions of people have been calling for an immediate end to Israel's destruction in Gaza.

2. Lana Bastašić, 'Opinion', *Guardian*, 23 October

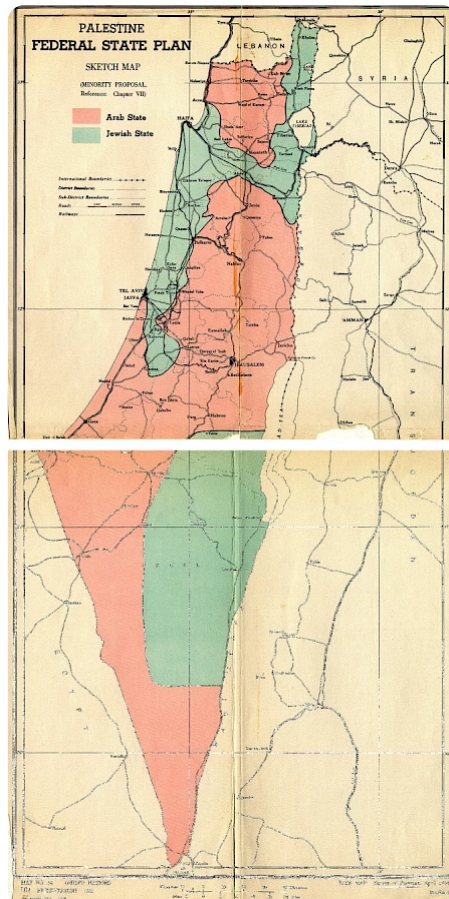
'The genocide of the Bosnian Muslims had been allowed to be carried out for so long ... that the basis for believing in law, rights, justice, and democracy became problematic. By denying the Bosnian state the right to self-defense, the fabric of international law was torn apart.'³ Written by sociologist Tomaž Mastnak in 1999, these words equally speak to the decades-long colonial violence carried out in Palestine.

There are, of course, clear differences between the contexts of Bosnia and Palestine. First and foremost on the question of statehood: While Bosnia and Herzegovina received international recognition and became a member of the United Nations in 1992, this is not the case with Palestine; Palestine has not been allowed to become an independent sovereign state. The UN played its role in this, already in 1947.⁴

2023, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com) (last accessed on 2 January 2024).

3. Tomaž Mastnak, 'Call for Papers: Political Theory and the War in Bosnia', *Living with genocide: art and the war in Bosnia*, M'ARS, Moderna galerija Ljubljana 1999, pp. 21–22.

4. The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine was established in 1947 with the aim to 'solve' the situation in the Middle East after the end of the British Mandate in Palestine. The minority plan, based on a federal state solution, as proposed by Yugoslavia, Iran and India, was not supported by the UN. Instead, the majority plan for a partitioned state but with an economic union was adopted. The partition of Palestine in 1947 was not a 'solution', but, as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay writes, it gave 'the greenlight to some Zionists' armed groups to use an array of genocidal technologies for its implementation. The outcome was the destruction of Palestine and Palestinians as a people, and along with them, their ancestral lands, practices, and heritage.' Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, 'Seeing Genocide', *Boston Review*, 8 December 2023, bostonreview.net (last accessed on 28 December 2023).



The partition of Palestine: minority or federal plan, map, 1947, United Nations.

Writer Lana Bastašić recently published an opinion piece in the *Guardian* calling attention to ‘white saviourist hypocrisy’ in response to what is happening in Gaza.⁵ In it, she identifies a pattern of extreme violence that can be recognized in the events in her native Bosnia during the war between 1992 and 1995. Her response to the question of why write about Bosnia twenty-eight years after the Dayton Peace Agreement is a grim warning that ‘there is no such thing as peace after an ethnic cleansing’.⁶

5. Bastašić, ‘Opinion’.

6. Bastašić, *ibid.*

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina played a central role in shaping the so-called new world order. In 2023, history repeated itself as tragedy, while the same world order yet exerts itself in Palestine. This war implicates many world powers whose involvement is fuelled by ideological and geostrategic interests, just as it was with the wars in Yugoslavia and in countless wars and conflicts since then, mainly in the Global South and in the East.

