Abstract: The author gives an inventory of Simon Wiesenthal’s advocacy for Bosnia during the 1992–1995 war. Though Wiesenthal played an active role in speaking up for Bosnia, his activism has been largely neglected in the existing literature. Based on primary sources at the Simon Wiesenthal Archive in Vienna, this article pieces together the story of how the famed Nazi hunter supported Bosnia-Herzegovina. Wiesenthal acted by speaking up about the atrocities in Bosnia, writing letters to influential decision-makers, and keeping Bosnia on the agenda. He supported a greater and more assertive American involvement to end the war and was a strong advocate of a UN war crimes tribunal, which materialized as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). By lending his voice and moral stature, Wiesenthal helped shape public opinion in favour of a more assertive international reaction to the war.

Keywords: Simon Wiesenthal, Bosnia, Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, advocacy

As Slobodan Milošević decided to strengthen his grip over Yugoslavia and cement Serbia’s dominant role in the multi-ethnic federation, Slovenia and Croatia headed for independence in 1991. After the European Economic Community (EEC) recognised the independence of these two successor states of Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter: Bosnia) faced two options: to seek independence as well or to remain a part of rump Yugoslavia. A referendum was held on 29 February and 1 March 1992. The turnout was around 64 %, with the vast majority supporting independence (Malcolm 1996). The EEC recognised Bosnia on 6 April and the United States (US) followed suit the next day. In response to the independence and recognition, the Yugoslav National Army and Bosnian Serb paramilitaries unleashed a war that lasted for three and a half years (Power 2002).

As the Bosnian Serb forces advanced, the beleaguered Sarajevo government sought international support. Significant diplomatic efforts were invested in
mobilizing support for Bosnia across the Atlantic in Washington, DC. In Europe, London and Paris were lukewarm on an international intervention in Bosnia, but a number of prominent intellectuals and activists across Europe became vocal advocates of a more assertive response to end the war (Drozdiak 1993). Simon Wiesenthal, the noted Nazi hunter based in Vienna, was one of these activist-intellectuals.

In the two biographies of Wiesenthal in the English language, there is scant mention of his activism on Bosnia. Hella Pick briefly noted that Wiesenthal “deserves credit for the fact that public opinion has become so receptive to the establishment of tribunals for war crimes in Bosnia and Rwanda” (1996, 318–9). Israeli historian Tom Segev’s book includes slightly more detail, noting that “when Yugoslavia broke up, Wiesenthal stood up for the rights of the Muslims in Bosnia.” Segev quotes from a letter Wiesenthal sent to US president Bill Clinton arguing that Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić should be put on trial. Segev also wrote that “Wiesenthal’s involvement in the protests over the Balkan wars stemmed from the terrible sense of helplessness he felt when he learned how the world had remained silent in the face of the extermination of the Jews” (2010, 314–5). Beyond these references to Wiesenthal’s activism on Bosnia, there is a void in the literature on how the famed Nazi hunter worked to end the war in Bosnia.

The objective of this article is to fill this gap by studying Wiesenthal’s advocacy on Bosnia in the early 1990s. Based primarily on research conducted at the Simon Wiesenthal Archive (SWA) at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI), this article pieces together this understudied aspect of Wiesenthal’s life and work. The four folders on Bosnia in the archive offer insights into how Wiesenthal viewed the war and what he undertook to end it. In the following, I argue that Wiesenthal’s support and activism was an important part of the international campaign in support of an American-led intervention in Bosnia. The transatlantic ad hoc campaign sought to marshal the support of the Western world into lifting the United Nations-imposed arms embargo on Bosnia, arming the Sarajevo government and providing humanitarian and other assistance to Bosnians. Comprising elected officials, journalists, and activist-intellectuals, this diverse coalition came together to stop the carnage in Europe at the close of the twentieth century. From liberal interventionists to neoconservatives, the Bosnia hawks set aside their differences to advocate for an assertive American action.

As the war raged in Bosnia for three and a half years, so did a battle of analogies and a war over terminology in the US and Europe. How the crisis in Bosnia came to be defined was to have a major impact on Western policy options. The Western debates over intervention in Bosnia coincided with the beginning of the American unipolar global moment and the search for a wider purpose of America’s role in the world. At odds were two competing discourses. The Balkan discourse in Western academia and public defined the region as Europe’s Other which was inherently violent and
Opponents of a Western intervention in Bosnia spoke of “ancient ethnic hatreds” influenced in no small measure by Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts* (1993). The underlying assumption of this discourse was that conflicts in the Balkans were inevitable, and hence any intervention was bound to be futile.

This reasoning dovetailed with the worldview of US president George H. W. Bush’s top officials. The Bush administration’s core foreign policy team included realists like secretary of state James Baker and national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, who saw no merit in intervening in Europe with no American interests at stake (Power 2002). Baker’s attitude to the war in Bosnia was most memorably summed up in his view that the US had no “dog in this fight” (Power 2002, 267). Joining the ranks of the realists were Vietnam veterans like chairman of the joint chiefs of staff Colin Powell, whose views were shaped largely by the American failure in Southeast Asia and a concomitant stance against humanitarian interventions (Power 2002, 262; Halberstam 2001, 35–36). On top of all this, an intervention in an election year in 1992 was not a politically sound idea.

