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Peter Handke

**Clarifications, materials and further sources
related to an ongoing debate**

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Contents

Preliminary Note	2
I. Peter Handke, Serbia, and the Yugoslav wars.....	3
I.1 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denies or excuses genocide and war crimes.....	3
I.1.1 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denies the genocide at Srebrenica	4
I.1.2 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denies the crimes in the city of Višegrad	6
I.1.3 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denied the existence	7
of concentration camps in the Yugoslav wars.....	7
I.2 Some observers have written that Peter Handke exclusively supports the Serbian point-of-view while ignoring other positions	8
I.3 Some observers have written that Peter Handke has claimed that ‘the Serbs’ suffered more in the 20 th century than ‘the Jews’, or as much.	10
I.4 Some observers have written that Peter Handke never doubted his positions or distanced himself from them.....	11
I.5 Some observers have written that Peter Handke mocked the victims of war crimes or did not take their suffering seriously	12
I.6 Some observers have written that Peter Handke ‘worshipped’ Slobodan Milošević and have criticized him for attending his funeral	14
II. Peter Handke’s relationship to nationalism and fascism	17
II.1 Some observers have written that Peter Handke feels a kinship with nationalism and fascism.....	17
II.2 Some observers have written that Peter Handke’s texts incite hatred	19
III. Addendum: Peter Handke and his ex-partner Marie Colbin.....	20
IV. Bibliography / Works Cited	21

Preliminary Note

The debate surrounding the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Peter Handke has, in the meantime, grown international. Below, some of the major topics publicly discussed in that debate have been collected and juxtaposed with texts and personal statements of Handke's, as well as research on his publications.

Peter Handke's complete works in German have been published by Suhrkamp in 14 volumes in 2018 (Peter Handke Bibliothek, Berlin, 2018). The volume *Aufsätze 2* comprises his works on the civil wars in Yugoslavia, and contains: *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land*, *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*, *Sommerlicher Nachtrag zu einer winterlichen Reise*, *Unter Tränen fragend*, *Rund um das Große Tribunal*, *Die Tablas von Daimiel*, *Die Kuckucke von Velika Hoča*, *Die Geschichte des Dragoljub Milanović*. The majority of them have not been translated.

The aim of this document is therefore to provide, wherever possible, some clarification based on original sources on some of the topics discussed, and to document, in English translation, original quotations from Handke's texts, as appropriate.

This document is a work in progress and will be continuously amended, as appropriate.

I. Peter Handke, Serbia, and the Yugoslav wars

I.1 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denies or excuses genocide and war crimes

Statements:

- “denial of Serb atrocities during the Balkans war” [Flood 2019]
- “denies that a well-documented genocide was committed by Serbs against Muslims in Bosnia” [Maass 2019a]
- “is an apologist for genocide” [Vulliamy 2019]
- “literary art of genocide denial” [Maass 2019b]

Clarification:

Peter Handke has neither denied nor excused genocide and war crimes in the Yugoslav wars. He has repeatedly emphasized this:

I have never denied or lessened or made light of, let alone countenanced, a single one of the massacres in the wars in Yugoslavia that took place from 1991 to 1995. [Handke 2018g, 1013]

In 2019 he repeated:

Of course, the genocide has caused infinite suffering, which I have never denied. A suffering that cannot be extinguished by anything. I regret my remarks, should they have conveyed something else [Handke 2019].

Handke’s questioning does not apply to the crimes per se, but to the way in which they were reported. From this media-critical approach, he attempts to historically expand the media's handling of acts and declarations of war from a Yugoslavian and Serbian perspective. (cf. I.2.).

In *Summer Postscript to a Winter’s Journey*, Handke defends himself against the repeated criticism of relativizing war crimes through a comparison with other war crimes, as well as the accusation of deflecting blame by taking a Serbian perspective:

But, once again, pay attention: just as a clarification of prehistories has nothing to do with anything being offset, it naturally has nothing to do with any kind of relativization or weakening either. There are no extenuating circumstances for revenge. [Handke 2018e, 166]

Handke’s texts *A Journey to the Rivers* and *Summer Postscript to a Winter’s Journey* describe his concrete travel experiences. This is both a consequence of his media-critical approach as well as his poetological principles. Handke describes his writing principle in the foreword to the US edition as follows:

I wrote about my journey through the country of Serbia exactly as I have always written my books, my literature: a slow, inquiring narration; every paragraph dealing with and narrating a problem, of representation, of form, of grammar – of aesthetic veracity; that has always been the case in what I have written, from the beginning to the final period. [Handke 1997, vii]

I.1.1 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denies the genocide at Srebrenica

Statements:

- “He once denied the Serbian massacre at Srebrenica” [BBC 2019]
- “contests the massacre at Srebrenica” [Vulliamy 2019]
- “denied the Srebrenica genocide” [Cain 2019]
- “denies that a well-documented genocide was committed by Serbs against Muslims in Bosnia” [Maass 2019a]
- “Handke does not doubt that people were killed in Srebrenica, but he denies that a genocide has taken place there” [Selimović 2019]
- “his lies that what happened in Srebrenica was an act of revenge” [Selimović 2019]

Clarification:

Peter Handke has not denied the genocide at Srebrenica. His early discussion of this war crime can be seen in the following quote from *A Journey to the Rivers*:

A child’s sandal broke the surface at my feet. “You aren’t going to question the massacre at Srebrenica too, are you?” S. commented, in response, after my return. “No,” I said. “But I want to ask how such a massacre is to be explained, carried out, it seems¹, under the eyes of the world, after more than three years of war [...] and further, it is supposed² to have been an organized, systematic, long-planned execution.” Why such a thousandfold slaughtering? What was the *motivation*? *For what purpose*? And why, instead of an investigation into the causes (“psychopaths” doesn’t suffice), again nothing but the sale of the naked, lascivious, market-driven facts and supposed facts? [Handke 1997, 73f.]

The last sentence can be explained by Handke's fundamental criticism of, in his view, the stereotypical reporting on the Yugoslavian wars (cf. I.2.). In the immediate aftermath of the genocide and at the beginning of its investigation, Handke attempts to understand the circumstances that led it. He is careful not to immediately confirm or believe everything the media has written about the situation. This is the context in which he first uses the adjective ‘presumed’:

Commemoration on the anniversary of the presumed (at the moment, the middle of July 1996, still the just and legal epithet) genocide committed in S. [Handke 2018e, 165]

In Handke’s texts on Yugoslavia, the term ‘presumed’ appears three times [ibid. and 161], all in the aforementioned context. But he was vehemently against any relativization of war crimes:

And I repeat, enraged, full of rage for the Serbian criminals, commandants, planners I repeat: Srebrenica represents the worst *crime against humanity* that has been committed in Europe since the war. [Handke 2018f, 1017]

¹ German: “so heißt es“. This could also be translated as “as they say“. Handke does not doubt the fact that the genocide happened.

² German: “wie es heißt“. This could also be translated as “as they say“.

Often it has been criticized, that, while Handke did condemn what happened in Srebrenica, he did not use the term “genocide” when referring to the genocide of Srebrenica.

His terminology refers to the legal situation of the time. Already in 2006 Handke uses the expression “Srebrenica-Genocide” [Handke 2018b, 349f]. The UN would declare the massacre at Srebrenica a genocide in 2007. In a statement Handke made on October 25 2019, he explicitly stated that the massacre at Srebrenica was in fact a genocide (cf. l.1.).

Also it was criticized that Handke called the genocide of Srebrenica an act of revenge. Though Handke claimed that the Srebrenica genocide could be regarded as an act of revenge by the Bosnian Serbs, he never said this was an excuse and neither countenanced the massacre. Handke wrote about the Srebrenica genocide that it was an “unforgivable act of revenge” [Handke 2018e, 165], “terrible revenge and eternal shame for the Bosnian Serbs responsible” [Handke 2018f, 1018].

I.1.2 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denies the crimes in the city of Višegrad

Statements:

- “The criticism of journalistic reporting turns into a doubting of the matter itself [...] Handke’s narrator [in *Summer Postscript to a Winter’s Journey*] denies the fact that the massacre of Višegrad ever took place ...” [Brokoff 2010]

Clarification:

Peter Handke has not denied that crimes against humanity were committed in Višegrad. Nor does Handke’s narrator do so in his text. On the contrary, Handke refers explicitly to crimes having been committed in Višegrad, for example in the following passage:

according to eyewitnesses many of the victims [...] were pushed off the bridge over there, and all on the orders of a young Serbian militia leader [Handke 2018e, 137]

In the criticized sentences of *Summer Postscript to a Winter’s Journey*, Handke objects to the journalists’ way of reporting of the war, looking, in his view, only for exactly that story they wished to find. He also criticizes the way journalists would employ a certain type of language to make their reportages more forceful:

It is remarkable, however, how the testimonial-collectors flown in from across the oceans were without exception only and exclusively concerned with their story, their scoop, their loot, what they could sell [...], but hardly ever with a context, with doing the work that might allow for the further explanation and clarification of a problem [...] with the prehistory that is particularly characteristic of Bosnia and Yugoslavia, prehistory after prehistory – a portrayal of the problem which would go to the heart in a fundamentally different way than, for instance, the last miserable little literary paragraph [...] where the journalist from Manhattan hired to go to Višegrad, behind the Bosnian mountains, has a witness—who managed to escape her city and was there the night her mother and sister were pushed off the bridge—say Tennessee-Williams-like: ‘The bridge. The bridge. The bridge ...’ [ibid., 139]

Peter Handke does not question the facts themselves. In the text, Handke identifies the effects of ethnic cleansing several times and of Višegrad he writes: “this, in the meantime, purely Serbian place” [ibid., 144]. Such description and observation of the effects of both the war and war crimes corresponds to his media-critical position (cf. I.2.).