At the end of the Cold War, Eastern Europe embraced the new political system and processes of integration with the West with optimism. The Middle East approached the end of an era with certain anxieties and expectations; the following decade would be marked by a mix of conflicts, peace initiatives, economic changes, and the emergence of extremist groups in the region. Thirty years later, the world is a very different place and the only common denominator is that there is no cause for optimism any longer.

In order to better understand this complex geopolitical situation, its political and social dynamics, we need to delve briefly into the history not only of Eastern Europe, but, above all, of its very East(s); the Balkans and the Middle East.⁷

II.

Disillusionment with Western liberal democracy is nothing new. It has been going on for quite some time, especially in the countries of the former Eastern bloc. Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have analysed how, after 1989, the most influential political leaders in Eastern Europe embraced copycat westernization as the shortest path to reform, only to witness the emergence of anti-Western sentiment and illiberal populism in many of these countries.⁸ This sentiment has recently been given new impetus as a result of the mass destruction and the genocide in Gaza carried out by Israel's apartheid and settler-colonialist politics, which are fervently supported by the very same Western democracies that 'sold' the idea of 'democracy' to Eastern Europe some decades ago.

The complexities and contradictions of East-West relations go back a long way, and although there was an illusion after the end of the Cold War that they could finally be resolved, they persist today. In fact, the ideological and cultural dichotomies seem to have become even greater than before. The East and its former socialist states have intensively searched for their national and cultural identities, largely based on their pre-socialist pasts, while still carrying along all their previous historical 'burdens' or distinctions, such as those between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, Christian and Muslim religions, 'democracy' and communism, and so on. The former ideological dichotomy between East and West 'has been replaced by "differences" based on long-lasting "historical legacies" and/or culture'.⁹

Many writers and theorists have often regarded Eastern Europe as a 'project' rather than a geographical place: a 'cultural project of demi-Orientalization' and, after the fall of communism, a project that eagerly embraced Western liberal democracy. But 'the East' has always been an elusive concept, constantly shifting or overlapping with other East(s) as, for example, the Balkans and the Middle East: an oriental East in Europe and the imagined Orient, the perennial colonial dream.¹⁰ In both cases, the focus has been on the stereotypical Other as the West has persistently imagined it: its incompletely developed antipode, a European burden, an irrational, violent people from the periphery of the Western world. Negative stereotyping, essentializing and over-simplification is common to concepts of Orientalism (Edward Said) and Balkanization (Maria Todorova). The processes of othering have also been used historically to justify intervention and control in the regions.

7. The term 'Middle East' is problematic as it is a colonial invention. Other suggested terms include 'the Levant' and 'the Arab world', but these have not really entered into common usage, and no other non-Western term has yet replaced the term 'Middle East'. Interestingly, in Slavic languages, the older term 'Near East' is still used.

8. Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed*, London: Penguin, 2019, pp. 20–21.

9. See Hannes Grandits, review of *Imagining the Balkans*, reviews.history.ac.uk, 2016 (last accessed on 28 December 2023).

10. These 'Orient's' were divided in the nineteenth century based on the Eurocentric colonial perspective: the Near East included the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans, the Middle East stretched from the Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia, and the Far East covered East Asia, North Asia and Southeast Asia.



Muslim women at the market, Banja Luka, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, postcard, 1933 (private archive).

Rebecca West, famous for her *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia* travelogue written at the dawn of World War II, and in general very sympathetic towards the Yugoslav people, commented: 'Violence was, indeed, all I knew of the Balkans: all I knew of the South Slavs'.¹¹ Stereotypes of this kind have been even further reinforced by the patronizing perception of the oppressed from these regions throughout history. Eric Hazan has recently analysed the situation in Palestine. In the eyes of the oppressor, he writes, the oppressed are only good when they are calm and silent.¹² If he rebels, he is therefore against our (Western) values, is violent without reason or is a member of a terrorist organization.

The 'Eastern question' that emerged in the nineteenth century, when the powers of the Ottoman Empire began to decline, clearly showed the political considerations and the strategic competition of the European powers to exert their influence over the falling empire. Mikhail Pogodin, the Russian imperial historian, wrote a memorandum to Tsar Nicholas I in 1853 saying: 'Russia demands a treaty to protect millions of Christians, and that is deemed to strengthen its position in the East at the expense of the balance of power. We can expect nothing from the West but blind hatred and malice'.¹³ In this context, it is important to note the gradation of 'Orient', a pattern that reproduces the original dichotomy on which Orientalism is based, about which Milica Bakić-Hayden has written extensively and in relation to which she has coined the term 'nesting orientalism'. She points out that in this pattern, Asia is more 'Eastern' or 'other' than Eastern Europe; within Eastern Europe this gradation is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as most 'eastern'.¹⁴

11. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, London: Penguin, 1994, p. 21.