On the other hand, supporters of a Western intervention in Bosnia saw a genocide being perpetrated and invoked the Genocide Convention. This discourse implied an ethical responsibility to act to stop the crime defined in the Convention (Power 2002, 261). The importance of a “frame of reference” in defining the crimes committed in Bosnia shaped not only the discourse but also policy options (Cushman and Meštrović 1996, 21). Contrary to the Vietnam analogy espoused by Powell, the Bosnia hawks invoked the Munich analogy, arguing that appeasement of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević was as misguided a policy as the Munich Agreement had been in 1938. The Munich analogy was also used by Bosnian prime minister Haris Silajdžić in public events in the US, declaring in one speech that a “never-ending chain of Chamberlains go to Belgrade” (Conflict in Former Yugoslavia 1993).

While the Munich analogy was used to criticize European mediators, the most powerful analogy was invoked in the late summer of 1992 with a view to generating a US-led intervention: the war in Bosnia also marked the first time that Holocaust analogies were frequently invoked in discussions on US foreign policy. Pro-interventionists particularly raised this in two cases: in the summers of 1992 and 1995. In 1992, Bosnian Serb-run concentration camps in northwestern Bosnia were discovered and reported upon by American and British journalists. The sight of white emaciated men behind barbed wires evoked memories of the Holocaust, and American Jewish organizations called on the US to act in Bosnia. As a presidential candidate in 1992, Bill Clinton referred to the lessons of the Holocaust in calling for an intervention. Three years later, the Bosnian Serb capture of the United Nations Safe Area of Srebrenica and the ensuing genocide of more than 8000 Bosniak Muslim men and boys similarly led activist–intellectuals to invoke the lessons of the Holocaust to
demand that the Clinton administration and the West act to end the carnage in Bosnia (Steinweis 2005, 277–281).

In the US, the pro-interventionist camp comprised and was crucially supported by the American Jewish community. Samantha Power wrote in *A Problem from Hell* how “Jewish survivors and organizations put aside Israel’s feud with Muslims in the Middle East and were particularly forceful in their criticism of US idleness” toward the war in Bosnia. Following the airing of footage of Bosnian Serb-run camps in 1992, the American Jewish community stepped in. Fifty years after “Never Again,” barbed wire was in Europe again. Power describes how *The Guardian*’s Ed Vulliamy, who was among the first to report on the camps, asked Holocaust Museum Director Walter Reich “if the phrase ‘echoes of the Holocaust’ was appropriate. ‘Yes’, Reich said, ‘very loud echoes’” (2002, 277–8).

Throughout the war, Holocaust survivors spoke up for Bosnia. Elie Wiesel became involved in the Balkans in July 1992. In London, president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Dobrica Ćosić had Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić promise in Wiesel’s presence to shut down the camps. Wiesel visited the Manjača camp in northwestern Bosnia and personally witnessed the inhumane treatment of Muslims and Croats. His visit to Sarajevo led him to observe that the Bosnian capital had become one of the “most devastated cities in the world.” In Belgrade, Wiesel met with Ćosić and tried to “convince him to end the policy of terror against the Bosnians” (Wiesel 2000, 388–96). The pledge by Karadžić and Ćosić to close the camps was not kept and this led Wiesel to write in *The New York Times* in February 1993 that “as far as Serbian authorities are concerned, I feel betrayed” (Wiesel 1993).

Then, on 22 April 1993, at the official dedication of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, Elie Wiesel turned to the newly elected president Bill Clinton: “Mr. President, I cannot not tell you something. I have been in the former Yugoslavia last fall. I cannot sleep since […]. We must do something to stop the bloodshed in that country” (Holocaust Memorial Museum Dedication 1993). Wiesel’s appeal carried particular weight and came to be seen as one of the most memorable appeals in support of Bosnia during the war. In addition to Wiesel, Holocaust survivors including California congressman Tom Lantos and executive director of the American Jewish Congress Henry Siegman continued speaking up for Bosnia during the war. The Holocaust analogy was also invoked in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) deliberations on Bosnia. During the Bosnian war, the Security Council convened formally more than 130 times to discuss Bosnia and passed more than 70 resolutions and almost 60 presidential statements on the situation in the country. A number of statements in the record of the Security Council made references to the Holocaust (Walling 2013, 95–7).

It is in this context of the pro-interventionist camp that Simon Wiesenthal’s role should be examined. While most of the advocacy for Bosnia was driven by and took
place in the US, Wiesenthal acted out of Vienna and sought to influence both European and American policymakers. Like Wiesel, he was a Holocaust survivor whose moral standing gave a particular weight to his views and helped generate public sympathy and support for the Bosnian cause. As the best-known Nazi hunter, Wiesenthal’s appeals in support of Bosnia in the early 1990s particularly resonated across Europe and the US and provided the beleaguered Bosnian people with much-needed international support.