I.1.3 Some observers have written that Peter Handke denied the existence of concentration camps in the Yugoslav wars

Statements:

- “he wrote that it is wrong to talk of ‘concentration camps’ in Bosnia“ [Maass 2019a]
- “denies the existence of concentration camps“ [Vulliamy 2019]

Clarification:

Peter Handke has not denied the existence of camps in the Yugoslav wars. In *A Journey to the Rivers*, he writes about “Serbian-Bosnian internment camps” [Handke 1997, 17]. Furthermore, he leaves no doubt as to what took place there:

It is true: between 1992 and 1995, in the territories of the Yugoslavian republics, above all in Bosnia, there were prison camps, and people in them were starved, tortured, and murdered. [Handke 2018f, 1018]

This appeared before in similar form in the article he wrote for *Libération* in 2006, in which he clarified that there were, in his view, Serbian camps as well as Croatian and Muslim camps [Handke 2006c].

Handke, indeed, criticizes the use of a certain language, specifically the term ‘concentration camp’ for camps in the Yugoslav wars. Observing the media coverage, Handke was of the opinion that the media had specifically introduced a language and a terminology that refer to the Holocaust to emotionalize what was happening to the greatest degree possible [Struck 2013, 82]. He considered this language and terminology inadequate and opposed its use in any context other than the Holocaust:

And let us never again use the word “concentration camp” to describe the camps built during the war of secession in Yugoslavia. [ibid., 1017]

But should one then limit the word 'apartheid' to its place of origin, like many other words transferred to Yugoslavia (like 'concentration camps' etc.)? [Handke 2018b, 317f.]

I.2 Some observers have written that Peter Handke exclusively supports the Serbian point-of-view while ignoring other positions

Statements:

- “widely accused of being an apologist for [...] Serbian nationalism” [Charles 2019]
- “used his public voice to [...] offer public succor to perpetrators of genocide” [Egan 2019]
- “a stance very similar to the views of the Milošević regime” [Illić 2016]
- “defends these war criminals and dissembles on their behalf” [Maass 2019a]
- “writing about how the Serbs were misunderstood” [Maass 2019a]
- “gives credence to mass murder and [...] to lies” [Vulliamy 2019]

Clarification:

In his texts on the Yugoslav wars, Peter Handke criticizes what he considers stereotypical reporting and especially, as he sees it, the prescribed appointment of blame. In *A Journey to the Rivers*, Handke describes his irritation with the language and images employed by the western media (c.f.1.5.).

Nothing against those—more than uncovering—*discovering* reporters on the scene (or better yet: involved in the scene and with the people there), praise for these other researchers in the field! But something against the packs of long-distance dispatchers who confuse their profession as writers with that of a judge or even with the role of a demagogue and, working year after year in the same word and picture ruts, are, from their foreign thrones, in their way just as terrible dogs of war as those on the battleground. [Handke 1997, 74]

Handke explains that his decision to make the Serbian perspective the topic of his texts is a reaction to such coverage. Therefore he tries to focus on what he considers to be, in effect, hidden Serbian views and experiences.

It was principally because of the war that I wanted to go to Serbia, into the country of the so-called aggressors. But I was also drawn simply to see the country that of all the countries of Yugoslavia was least known to me and, perhaps because of the news reports and opinions about it, had come to attract me most strongly (not least because of the alienating rumors). Nearly all the photographs and reports of the last four years came from one side of the fronts or borders. When they occasionally came from the other side they seemed to me increasingly to be simple mirrorings of the usual coordinated perspectives—distorted reflections in the very cells of our eyes and not eyewitness accounts. I felt the need to go behind the mirror; I felt the need to travel into the Serbia that became, with every article, every commentary, every analysis, less recognizable and more worthy of study, more worthy, simply, of being seen. And whoever is thinking now: Aha, pro-Serbian! or Aha, Yugophile!—the latter a *Spiegel* [the German news magazine; *Spiegel*=mirror] word—need read no further. [Handke, 1997, 2-3]