12. Eric Hazan, *Zapiski o okupaciji (Notes on the Occupation)*, Ljubljana: Založba, 2017, p. 8.

13. Joshua Keating, 'The Long History of Russian Whataboutism', *Slate*, 21 March 2014, [slate.com](https://www.slate.com) (last accessed on 28 December 2023).

14. Milica Bakić-Hayden,

In the same line, the Ottoman (oriental) heritage of the (non-Muslim) Balkans has largely been regarded as a kind of 'cultural discontinuity'. The writing of the historian Pogodin could then be understood as a reminder to the West that Russia had stood against the Ottomans as a bastion of Christian faith and Western values, or rather: as the (West's) East against *its* East(s), its Orient.

Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire played a significant role in shaping the history and the culture of both the Balkans and the Middle East; it was common for various ethnic groups from different parts of the empire to migrate internally. In the late nineteenth century, a large number of Muslim families from Bosnia and Herzegovina migrated to Palestine, settling just south of Haifa, in what is now Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. These communities were called Bushnaqs (Arabization of the Slavic word 'Bošnjak') and have since been incorporated into Palestinian society as part of the Palestinian people. However, when they arrived in Palestine the Bushnaqs were not granted the same extraterritorial privileges as were granted to the citizens of European states. Under the British Mandate, Bushnaqs were actually classified as Arabs,¹⁵ and during the Nakba they experienced expulsion in the same way as other Palestinians.

III.

This web of interactions, geopolitical shifts, conflicts and entanglements receded into the background in the aftermath of the World War II with the emergence of new political, economic and cultural identities in Eastern Europe, including those of the Balkans and the Middle East. The countries of Eastern Europe became part of the Eastern bloc, with the Soviet Union maintaining varying degrees of direct and indirect military, political, economic and cultural control over them. In the case of the Middle East, the old colonial powers still saw the region as something they were entitled to exert their influence and domination over: after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, these powers had imposed the state system of government on the region without regard for its ethnically and religiously diverse populations. Immediately after World War II, many countries in the Middle East began the process of decolonization. Almost all of them joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) at its formation in 1961.

The political, economic and cultural changes were perhaps the most profound in Yugoslavia, which not only broke with the Soviet Union and consequently with the Eastern bloc in 1948, but also introduced a new type of self-managed socialism and turned its foreign policy towards the Third World, being one of the founders of the NAM. Yugoslavia incorporated the diverse ethnic, religious and cultural identities of its peoples into a new, Yugoslav one, united under a common federal socialist state with an emphasis on equality between nations. It was not only a state but a *project*: so it is no surprise that, in 1947, as many as 200,000 young brigadiers from around the world, including a Palestinian brigade, took part in the building of the new Šamac-Sarajevo railway in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This project was more than a railway; it was a symbol of a new era for the newly liberated countries and their people, who throughout history had been forcibly placed on the margins of the global economic, political and cultural system. The Šamac-Sarajevo railway was an example of how these countries could begin the process of modernization on their

'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4, Winter 1995, p. 918.

15. See: Darryl Li, 'Translator's Preface: A Note on Settler Colonialism', *The Herzegovinian Muslim Colony in Caesarea, Palestine*, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. XLV, no. 1, Autumn 2015, Institute for Palestine Studies, p. 75.