**Reaching out to Wiesenthal**

For much of the war, a pro-Bosnian Austrian national named Pavo J. Urban played an active role in Austria and held the title of special envoy of the president of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Biographical details of Urban are sketchy. Some media reports indicate that he died at an advanced age in 2010 (Salkić 2020). Former diplomat Husein Živalj, who served as Bosnia’s ambassador to Austria in the 1990s, recalls that Urban introduced him to Wiesenthal to seek his support for Bosnia. Živalj recalls seeking an introduction to Wiesenthal in the hope that Wiesenthal’s voice could reach the US and help move its policy in a more decidedly pro-Bosnian direction.¹

In fact, a first letter was sent to Wiesenthal by Bosnian government officials as early as the beginning of the war. The Wiesenthal archive contains a letter from the mayor of Sarajevo Muhamed Kreševljaković dated 1 May 1992 which is likely the first letter of appeal to Wiesenthal as the city was being encircled. The mayor explained the conditions in the besieged Bosnian capital and the tone of the letter amounts to a dramatic appeal for help:

> I ask you to stop this (sic) atrocities. Don’t let this beautiful city and cosmopolite (sic), Olympic City become ashes […]. Help us to liberate roads and airports and if you are able to send us any kind of help in food and medicine, so our children, my fellow townsmen and wounded persons could survive, and not die of hunger. As a Mayor of this exhausted City, I beg you to do that as soon as possible.²

The above-mentioned Pavo J. Urban continued his appeals to Wiesenthal for assistance throughout the war. The Wiesenthal archive contains several of his letters. On 10 August 1992, Urban wrote to Wiesenthal informing him about the Bosnian Serb-run camps in the country. Urban stated that there were around a hundred such

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1 E-mail interview with Husein Živalj, 11 December 2021.
camps in Bosnia. The special envoy wrote that following British media reports, world attention was significantly made aware of these developments in Bosnia and that Serbs were forced to allow international inspection of twelve of these camps. Urban stated that the killing was ongoing and wondered why only twelve camps were inspected: “Dear Mr. Wiesenthal, I ask you to raise your voice against these crimes wherein it seems to me that calling the key institutions in the US would be most appropriate.”

Two days later, on 12 August 1992, Wiesenthal wrote to Urban to inform him that the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles had published an appeal protesting the killings in the former Yugoslavia: “I suppose this is supportive of your cause.” The next day, Pavo J. Urban thanked Wiesenthal, on behalf of Bosnian president Alija Izetbegović and himself, for his efforts to shake up the US public regarding ongoing atrocities in Bosnia, and for his brave involvement for humanity.

**Supporting Bosnia from Vienna**

Towards the end of 1992, Wiesenthal wrote to president-elect Bill Clinton. In the letter dated 11 December 1992, Wiesenthal wrote:

> I am able to write to you about Bosnia because American soldiers once liberated me from the Mauthausen concentration camp; they did so under the orders of another American President during the terrible years of World War II. Therefore, I urge you, Mr. President-Elect, to put the people of Bosnia high on your priority list, to engage yourself actively in finding a solution to a great human tragedy that finds innocent civilians in concentration camps and women and children murdered daily with no end in sight. In my view, the United States has always done the right thing and it should do so again with respect to Bosnia, whether by liberalizing the immigration quotas to take in more Bosnian refugees, or in forming an international coalition to end the aggression there.

Wiesenthal wrote a similar letter to outgoing president George H. W. Bush. Here, he wrote that he was aware that the president would be handing over to his successor in a few weeks, but that he was writing to him about Bosnia because he was still the

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American president and leader of the free world. The text of the letter to Bush was almost identical to the letter he had sent to Clinton.7

Wiesenthal sent a letter to psychologist and genocide scholar Israel W. Charny, enclosing his letters to Bush and Clinton.8 Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles sent a fax to Wiesenthal on 15 December 1992 congratulating him on the German and Austrian press coverage on the letters on Bosnia that Wiesenthal had sent to Bush and Clinton.9 The letters to the outgoing and incoming US presidents represented an important attempt to keep Bosnia on the American agenda and to shape a more assertive US involvement.

On 19 January 1993, Bush replied to Wiesenthal. The president reiterated his respect for Wiesenthal’s lifelong work on human rights. He then stated that the “situation there concerns us deeply, and the U.S. government holds the Serbian civilian and military authorities in Belgrade, in particular President Milošević, accountable for much of the violence.” He added that the US strategy had been to support the London peace conference and the efforts of co-chairmen Cyrus Vance and Lord David Owen. The president wrote that while a number of countries, including the US, had offered resettlement for former detainees and their families, the American policy was that general resettlement was not the answer to the conflict. Rather, “we must end the conflict, so these people can return in safety to their homes.”10

Closer to home, on the same day that he received Bush’s reply, Wiesenthal wrote to Austrian foreign minister Alois Mock on 19 January 1993. Mock had been very active on the issue of Bosnia throughout the war. Wiesenthal raised the issue of Bosnian refugees in Croatia and conveyed information from the Austrian state television broadcaster (Österreichischer Rundfunk, ORF) that the Croatian government had asked Bosnia to stop the fighting around the town of Gornji Vakuf or otherwise Bosnian refugees living in Croatia would suffer. He asked that the Austrian government react promptly.11 The foreign minister replied on 2 February 1993 stating that he had asked the Austrian embassy in Zagreb to check this information. He reiterated that the Austrian government rejected any kind of pressure on refugees

for political gain and would continue with this position towards the Croatian side if the media reports were corroborated.\footnote{SWA, VWI, B: KP, folder C-VI.1.: 5/1992–3/1993, Letter from Alois Mock to Simon Wiesenthal, 2 February 1993.}

Around this time, the Bosnian-born Austrian intellectual Smail Balić sent a letter to Wiesenthal on 27 January 1993 expressing his gratitude for his “fatherly engagement for the Bosnian people of Islamic tradition which is threatened with annihilation.”\footnote{SWA, VWI, B: KP, folder C-VI.1.: 5/1992–3/1993, Letter from Smail Balic to Simon Wiesenthal, 27 January 1993.} The archive in Vienna contains several letters from Balić. It was Urban, however, who was more continuously involved in working with Wiesenthal on Bosnia.