Because the roles of attacker and attacked, of the pure victims and the naked scoundrels, were all too rapidly determined and set down for the so-called world public. [Handke 1997, 18]

Handke does not deny other positions (cf. I.4.). In the following quote he classifies his own attempt at establishing a Serbian perspective within the international discourse self-critically:

But isn't it, finally, irresponsible [...] to offer the small sufferings in Serbia [...] while over the border a great suffering prevails, that of Sarajevo, of Tuzla, Srebrenica, of Bihać, compared to which the Serbian boo-boos are nothing? Yes, with each sentence I too have asked myself whether such a writing isn't obscene, ought even to be tabooed, forbidden [...] Didn't the one who described the small deprivations (gaps between teeth) help to water down, to suppress, to conceal the great ones? [Handke 1997, 81f.]

In the text *A Journey to the Rivers. Justice for Serbia* Handke explains his approach. In the context of a longer passage criticising media coverage on the wars in Yugoslavia, for example, from the *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* or *Time* ("What kind of journalism is it ..." [Handke 1997, 75]), he writes:

I feel compelled only to justice. Or perhaps even only to questioning?, to raising doubts.
[Handke 1997, 76]

I.3 Some observers have written that Peter Handke has claimed that ‘the Serbs’ suffered more in the 20th century than ‘the Jews’, or as much.

Statements:

- “How can Handke not see that his comment, since retracted, that the ‘Serbs were bigger victims than the Jews’, can only be true if it refers to the confines of his own psychology and biography?” [Kuras 2019]
- “insisted [...] that the Serbs were suffering like the Jews under the Nazis.” [Hemon 2019]
- “compared the plight of the Serbs to the persecution of Jews” [Taylor 2019]
- “[...] likening the fate of the Serbs to that of the Jews under the Nazi regime.” [Traynor 1999]

Clarification:

Peter Handke has said, “the genocide against the Jews is the fundamental shock of my entire life” [Müller 2007].

However, in an interview with Serbian television on 18 February 1999, in French, Handke said:

What the Serbs have been going through for five, even more, eight years, no people in Europe has gone through in this century. There are no categories for that. Regarding the Jews, there are categories [. . .]. But with the Serbs, that's a tragedy for no reason. This is a scandal. [Handke 1999]

He corrected this statement shortly thereafter in a letter to the German magazine *Focus* that was published on 15 March 1999 and wrote [Handke, 1999]:

In my conversation in French with Yugoslavian television in Rambouillet, I once got muddled. When I said that there were categories on the subject of "Jews", that one could talk about them, I wanted to say just the opposite: it was not for the first time in my life that it happened to me that something that had been written down in my head at the moment that it orally came out wrong. (But you don't have to go to a psychologist for that.)

What has been written in me for a long time was the following: There are no categories on the subject of the (annihilation of the) Jews. The Jews are out of category. There is nothing to say about it (it is absolutely clear). But the people who suffered the most in this century (after the Jews) in Europe (through the Germans, the Austrians, the Catholic Ustaša Croats) are, for me, the Serbs. And what has been done to the Serbian people and what is being done now is beyond my understanding. Ita est.

He later repeated that correction several times [e.g., Handke, 2018g, 1013f; Handke 2018f, 1020].

I.4 Some observers have written that Peter Handke never doubted his positions or distanced himself from them

Statements:

- “views he had sustained over the years“ [Illić 2016]
- “many years of Handke writing about how the Serbs were misunderstood“ [Maass 2019a]

Clarification:

In the German media, but internationally as well, Handke’s statements have been repeatedly, intensively, and controversially discussed since 1996. Whole books and essays have been published just on documenting the controversies alone [see Deichmann 2017; Zülch 1996; Gritsch 2019].

Over the years, Handke has repeatedly tried to explain and revise earlier statements of his against accusations such as those to be found once again in the current debate. For example, in the articles “What I Did Not Say” and “Attempt at an Answer” in 2006 [Handke 2018f; Handke 2018g], starting with his corrections in *Focus* in 1999 [Handke, 1999; cf. I.3.].

In many of his texts, passages that are attributed to him as statements are, indeed, meant to be questions. For he does not trust the media (cf. I.2.), he feels it is important to be allowed to question what is being reported:

...which shows, nonetheless, how such broadcast reports and pictures transform and misinform themselves in the receptor. [Handke 2018c, 14].