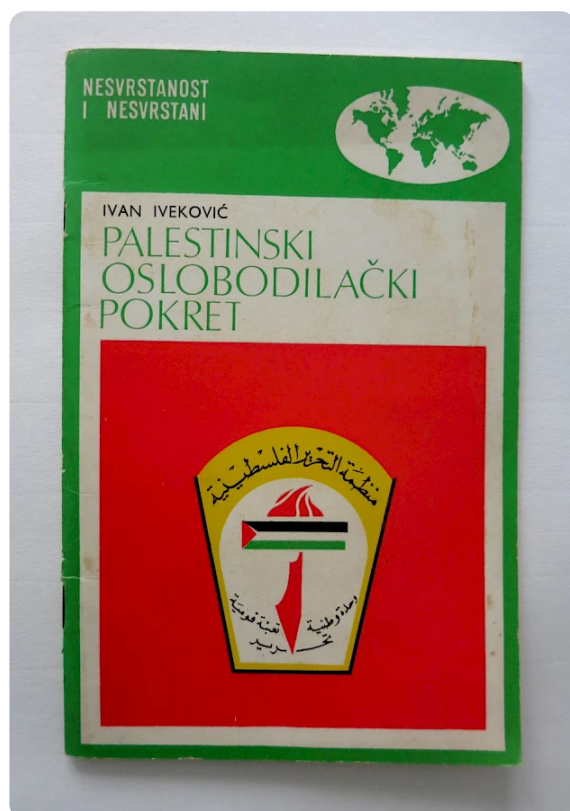
own terms and at their own pace. At the same time, it signified the construction of a new, better world based on different, more equal foundations; a world which was emerging as a reality, not just a utopia.

IV.

In 1961, at the height of the Cold War, NAM was founded in Belgrade.¹⁶ In retrospect, we can say that its inauguration represented the first significant disturbance in a world geopolitical arena dominated by the two hegemonic blocs. NAM functioned as a social movement with the aim of changing then current global structures to bring about a more just, equitable and peaceful world order. As such, it was anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and anti-racist: it also supported the National Liberation Movements across the world fighting for independence from colonialism and various forms of occupation, and the Palestinian case was no exception. As the majority of its members were pro-Palestine, NAM strongly promoted Palestinian interests at the United Nations. At the 1973 NAM summit in Algeria, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was given observer status as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and their struggle, and at the 1976 Colombo summit the PLO was given full participant status. Support for the Palestinian cause has been expressed at all NAM summits and conferences. In the communiqué of the preparatory meeting for the Colombo Conference in 1964, for example, the members declared the following: 'The Conference condemns the imperialistic policy pursued in the Middle East and, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations, decides to: endorse the full restoration of all the rights of the Arab people of Palestine to their homeland, and their inalienable right to self-determination; declare their full support to the Arab people of Palestine in their struggle for liberation from colonialism and racism.'¹⁷

16. NAM was a coalition of small and medium-sized states, mostly former colonies and developing countries from the Third World. Yugoslavia was one of its founders and key members. At the first summit in Belgrade in 1961, there were twenty-five participating countries, and by 1979 the organization had grown to nearly one hundred members.

17. *Documents of the Gatherings of the Non-Aligned Countries 1956–1989, Beograd: Međunarodna politika, 1989, p. 26.*



Palestine Liberation Organization, booklet from the series *Nesvrstanost i nesvrstani* (Non-alignment and the Non-aligned), Beograd: Izdavačko preduzeće 'Rad', 1974 (private archive).

As one of the founding members of NAM, Yugoslavia was fully committed to Palestine, supplying material and logistical support to Palestinian organizations (arms and medical supplies, medical treatment of Palestinian fighters in Yugoslavia, education grants for Palestinian students) and helping to legitimize the PLO's position as the legal representative of the Palestinian people. Following the Six Day War in 1967, Yugoslav officials expressed strong support for the Palestinian right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state, and were more in favour of the Palestinian armed struggle than in previous decades even though they explicitly condemned terrorist acts such as plane hijackings. In 1967 Yugoslavia severed diplomatic ties with Israel.

Relations between Yugoslavia and Palestine were significant not only politically but also culturally. Manifestations of various kinds – art exhibitions, translation of Palestinian authors (Mahmoud Darwish, Tawfiq Zayyad) and rock concerts in solidarity with Palestine – took place around the country. The Yugoslav people were in general very supportive of the Palestinian liberation movement, and even schoolchildren regularly participated in solidarity actions such as fundraising for their peers in Palestine. The affection was mutual: documents in the Archives of Yugoslavia reveal that many young Palestinian fighters were so impressed by the Yugoslav national liberation struggle in World War II that they nicknamed themselves Tito.¹⁸

18. Žiga Smolič, *Jugoslavija i palestinska revolucija*, *Reprezentacija nasilja u jugois-*

In the late 1980s, Yugoslav aid and support for Palestine declined, partly because of the changes in Yugoslav foreign policy after Tito's death but also as a result of a deep crisis within the federation.

točnoj Europi 20. stoljeća (zbornik radova), Sarajevo: Udruženje za modernu historiju, 2022, p. 259.