That Wiesenthal’s position on Bosnia was internationally recognized was evident from a letter that the president of the UN General Assembly, Stoyan Ganev, sent to Wiesenthal on 2 March 1993, inviting him to act as an honorary co-chair in an international event scheduled for May 1993, to benefit the women and children of Bosnia.\footnote{SWA, VWI, B: KP, folder C-VI.1.: 5/1992–3/1993, Letter from Stoyan Ganev to Simon Wiesenthal, 2 March 1993.} On 15 March 1993, Wiesenthal sent Ganev a thank you note. He wrote that as “someone who spent four years in different Nazi concentration camps, the tragedy that is now taking place especially in Bosnia is robbing me of my sleep and my peace of mind as I ponder how the people there—and especially the women and children—can best be helped.” Wiesenthal promised to try to be there for the event.\footnote{SWA, VWI, B: KP, folder C-VI.1.: 5/1992–3/1993, Letter from Simon Wiesenthal to Stoyan Ganev, 15 March 1993.}

A few days later, on 18 March 1993, Wiesenthal received another letter from Pavo J. Urban. Urban wrote of the suffering of children in Sarajevo and mentioned 6000 of them who had been wounded. He raised the idea that Wiesenthal’s institution establish an organization together with other famous and internationally recognized personalities to care for the children. From the Bosnian side, the required logistics could be carried out by the mayor of Sarajevo in cooperation with the Bosnian-Austrian society immediately after the end of the war.\footnote{SWA, VWI, B: KP, folder C-VI.1.: 5/1992–3/1993, Letter from Pavo J. Urban to Simon Wiesenthal (in German), 18 March 1993.}

The following month, on 18 April 1993, the Bosnian government vice president Zlatko Lagumdžija sent a fax to Wiesenthal explaining the situation in Bosnia and expressing his gratitude: “The people of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Government and myself are deeply aware of and grateful for your authoritative voice and your engagement.”\footnote{SWA, VWI, B: KP, folder C-VI.2.: 3/1993–2/1994, Fax from Zlatko Lagumdžija to Simon Wiesenthal, 18 April 1993.} Similarly, on 10 May 1993, the Austrian president
wrote to Wiesenthal expressing his appreciation for Wiesenthal’s engagement in tracking the crimes committed in Bosnia. The president pledged to continue advocating for an end of the bloodshed.\textsuperscript{18} It was clear that Wiesenthal’s voice on Bosnia was being recognized by both Bosnian officials and others.

Lifting the Arms Embargo

The archive also contains several more letters of correspondence between Wiesenthal and the Austrian foreign minister Alois Mock. On 31 May 1993, Mock thanked Wiesenthal for his letter of 7 May 1993 regarding the question of lifting the arms embargo imposed on the former Yugoslavia by the UN:

\begin{quote}
As you know, I have always been in support of the resolutions of the Security Council and the conclusions of the London Conference on Yugoslavia to be implemented by fully exhausting all available means including, if necessary, forcibly. As long as this does not happen, and the community of states allows the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina to win, then the international security mechanisms suffer an irreparable damage and violence will take the place of a peace conflict resolution.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Mock further wrote that he agreed with Wiesenthal that the “the lifting of the arms embargo for the purposes of increase of self-defense capacity of the Bosnian government would be definitely appropriate.”\textsuperscript{20} The UN had imposed an arms embargo on Yugoslavia in 1991 and the embargo stayed after Slovenia’s, Croatia’s, and Bosnia’s independence. The lifting of the embargo was a major objective of the Bosnian government and the letter from Mock indicates that Wiesenthal supported this as well.

Documenting the Atrocities

The Wiesenthal archive shows that Newsday’s reporter Roy Gutman corresponded with Wiesenthal. Gutman was an award-winning journalist, who uncovered the concentration camps in Bosnia and wrote eloquently for several American media outlets. In one letter, Gutman related that he took up Wiesenthal’s idea to write a book based on his reporting on Bosnia for Newsday. Gutman enclosed a selection of

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
his articles and asked Wiesenthal for advice on an introduction and an epilogue.\textsuperscript{21} Wiesenthal replied to Gutman on 4 June 1993, thanking him for the articles and expressing his happiness that Gutman had accepted Wiesenthal’s idea to write a book.\textsuperscript{22} Gutman’s groundbreaking work titled \textit{A Witness to Genocide} was published in September 1993, and he also received the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting that year for his work covering human rights abuses in Croatia and Bosnia.\textsuperscript{23} His reporting has been credited with drawing international attention to the camps in Bosnia and his exchange with Wiesenthal shows that the idea for his influential book had come from the latter, a fact virtually unknown until now.

**Further Corresponding with World Leaders**

In the summer of 1993, the situation in Bosnia was deteriorating and the capital Sarajevo was put under increasing pressure by Bosnian Serb forces. Its fall seemed imminent, and Wiesenthal again wrote to world leaders. First, on 22 June 1993, he sent a letter to German chancellor Helmut Kohl expressing his support for Kohl’s position that the arms embargo on Bosnia should be partially lifted for defensive weapons. He appealed to Kohl to continue with his line of policy.\textsuperscript{24} This is a position that Wiesenthal had previously conveyed to Mock.