I feel compelled only to justice. Or perhaps even only to questioning?, to raising doubts. [Handke 1997, 76]

I.5 Some observers have written that Peter Handke mocked the victims of war crimes or did not take their suffering seriously

Statements:

- “Handke makes fun of the victims, he mocks them.” [Brokoff 2019]
- “As for Mr. Handke, when a journalist asked him if he was concerned about the suffering in Bosnia, he retorted, ‘Stick your corpses up your ass!’” [Hemon 2019; the quote has since been corrected]
- “When critics pointed out that the victims' corpses provided evidence of Serb atrocities, the writer replied: ‘You can stick your corpses up your arse.’” [Irish Times 2019]

Clarification:

Handke never said “You can stick your corpses up your ass.” The German magazine *Der Spiegel* carefully traces the origin of this false quotation [Bayer et al. 2019].

During a reading tour for *A Journey to the Rivers* at Vienna’s Akademietheater on 18 March 1996 he was asked by the Austrian journalist Karl Wendl why he had travelled to Serbia and not to Bosnia. Karl Wendl proceeded to say that those journalists who had travelled to Bosnia, and Sarajevo in particular, were manifestly more concerned than Handke. To which Handke responded: “Stick your [concerns] up your ass.”³ It is important to know, however, that Handke never hesitated to provoke, starting with his early play “Publikumsbeschimpfung”⁴.

However, this should not suggest that Handke has mocked victims. In fact, quite the opposite is true [Handke, 2019]. Those texts of Handke’s referred to in the discussion as making fun of the victims or playing down their suffering [e.g. Brokoff 2019] only criticize what Handke regards as the media’s inadequate use of language and images in order to make the suffering visible to readers. Handke is arguing that most methods of “showing” suffering through text and image in the end fail to do so, and are, in reality, simply exploited for political or other purposes.

"Massacres", "concentration camps", "genocide", "ethnic cleansing", "mass rape", "Soldateska", "butchers", "pro-Serbian", and all the close-ups of "hands on barbed wire" (without barbs too), "tears on eyelashes", "old people with breaking eyes". Do the pictures from Bosnia at that time resemble those from the Macedonian, Albanian, or Montenegrin borders? No, the picture settings, the picture angles, the picture schemata all resemble one another. What are these truths that consist mainly of close-ups and hard-hitting words? [Handke, 2018h, 183]

For Handke, the media’s employment of techniques to illustrate individual suffering only on one side of the war is unbalanced and biased:

But didn’t the odd observer, even before the pictures of the refugee trek out of the Krajina, notice how the Serbian victims, almost invisible up to that point, as a rule appeared radically different in picture, sound, and print than the hecatombs of the others? Yes, in the photos, etc., of the couple of exceptionally news worthy Serbs, they seemed to me in fact to be “vanishing” and thus stood in the most conspicuous contrast to their comrades in grief and sorrow from the other remaining peoples of

³ *Peter Handke. Bin im Wald, kann sein, dass ich mich verspäte* (2016) Directed by Corinna Belz [Film]: Berlin Zero One Film. An excerpt of the 2016 film can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rebZAFYc6KI>, the quote begins at 02:20.

⁴ “Offending/ Insulting the Audience”.

the war. The latter, it was not uncommon to see, didn't exactly "pose", but they clearly had been shifted into a pose as a result of the visual or reported perspective: doubtlessly really suffering, they were shown in a pose of suffering. And during the years of war reporting, while continuously and really suffering, and no doubt more and more, they compliantly and visibly adopted the requested martyr faces and postures for the lenses and microphones of the international photographers and reporters, as instructed, directed, signalled ("Hey, partner!"). Who can tell me I am mistaken or even malicious when, looking at the picture of the unrestrainedly crying face of a woman in close-up behind the bars of a prison camp, I see also the obedient following of directions given by the photographer of the international press agency outside the camp fence; and even in the way the woman clings to the wire I see something suggested by the picture merchant? Yes, it may be that I am mistaken, the parasite is in *my* eye (the child, large in one photo, screaming in the arms of a woman, its mother?, and in the subsequent photo far away in a group, very peaceful in the arms of an other woman, its real mother?), but why haven't I ever seen such meticulously framed, cleverly devised, and seemingly set-up photographs—at least not here, in the "West"—of a Serbian war victim? Why were Serbs hardly ever shown in close-ups, and hardly ever alone, but almost always only as groups, and almost always only in the middle distance or background, just vanishing, and also, as opposed to their Croatian or Muslim cosufferers, hardly ever with their gaze directly and passionately into the camera, but rather in profile or gazing at the ground as if conscious of their guilt? Like a foreign tribe? Or as if too proud to pose? Or as if too sad for that? [Handke 1997, 20-21]

I.6. Some observers have written that Peter Handke ‘worshipped’ Slobodan Milošević and have criticized him for attending his funeral

Statements:

- “has taken a stand for Serbia and the country's leader Slobodan Milošević in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s” [Elam 2019]
- “And probably it would be hard to see the cheek-kissing with the president behind a genocide as a brilliant tribute to the equal value of all people.” [Fjellström 2019]
- “it is hard to grasp what could cause him to worship a monster like Mr. Milošević.” [Hemon 2019]
- “Mr. Milošević called for him to be a witness at his trial in The Hague, which Mr. Handke politely declined, though he visited his trial more than once.” [Hemon 2019]
- “The same person who was ready to make a statement on behalf of the war criminal Milošević as a witness for the defence before the International Court of Justice in Den Haag.” [Marinić 2019]
- “held a moving tribute at the funeral.” [Jensen 2019]

Clarification:

Peter Handke visited Milošević once during his incarceration in The Hague and was present at the trial. No other meeting is documented. He was then present at his funeral.

Handke describes his visit to Milošević in prison as follows:

Likewise I was not curious about the unknown 'friend' (Milošević) and did not want to know anything about him, at least not anything that might have had to do with the trial. I felt a little uncomfortable thinking that his legal advisor had merely persuaded the accused to meet me. [Handke 2018b, 338]

Once he was there, Milošević filled Handke's three-hour visit with a monologue [Struck 2013, 239]:

Only: who did Slobodan Milošević want to convince with his remarks? Why all the effort? [...] And now I ask myself, did Slobodan Milošević present his positions and words to me in such a detailed and fiery way because he would not be able to do so later in court? [Handke 2018b, 363f]

Handke criticizes the media's prejudgement of Milošević before the gathering of evidence by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia had been completed. **For Handke, the presumption of innocence, even in Milošević's case, can only be overturned by a judicial decision.** Handke formulates his doubts carefully, enquiringly, while also considering the possibility that he might be wrong:

Old-fashioned observer whose gaze is almost automatically focused on the one charged, on the accused, the guilty, and now, in the case of Slobodan Milošević, on the peculiarity of a defendant who, although the trial against him is supposed to last more than a year and a half, has already been convicted in advance. (But maybe I'm wrong?) [Handke 2018d, 278]

But Handke has also clarified:

Nowhere in my writings can I be found to have described Slobodan Milošević as “a victim” or “the victim.” [Handke 2018g, S. 1013]

Peter Handke comes to the conclusion that the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the trial against Milošević are a given and unavoidable:

Thanks to the reports of the preceding trials there [at the ICT] against (sic) "lesser" defendants as well as, and much more strongly, my direct participation in them as a spectator, even though I was sceptical about the court at Churchillplein, the building alone, its location and, in particular, its multifariously ordered, thoroughly hierarchical scenery, appeared to me as something, if not necessarily legitimate, given, unavoidable. [Handke 2018b, 336f.]

Handke also does not consider Milošević innocent:

Yes, my 'inner conviction' even goes so far that I see Slobodan Milošević not only before the wrong court, but also - not at all as 'innocent' (that, as I said, has nothing to do with me), but as 'not guilty in the sense of accusation', and just as much in the sense of the organization, of the trial, of its birth as well as the way it is being handled by the judges. [Handke 2018b, 356]

Handke stresses the need for a different journalistic approach to reporting about people like Milošević.

For if he [Milošević] is a form of evil (and a previously unknown one), that is something for a journalist to investigate, not attack and denounce. [Handke 2018c, 105]

Peter Handke was first named as one of more than sixteen hundred witnesses of the defense in the trial against Milošević. **He decided not to testify at the trial against Milošević:**

In the meantime, one thing is certain: I will not be a witness in this trial against Slobodan Milošević. I do not care to be. I do not want to be. I cannot be. [Handke 2018b, 331]

Milošević's funeral

Later, in 2006, Peter Handke attended Milošević's funeral. In his speech he said the following:

As a writer, I would have liked not to be alone here in Požarevac, but at the side of another writer, Harold Pinter, for example. He would have used strong words. I am using weak ones. But the weak shall be right here today. It is not only a day for strong words, but for weak ones as well. [From here on, I spoke Serbo-Croatian – composed on my own! –, translated back afterwards:] The world, the so-called world, knows everything about Yugoslavia, Serbia. The world, the so-called world, knows everything about Slobodan Milošević. The so-called world knows the truth. Which is why the so-called world is absent today, and not only today, and not only here. The so-called world is not the world. I know that I don't know. I do not know the truth. But I look. I listen. I feel. I remember. I ask. That is why I am here today, close to Yugoslavia, close to Serbia, close to Slobodan Milošević. [Handke 2006a]

The claim made in the *Nouvel Observateur* that Handke waved a Serbian flag at Milošević's funeral and laid roses on Milošević's grave is unfounded. [Struck 2013, 248]. Handke successfully sued these and other allegations made against him in the French newspaper [Herwig 2010: 250].

