

Protest letter of Peter Lippman for not request to proceed with the invitation of Mr. Michael Parenti (supporter of war criminal Slobodan Milosevic and genocide denier) as guest speaker for the Peace Center's 31 May fundraising event

To the board of the San Jose Peace and Justice Center,

I write to join with those who have contacted you requesting that you cancel the appearance of Michael Parenti later this month.

I have worked, studied, and traveled in the former Yugoslavia for over thirty years. I lived in Serbia for a year before the war, and in Bosnia for two years soon after the war. Since that stay I have returned to the region a dozen times. I have worked in humanitarian relief and, more extensively, I have researched grassroots human rights campaigns. I speak the local language fluently. I have written at length about the situation I found there; please see <http://balkanwitness.glypx.com/journal.htm> .

In 1997 I was volunteering for a relief organization in Tuzla , northeastern Bosnia . Many surviving widows from Srebrenica took refuge in Tuzla , so I often had occasion to meet some of them. Once, a widow looked at me and cried, “I had six sons!” The look of pain and mourning in her eyes burned into me.

From that experience, and many similar ones, I feel that I owe it to the people of Bosnia to make sure that the truth is told and to advocate for justice for the victims of that war.

As activists who value human rights and who pursue justice, that is the responsibility of all of us. Mr. Parenti has participated in the denial of the concerted campaign of atrocities committed in Yugoslavia by ultra-nationalists. His pronouncements on this subject have served to confuse the issue and to distract people’s attention away from the plight of the victims of nationalist aggression. It is in this light that I support the request for cancellation of the Parenti event.

To back up a little: it is customary for us busy activists to seek information and analysis from trusted commentators in the broader peace and justice movement. However, as other writers have recently expressed to you, in the case of the breakup of Yugoslavia our respected analysts have, in many cases, missed the mark.

People such as Mr. Parenti, Noam Chomsky, and others failed to understand the cause of the breakup of Yugoslavia : an extreme nationalist movement, led by Serbian expansionists and then answered by similar nationalists in Croatia . The conflict that tore Yugoslavia apart, displaced at least three million people, and resulted in the deaths of around 100,000 in Bosnia-Herzegovina alone, was not simply a “civil war.” It was, to a large extent, planned by power-hungry demagogues such as Slobodan Milosevic.

In the early 1990s the conflict seemed to many Americans to be far away and very complicated, so many progressives either ignored it or settled on various simplistic analyses involving the phrases “civil war” or “ancient ethnic hostilities” – none of which came close to clarifying the situation.

This confusion has produced grievous results in that it left it to people such as Mr. Parenti to analyze the situation for us, in the process distorting the truth beyond recognition, as explained to you by previous writers.

I submit to you that there are times when it is appropriate to be impartial and let all voices be heard. There are other times when there can be no compromise between the need to expose and safeguard the truth, on one hand, and the freedom of speech of those whose message is destructive and, essentially, hateful. Now is one of those latter times when we must not make this compromise. Mr. Parenti has crossed the rhetorical line into atrocity denial, along the way trampling on the memory of the tens of thousands who were raped, tortured, imprisoned, and murdered for the profit of a few warlords.

Sincerely yours,

Peter Lippman