Then, on 21 July 1993, Wiesenthal wrote to president Clinton urging him to help the besieged Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. This was Wiesenthal’s second letter to Clinton: “300,000 people in Sarajevo have no food, no water, no electricity and no medical supplies […] The city is in danger of becoming totally surrounded by the Serbian offensive. Please help these people by dropping down emergency supplies on Sarajevo from the air. Only the U.S.A. and its allies are capable of doing so.”\textsuperscript{25} Wiesenthal on 23 July 1993 forwarded to Helmut Kohl the letter he had sent to president Clinton, asking him to advocate for it with the US president.\textsuperscript{26} He thus tried to convey


the same appeal through additional channels. Aware of Wiesenthal’s efforts and their impact, Bosnia’s president Alija Izetbegović on 23 July 1993 thanked him for all his efforts to support Bosnia.27

**International Appeals**

The Wiesenthal archive contains an interesting document that probably emerged around this time. Titled “Appeal to Former Deportees and to the Members of the Resistance Against the Nazis,” it is signed by Wiesenthal but is not dated. The appeal states that the “silence of the world concerning the tragedy in Sarajevo is a crying shame. As one who survived the Nazi regime and spent a number of years in bondage in a ghetto and in concentration camps, I can no longer understand this silence […].” Wiesenthal described the worsening situation in Sarajevo: “I appeal above all to the people in the many different countries who suffered as I did—and to their children and families, if my friends are no longer alive. Please do something […].” There is no date to this document, but it was likely written sometime in the summer of 1993 when the Bosnian Serb forces advanced to capture the Bosnian capital.

As Sarajevo was under increasing pressure, Wiesenthal sent a letter to senator Dianne Feinstein on 28 July 1993. He apologised for writing late because he was “terribly busy trying to find a way of helping the Bosnian Moslems.” Wiesenthal wrote that

as someone who spent many years in concentration camps, I feel it my duty to do something for others who are suffering so terribly as the Bosnians are. I have given interviews on television and for the newspapers; I spoke on behalf of the Bosnians at the human rights conference in Vienna, and, most recently, wrote a letter to president Clinton […]. The military aim of the Serbs seems to be to starve out the 350,000 population of Sarajevo […]. If you see any possibility of doing something, please do it.29

Wiesenthal ended his letter by recalling Sarajevo’s cultural heritage: “The Bosnian Moslems have lived together with Jews in harmony for over 500 years, and Sarajevo has long been a model of a multicultural city.”30 Two days later, on 30 July 1993, senator Feinstein replied:

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Your work with, and on behalf of, the Bosnian Muslims is to be commended and your presence lends the tragic situation there a sorely needed glimmer of humanity. [...] as you well know, aggression of this nature rarely ends until it is stopped by the international community. To this end, I have supported the concept of a “no-fly-zone” and [...] commended President Clinton’s recent efforts to forge an international coalition to enforce that zone. [...] To you, Simon, I say be careful and please know that your voice, and the cries of Bosnian Muslims, have not fallen on deaf ears. We in the United States and in Congress hear you and hope that this tragic situation can soon be resolved.

In response, Wiesenthal sent another letter to senator Dianne Feinstein, dated 18 August 1993, in which he expressed his gratitude that they agreed on Bosnia. Noting that president Clinton’s recent statements indicated that he wanted to help the Bosnians, Wiesenthal added that “(w)ithout this commitment on the part of the U.S.A., the Serbs would never have retreated from the two mountains surrounding Sarajevo.” He also suggested that US welfare agencies such as CARE, the American Red Cross, and others could open offices in Sarajevo and thereby reflect the humanitarian aspect of the mission.

During the same weeks that this correspondence took place, Wiesenthal on 30 July 1993 gave an interview to the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit, in which he reiterated his appeal to Clinton that the US drop supplies to citizens of Sarajevo. He emphasized that the Sarajevans’ situation was as dramatic as it had been in the eastern Bosnian towns of Goražde and Srebrenica a few weeks earlier. He also stated that he saw the Croatian leadership as significantly involved in the ethnic “cleanings” in Bosnia. In this interview, Wiesenthal thought it probable that the Serbian and Croatian presidents Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tudman were implementing a secret plan to carve up Bosnia: “Bosnian Muslims have always been anti-fundamentalist and have always seen themselves as European. That is why their disappearance would be a real shame for Europe.”

In another interview, titled “Sarajevo Must Not Starve,” Wiesenthal was asked what prompted his appeal to president Clinton: “It is simply my despair in the face of the need of the people but maybe also my helplessness which I cannot leave as it is. I want to help save the people of Sarajevo from starvation.” He repeated his view that America, as the sole remaining superpower, had a great responsibility: “I cannot prove it, but I am certain there are talks between Tudman and Milošević about the division of Bosnia.” He added that sanctions against Croatia as a tourism-oriented country would probably be more effective than those against Serbia, which was

predominantly agrarian and could survive autonomously for longer. Wiesenthal further stated that “the Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles has contacted all senators and congressmen […] around 70 of them support the request of immediate air supplies to Sarajevo.” It is noteworthy that twice in 1993 Wiesenthal repeated his feeling about plans to divide Bosnia.