Handke himself began to have doubts at the funeral, for he by no means wanted to be associated with the nationalistic or rage-filled rhetoric of certain speakers:

Listening to one or the other of the previous speakers in Požarevac, however, my impulse was: no, not after the dashing general there, the politician screaming for revenge there, both of

whom wanted to fire up the crowd, which, with the exception of a few isolated fellow screamers, did not allow itself to be collectively swept away to any hate-filled or angry response [...]. [Handke 2006b]

Milošević had been the last president of the now defunct state. In an interview in 2007, Handke replies to the journalist's statement, "You wanted to say goodbye to the country of which he [Milošević] had been the last president," with a short: "That's it." [Müller 2007].

For Peter Handke, Yugoslavia was a special state supported by various language communities. Handke admired "their rather informal, for many even enthusiastic, coming together in 1918 with the end of the Habsburg Monarchy, for the first time ever in their own separate kingdom where the individual countries no longer needed to be shadowy colonies, their individual languages the whisperings of slaves" [Handke 2018a, 13]. He was particularly impressed by the participation of a large part of the Yugoslav population in resisting Nazi occupation during WWII, by people from very different worldviews joining together in the fight against fascism [see *ibid.*]. **With its anti-nationalistic and anti-fascist history, Yugoslavia had been important to Peter Handke**

Handke gave another reason for attending the funeral. He criticized the language of the media, which in his opinion had not adhered to the presumption of innocence.

It was language that took me there, the language of a so-called world that knew the truth about this "butcher," this "dictator" guilty "beyond all doubt," who was even to be blamed for his death, because he had "sidestepped a guilty verdict, the certainty of a life sentence"—why then, I asked, was there still need for a court to declare him guilty? Language of this kind was what impelled me to my mini-speech in Požarevac—language of this kind; not loyalty to Slobodan Milošević, but loyalty to that other language that embodies neither journalism nor prevailing ideas. [Handke 2018f, 1020f.]

II. Peter Handke's relationship to nationalism and fascism

II.1 Some observers have written that Peter Handke feels a kinship with nationalism and fascism

Statements:

- "With Peter Handke, Europe's right-wing forces have long had a stiff-backed advocate." [Jensen 2019]
- "a man who has openly supported ultranationalists and fascists in the Balkans" [Edin Kadribegovic, speaker of the union of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Norway, cited in Bach 2019]

Clarification:

Peter Handke has always vehemently renounced nationalism and fascism:

Handke is reluctant to enter into contemporary debates, but when asked by a journalist about the nationalist wave in Europe, he replies: "I distinguish between nationalism and patriotism. My country is Austria. When someone insults my mother, my brothers, my country without knowing them, I become a patriot. But I am absolutely anti-nationalist." [Bassets 2019]⁵

Already in an earlier interview Handke had said: "There is a difference between patriotism and nationalism. The patriot only reacts when their country is attacked," [Müller 2007]. Handke goes even further in his work:

But I never became a "Slovene", not even though I can read the language halfway in the meantime, a "half"; if today I see myself in something like a people, then it is that nobody⁶ – which can at times be salutary, at times hopeless (at those moments when I myself can no longer imagine the common bonds connecting that great nobody straying across the globe). [Handke 2018a, 10]

In his texts on Yugoslavia in particular Handke makes his opposition to German nationalism and fascism explicitly clear. German journalist Lothar Müller has called attention to this fact, writing: "The echo chamber of the debate on Handke's Yugoslavia texts included not only the wars of that time, but the massacres of the Second World War as well" [Müller 2019].

In *A Journey to the Rivers*, Handke mentions Kragujevac and Kraljevo, places where, during Nazi occupation, the Germans massacred thousands [see Müller 2019 and Handke 2018c, 73]:

And, in contrast, how conscious was the German (and Austrian) people of what it did and caused to be done repeatedly in the Balkans during the Second World War? Was it simply "known," or also really present, in the common memory, as was what happened with the Jews, or even only half so present, as it still is, from generation to generation, for the affected Yugoslavs [...] [Handke 1997, 78-79]

⁵ In the original Spanish: "Handke es reacio a entrar en debates contemporáneos, pero cuando un periodista le pregunta sobre la ola nacionalista en Europa, responde: 'Yo distingo entre nacionalismo y patriotismo. Mi país es Austria. Cuando alguien insulta a mi madre, a mis hermanos, a mi país sin conocerlos, me vuelvo patriota. Pero soy absolutamente antinacionalista'."

⁶ German: "wenn ich mich heutzutage in so etwas wie einem Volk sehe, dann in jenem der Niemande". This could also be translated as "if today I see myself in something like a people, then it is the people of nobodies".