In 1989, Palestinian artist Kareem Dabbah donated his work *Composition* (1989) to the collection of the Art Gallery of the Non-Aligned Countries in Titograd. The work, one of the copper engravings for which the artist was known, includes lines from a poem by Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri. At the bottom of the engraving, the line, 'Long live the Palestinian–Yugoslavian friendship' stands as a statement of political and collective resistance and of solidarity between the two states – one that, at that time, was already history and one that was still future.



Kareem Dabbah, *Composition*, 1989, copper engraving. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Montenegro. Photo: Andy Stagg. Courtesy of The Mosaic Rooms, London.

V.

The events of the 1990s reshaped the political, economic and cultural landscape in the East(s): the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Eastern bloc; the break-up of, and wars in, Yugoslavia; the Gulf War and the subsequent conflicts and wars in the Middle East. NAM had become an anachronism in international politics; in permanent crisis and unable to resolve any armed conflict or war between its members, including the wars in Yugoslavia. The radical changes of this decade were so profound that their consequences continue haunt us to this day.

So what is left of the idea of Eastern Europe, more than thirty years after the end of the Cold War? Eastern Europe has all but disappeared from the geopolitical map of the world, replaced by Global East, Central Europe, the Baltics, Southeast Europe or the Western Balkans. The overturning of one system (communism) in order to copy another (liberal democracy) left most of the region with 'decades of rising social inequality, pervasive corruption and the morally arbitrary redistribution of public property into the hands of small number of people', as Krastev and Holmes put it.¹⁹

19. Ivan Krastev and Stephen

It is accurate to say that there is no longer just one Eastern Europe, but many. And if there is no more Eastern Europe as such, what has become of the East of the former East?

Holmes, 'How liberalism became "the god that failed" in eastern Europe', *Guardian*, 24 October 2019, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com) (last accessed on 2 January 2024).

Even if there is no European East, so to speak, the centuries-old hostility towards the other East(s) has not disappeared, but is still present in various guises. Many leaders from the eastern part of Europe, for example, repeatedly use migration as a populist mantra, emphasizing how the region stands as a bastion 'to protect the rights of the threatened white Christian majority who are in mortal danger'.²⁰ Bosnia, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, the East(s) of yesterday, are now more or less 'failed states' whose citizens are leaving en masse.

20. Ibid.

The West has been accused of double standards; its 'indifference to the suffering and annihilation of those deemed inferior or not human enough' for Western civilization has been pervasive.²¹ One argument is that while the Western world reacted immediately and unequivocally to the invasion of Ukraine with sanctions against Russia, its reaction to the siege of Gaza could not be more different: The West has clearly sided with Israel, supplying arms and resources to the occupying force; Palestine is deemed a threat to the outpost of the 'civilized' world in the Middle East.

21. Samir Bennis, 'Complicity in Gaza Genocide Unmasks the West's Moral Decay, Inherent Brutality', *Morocco World News*, 2 November 2023, [moroc-coworldnews.com](https://www.moroc-coworldnews.com) (last accessed on 2 January 2024).

After World War II there were alternatives to domination and oppression; anticolonial, emancipatory movements inventing new political languages of liberation. All these past alternatives seem to have failed us. Even though Palestine is still a member of NAM, 'the biggest peace movement in history', it was not until 29 November 2023 that a relatively unnoticed statement was passed on to the UN by the delegation of Azerbaijan on NAM's behalf. What made this statement particularly cynical is that it came via the representatives of the country responsible for 120,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh being forced to leave the region just a month before, in anticipation of ethnic cleansing.

In contrast, South Africa has recently launched a case against Israel at the UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ), the first state to have done so, accusing Israel of genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and comparing Israel's treatment of Palestinians to apartheid. South Africans have learned from their history; the rest of the world has not.

These questions remain: How to understand these complex histories and demand change that would actually produce a new politics of rupture in this deeply unjust world? How to finally exorcise the demons of war? To paraphrase the title of Eric Maria Remarque's classic novel, nothing is new on the Eastern front. In Gaza, people cannot bury their dead as there are no longer any graveyards. And as we wait for the alternatives, it looks unlikely, tragically, that change will come any time soon.

Ljubljana, 2 January 2024

confederation and its members.