His appeals were reaching top decision-makers. On 8 August 1993, Austrian foreign minister Alois Mock wrote to Wiesenthal that he supported his appeals to president Clinton and other politicians and governments:

> It is shocking how the rage of ideologues of ethnic purity can go unpunished and destroy the capital of a European country in a barbaric and cowardly way and to kill its citizens. […] Your efforts to save Sarajevo and with it the whole of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian togetherness of peoples and religions is deserving of my unlimited admiration and support.\(^{35}\)

In yet another interview given around this time, Wiesenthal reiterated his appeal amid the gravity of the situation in Sarajevo once more: “If you have suffered yourself and you see these images, then you know something needs to happen,” adding that the attackers were starving people so as to force the Bosnian government into accepting a truce dictated by the attackers. Wiesenthal repeated that the Americans should drop supplies to Sarajevo and there should be more supply convoys, whether the Croats let them through or not. Asked if he supported lifting the arms embargo, Wiesenthal replied:

> Yes, the Serbs have enough weapons. The Croats received money from diaspora Croats to buy weapons. The Muslims are also trying this, but the Croats are stopping the transports and keeping more than half of the weapons as customs taxes. […] If Bosnia as a UN member simply disappears, then this is proof that UN membership is no protection for a country.\(^{36}\)

The gravity of the situation in Bosnia in 1993 is thus clearly reflected in Wiesenthal’s assessment of the situation.

### Appeals for Sarajevo

On 21 September 1993, the Bosnian special envoy in Austria, Pavo J. Urban, wrote to Wiesenthal once more: “I am asking you again wholeheartedly and urgently to use

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your global reputation and authority as a humanist to prevent Sarajevo from freezing to death.” Urban wrote of the terrible conditions in the beleaguered city and, specifically, suggested that NATO provide the city with heating materials: “The impetus for such an activity should come from your organizations in the US, but it should come promptly.”

Then, towards the end of the year, on 28 December 1993, in the face of yet another winter under siege in Sarajevo, Urban asked Wiesenthal to use his international reputation to spearhead an international media campaign for Bosnia. Specifically, he asked that the following should be insisted on: (i) an immediate end to the shelling of Sarajevo; (ii) secure transport of food supplies and medication through Serb and Croat territories; and (iii) the re-establishment of electricity and water supply in the city. Thanking him for his unique support of Bosnia, Urban concluded that “the Western world cannot allow itself to completely negate a campaign spearheaded by Simon Wiesenthal.”

1994: a Year of Limited Activism?

While Wiesenthal was very active between late 1992 and the end of 1993, it is interesting that the Vienna archive has only one document on Wiesenthal’s activities related to Bosnia in 1994. It is impossible to discern the exact reasons for the lack of a paper trail for 1994. One potential explanation could be that the Bosniak–Croat Federation was established in March 1994, which reduced the scale of the conflict. Also, the situation in Sarajevo that year was not as dire as in 1993. For 1994, the archive holds only Wiesenthal’s message for a pro-Bosnia rally that was scheduled to be held at Trafalgar Square London on 12 February 1994:

The crimes committed by the Nazis usually happened under concealment, and many Germans could later say they knew nothing about them. Today, however, thanks to the media, we see pictures of the crimes committed in Bosnia almost at the same time as they occur […]. Those who are committing these crimes have merely been fought with words for almost two years now […]. It must finally be demonstrated that there can be no neutrality in the face of such crimes.

1995: Renewed Advocacy

The Vienna archive has important documents on Wiesenthal’s activities in 1995, indicating that he returned to the issue of Bosnia during that year. On 10 January 1995, he received a note from special envoy Urban, urging him: “Dear and Honourable Mr. Engineer, you are the only person in the world whose voice is heard by persons of influence,” while informing him of the collected food supplies in Germany for Bosnia, the transport of which was declined by the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia. Writing in the midst of winter, Urban pleaded: “I can imagine that an appeal to Clinton and [US senate majority leader] Bob Dole at the same time to organize the transport and the protection of these food supplies by the US military would fall on open ears and this should be done as promptly as possible as hundreds are dying today and in a few days it could be thousands.”

The mentioning of Bob Dole, who had become Senate Majority Leader in early 1995 following the Republican victory at the 1994 midterm elections, was important, as Dole was one of the most influential supporters of Bosnia in the US. He would later support Clinton in deploying US troops to Bosnia in December 1995 to implement the Dayton peace agreement (Karčić 2021).

Two months later, on 16 March 1995, Wiesenthal sent an interesting letter to US ambassador to Austria Swanee Hunt, in which he mentioned that he heard how “the Croats are demanding that Sven Alkallai (sic) be removed from his post as [Bosnian] ambassador to the USA and that a Croat be given this very important position.” Wiesenthal wrote that he did not know Alkalaj personally but that he belonged to a respected Sephardic family that had come to Sarajevo centuries ago, after the expulsion of Jews from Spain: “Sven Alkallai (sic) is the only Jewish diplomat in Bosnia and from what I have heard he is doing a very good job. I am convinced that if Alkallai has to leave his post in Washington only because the Bosnian Croats want it for themselves this will certainly not be of profit to the federation.” Concluding, Wiesenthal wrote that he wanted to inform the US ambassador due to her close involvement with the Federation. Sven Alkalaj is a Bosnian-Jewish diplomat who served as Bosnia’s ambassador in Washington, DC, during the war. He is considered to have done a good job representing multi-ethnic Bosnia. Though it is not clear from Wiesenthal’s letter which Croat politicians were calling for Alkalaj’s removal, it is likely that they sought the coveted post in the US for one of their own. Wiesenthal had been critical of Croatia and Bosnian Croat policies in his interviews in 1993, and this

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letter indicates that he continued to be so in spring 1995. This is the only recorded instance of Wiesenthal getting involved in Bosnia’s matters of personnel choices during the war.