This is precisely why he is wary of the new nationalism in the former Yugoslavia and, above all, the role of Germany there. He even wonders whether Germany of all countries should become involved in these conflicts, in what would be its first military mission since WWII and one without a UN mandate. Lothar Struck adds: “For a person like Peter Handke, who despises German National Socialism and its implications, it would be a historical atrocity for Germany of all countries, which occupied Yugoslavia during the Second World War and agreed to a pact with the Croatian fascists (and granted them a state of their own), to diplomatically destroy this state of Yugoslavia now” [Struck 2013, 33]. Handke reminds us that those crimes committed by the Germans during WWII can by no means be allowed to be forgotten:

After the war, Jean-Paul Sartre visited Kragujevac. It’s an industrial city, with maybe 200,000 inhabitants. During the war there high-school students and their teachers were taken hostage by the Germans and murdered. Sartre could sense that the entire country was enveloped in pain; all of Serbia is painful. That pain comes from the Germans, and that must burn into the Germans’ hearts. [Handke 1996]

II.2 Some observers have written that Peter Handke's texts incite hatred

Statements:

- "Handke's political leaflets are not literature – they are calls for hatred that reinforce prejudice." [Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, cited in Andersson 2019]

Clarification:

Not one of Peter Handke's texts incites hatred, on the contrary. Speaking about *A Journey to the Rivers* he has said:

My text is word for word a text for peace. Those who can't see that don't know how to read. [...] it is absolutely unnecessary for our intellectuals to go down there and join in hate. I certainly did not go there to join in hate. [Handke 1996]

Furthermore, he differentiates between anger, rage, and hate:

As a writer anger and rage are also tools of mine, but not hate. My articles on Serbia often had to do with the hate that I supposedly felt. Naturally, anger and rage play their part, but they are carried over into the game of language. [Handke 1996]

In *A Journey to the Rivers*, Handke explains what contribution art can make against hatred and for peace:

My work is of a different sort. To record the evil facts, that's good. But something else is needed for a peace, something not less important than the facts. So now it's time for the poetic? Yes, if it is understood as exactly the opposite of the nebulous. Or say, rather than "the poetic," that which binds, that encompasses—the impulse to a common remembering, as the possibility for reconciliation of individuals, for the second, the common childhood. How, then? What I have written here was meant for various German-speaking readers, and just as much for various readers in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, for experience tells me that that common recalling, that second, common childhood, will arise exactly through the detour of recording certain trivialities, at least far more lastingly than by hammering in the main facts. "At one place on the bridge there was, for years, a loose board." "Yes, did you notice that too?" "At one place under the church choir the steps began to echo." "Yes, did you notice that too?" Or simply to divert from the shared—shared by us all— captivity in the rhetoric of history and topicality into a much more productive present: "Look, now it is snowing. Look, children are playing there" (the art of diversion; art as the essential diversion). And thus I felt, there on the Drina, the need to dance a rock across the water toward the Bosnian shore (but then couldn't find one). [Handke 1997, 82f.]

III. Addendum: Peter Handke and his ex-partner Marie Colbin

Statements:

- “And now, with Handke, an author is being honoured, one whose former partner, Marie Colbin, in an open letter in 1999 accused of having kicked and beaten her” [Stokowski 2019]

Clarification:

To provide a full account of the background of this story: In 1999, close to a decade after separating from Peter Handke, Marie Colbin wrote an open letter in which she accused him of having hit and kicked her.⁷ Handke admitted this to the biographer Malte Herwig and explained his actions:

Then it comes to the story that's common knowledge. In 1999, around a decade after their split, Marie Colbin wrote an open letter. In it, she accuses Peter Handke of having hit her: “I can still hear my head smack the stone floor. Once again I can feel his hiking boot in my stomach and his fist in my face. No – you are no man of peace!” These three sentences were quoted worldwide. They fit all too well into the image of Handke the grim defender of Serbia. [...] Today she is angry that people reduced her article to the last three sentences. But she does not want to take it back either: “I verbally lashed out in rage.” [...] Did he really beat her? I ask Handke about it when we meet again in Chaville. “‘Beat’ is a stupid expression because it sounds self-righteous,” he responds. “It was self-defence. Furthermore, it wasn’t in the stomach, I gave her a kick in the ass. I think I gave her a good slap across the face. I just wanted to work, and that was impossible. At some point, I lost it. All the same, that wasn’t good. I didn’t like myself at all either. [Herwig 2010: 242]

⁷ Marie Colbin’s open letter appeared under the title “You fascist ideologue” in the Austrian newspaper *Format* on 24 May 1999.

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