Given his international reputation, Wiesenthal was frequently contacted by pro-Bosnian groups and individuals. For example, the archive in Vienna contains several letters exchanged between Wiesenthal and Tilman Zülch of the Society for Threatened Peoples. For instance, on 12 July 1995, Zülch informed Wiesenthal of an upcoming International Congress on the Documentation of Genocide in Bosnia organized by the Society for Threatened Peoples International along with the University of Sarajevo Institute for the Documentation of Crimes Against Humanity and the Kuala Lumpur Human Rights Group for Bosnia, to be held in Bonn at the end of August and beginning of September. In very politely formulated language and hinting at Wiesenthal’s international prestige, Zülch expressed his hope that Wiesenthal might consider attending the congress. He invited him to be a patron of the congress and to send a message to the attendees. Zülch emphasized that, for most of the participants, Wiesenthal had been a role model for more than four decades. Given that he had managed to secure the involvement of many prominent personalities in the congress, it was only logical he would attempt to invite Wiesenthal. In the aftermath of the genocide in Srebrenica, on 20 July 1995, Wiesenthal replied to Zülch, welcoming his initiative: “The documentation of the genocide in Bosnia is eminently important.” Wiesenthal agreed to act as a patron of the congress, to send a message, and to attend, his health permitting. He attached a copy of the letter he had sent to president Clinton. Wiesenthal informed Zülch of the contents of the letter, to declare the Bosnian-Serb political and military leader Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić perpetrators.

In mid-1995, Wiesenthal became involved in the European Action Council for Peace in the Balkans, an outfit of influential individuals who came together in 1994 to support Bosnia. The archive reveals that Wiesenthal was one of twenty-nine members of the Advisory Committee. It contains letters and memos sent by the Council’s executive director Mabel Wisse Smit to Wiesenthal, explaining the Council’s positions on Bosnia. Wiesenthal’s letter of 18 February 1994 is also preserved, in which he agreed to serve on the Advisory Committee and confirmed his acceptance of its direction and purpose.

Srebrenica and Its Aftermath

As mirrored by the documents in his archive, Wiesenthal had been supportive of Bosnia since late 1992, but if there was one event which shaped and emboldened his activism further, it was Srebrenica. After the capture of the UN safe area on 11 July 1995 and the ensuing genocide, Wiesenthal stepped up his advocacy for punishing the perpetrators. On 19 July 1995, a few days after the fall of Srebrenica, he wrote a powerful letter to US president Clinton:

The events in Bosnia, as the media portray them to us today—with all their crimes against humanity, the ethnic cleansing, the slaughter [sic] of civilians regardless of age, the rape of muslim [sic] women—while they do not constitute a Holocaust, repeat many of its horrible details [...]. The two persons mainly responsible for these occurrences in the former Yugoslavia—namely Radovan Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic—do not pay the slightest attention to the demands of the United Nations [...]. Today, thank God, the United States of America is the only superpower in the world. I believe that the condemnation of Karadzic and Mladic—verbal, at first—and the threat to put them before a tribunal—would have an effect. The United States could, I hope, put an end to the deeds of these two men and their soldiers by public [sic] announcing that the crimes they committed will not remain unpunished. This letter is being addressed to you by a Holocaust survivor who, after four years of suffering in the ghettos and concentration camps, was liberated by the American Army.46

In this letter, much as in the letter he had sent to Clinton in late 1992, Wiesenthal appealed to the US and its unique position as a superpower to take steps to end the war in Bosnia. In both letters, Wiesenthal emphasized that he was addressing the American president as a Holocaust survivor.

Another two days later, on 21 July 1995, Wiesenthal wrote to Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. He commended Rabbi Hier for the decision to place, on that very day, a full-page ad in The New York Times, expressed his hope that the ad would also be placed in other newspapers, and offered a specific suggestion: “I’d ask you to put in—if possible—the names of the two persons responsible, RADOVAN KARADZIC AND RATKO MLADIC—into the ‘letter to the President’. The title is perfect: Enough is Enough!” [emphasis in the original].47 The “letter to the President” that Wiesenthal mentioned here was addressed to president Clinton, dated 20 July 1995: “Like all Americans, the 380,000 constituent families of the Simon Wiesenthal Center are outraged by the scope of the human rights violations in Bosnia,” adding that they endorsed “the request made to you by Simon Wiesenthal this week: that the United States publicly name those individuals

responsible for the policy of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity and state unequivocally that these individuals will be brought before the bar of justice, however long it takes.”

The twenty-five signatories of the letter urged the president to take immediate action to end the war in Bosnia.

President Clinton’s reply to Wiesenthal’s letter of 19 July bears the date of 14 August 1995. He noted that Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić had been charged with genocide and crimes against humanity and reiterated his support for the UN-established war crimes tribunal: “The United States has never been slow to condemn the conduct of the Bosnian Serb army or its leadership. Actions perpetrated in the course of the conflict in Bosnia have brought back to Europe the type of barbarity we all hoped the Nuremberg trials would put behind us forever.” He added that—in the aftermath of the capture of the towns of Srebrenica and Žepa—the US was prioritizing the alleviation of suffering of survivors and a search for the missing. He also conveyed to Wiesenthal that the US was undertaking a major effort aimed at finding a political solution to the conflict. A scarce month later, on 11 September 1995, Wiesenthal wrote to the chief prosecutor of the United Nations International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, Dr. Richard Goldstone, enclosing his correspondence with Clinton.

The Wiesenthal archive also contains a message dated 31 August 1995 that Wiesenthal sent to the Congress on the situation in Bosnia organized in Göttingen, Germany, by the Society for Threatened Peoples. He recalled his personal experiences and suffering and stated: “This Bosnian state has been recognized by the whole world as a full member and now there should be peace whose victim is Bosnia. That is an unjust peace!” He reiterated his previously expressed belief regarding a Milošević–Tuđman agreement on the carving up of Bosnia and pointed to Tuđman’s drawing of a new map of the region with the border between Serbia and Croatia running through Bosnia. He emphasized that “the Bosnians identify with Islam but, in their origin, they are neither Arab nor Turkish, they primarily have Slavic ancestors and became Moslems first forcibly but then out of their free will. Over the centuries, they have proven that they can live peacefully with Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Jews.” Wiesenthal once again reiterated the imperative of toppling and then prosecuting in front of an international court those responsible for massacres, such as Karadžić and Mladić.

In view of Wiesenthal’s significant contribution to the Bosnian cause, Bosnia’s president Izetbegović wrote to Wiesenthal on 1 September 1995 once again thanking him for his efforts: “Friends like you, with your strong sense of moral conviction and a deep personal understanding of our plight, because of the painful memories of the Holocaust, are what helps us continue our just struggle. […] Allow me also to recognize your special efforts which have contributed to making the International War Crimes Tribunal a working reality.” Izetbegović also conveyed how special envoy Pavo J. Urban spoke highly of Wiesenthal’s support for Bosnia.

Later that month, on 20 September 1995, the Bosnian ambassador to Austria Husein Živalj and Pavo J. Urban, on behalf of Izetbegović and themselves, congratulated Wiesenthal on the upcoming Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and thanked him once more for all his efforts:

The Bosniaks owe you eternal gratitude. Because of your own horrible experiences with national socialism, you have immediately recognized that the tragic events in Bosnia are no civil war but an aggression motivated by racial hatred and religious intolerance […]. The fact that the attention of the great American people has been drawn to the situation and the true background of the Bosnian tragedy is primarily your historical achievement […]. You have erected a monument to yourself in the hearts of the Bosniaks, which will be preserved by historiography for all eternity.

Two days later, on 22 September 1995, Izetbegović met with Wiesenthal in Vienna where, as former Bosnian ambassador in Vienna Husein Živalj recalls, Izetbegović took the chance to personally thank Wiesenthal for his support and invited him to visit Bosnia. Thus, the letter of the Bosnian ambassador, the three letters from Bosnia’s president Izetbegović as well as Izetbegović’s visit to Wiesenthal in Vienna in 1995 reflect the Bosnian government’s gratitude for Wiesenthal’s support. Soon after the war ended, the University of Sarajevo decided to award Simon Wiesenthal an Honorary Doctorate Degree. This decision of 3 January 1996 was made in order to honour Wiesenthal for his “fight against fascism and aggression on the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

54 E-mail interview with Husein Živalj, 11 December 2021.
Simon Wiesenthal’s involvement in advocating for Bosnia during the 1992–1995 war had been an overlooked aspect of both his life and of international reactions to the war. Now, with access to Wiesenthal’s papers on Bosnia at his archive in Vienna, it has become possible to piece together the story of how the famed Nazi hunter supported Bosnia in the 1990s.

In 1992 and 1993, Wiesenthal spoke up for Bosnia with the objective of keeping the war on the agenda of decision makers in the US and in Europe. He appealed both to US presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton. When the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo was about to be overrun by Bosnian Serb forces in the summer of 1993, Wiesenthal stepped up his engagement. However, concerning his activities in 1994, there is less of a paper trail in the Vienna archive. What is evident from the collection is that Wiesenthal decidedly stepped up his engagement once more after the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995. He was particularly eloquent in calling for the perpetrators—and specifically Bosnian Serb leaders Karadžić and Mladić—to be prosecuted before an international tribunal. Taken together, Wiesenthal’s activism during the Bosnian war represents an important mosaic in the study of the variety of international responses to the war in the early 1990s.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to the Simon Wiesenthal Archive (SWA) at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) and particularly to Dr. Kinga Frojimovics for facilitating my research. I would like to thank Nina Newell for translating the documents from German, Dr. Ehlimana Memišević for checking a source and Mirnes Ibrić and Umihana Mahmić for information on the University of Sarajevo honorary doctorate for Simon Wiesenthal. Finally, I thank the Alija Izetbegović Museum in Sarajevo for providing a photograph of the Bosnian president’s meeting with Wiesenthal in 1995.

References


Bionote

Hamza Karčić is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo. He has researched and published on foreign policy, diplomatic history, and international influences in Southeastern Europe.