ABSTRACT. The paper explores how language underscores our appreciation for international activism. An account of the tension between activism and international activism, especially in the context of the declarative and “true” character of the terms is offered. This is achieved through examining “word games” pertaining to the Balkan crisis with such expressions as “democratic revolution”, “Serbian nationalism”, “revenge killing”, and “reverse ethnic cleansing.” The analysis points to a non-descriptive attitudinal character of such phrases. Consequently, two defensive strategies are suggested for international activists. First, they should get informed on the history of the region as much as possible, becoming avid students of recent and more historically removed events of importance. And second, they must make sure they do not fall prey to the on-going word games that can obscure their overall goal and purpose. Hence, the need to develop a proper ethics of international activism, which we would be unable to do if we were to ignore massive opportunity for manipulation residing in the attitude that humanitarian workers are modern day saints. International law, whatever its final shape, must also take into account findings detailed here. All of this is linked to (international) activism and the double-edged sword it embodies: peace initiatives yet foreign invasions.

INTRODUCTION

Well-meaning activists from afar wanting to immerse themselves in helping activities in a removed region must arm themselves with two defensive strategies. First, they should get informed on the history of the region as much as possible, becoming avid students of recent and more historically removed events of importance. Second, perhaps more difficult, they must make sure they do not fall prey to the on-going word games that can obscure their overall goal and purpose. The two tasks are interconnected. The first task is more or less a matter of personal, intellectual integrity and decency while the second is in many ways much more exigent and often quite a tricky matter. Though there is no guarantee, it becomes increasingly unlikely for activists to fail in the second sense should they properly pursue the task of acquiring sufficient erudition.¹ This paper

¹ For example, nobody knowledgeable of the history of the Balkans, and what regions were inhabited for centuries by what ethnic groups could write the following rebuke of the UN Secretary General, proposing a more “noble” goal for activists:

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is a modest contribution to the latter task with a treatment of specific examples. It is an attempt to engage in what might be termed the ethics of international activism by focusing on the interplay between pro-actively describing foreign conflicts and the limitations placed by international law on (powerful) countries that might want to take strategic advantage from such conflicts.

Specifically, I shall examine the following points. First, I explore what is understood by activism in general and “international activism” in particular. Second, I point to the declarative character of what activism is understood to be. Third, I show that there exists an important tension between the declarative and true character of this activity. Fourth, I describe difficulties in confronting this tension as they appear in two forms: first, for activists themselves and, second, for their critics. For, the latter are in an awkward position of critically examining something that they must, at the same time, recognize as in principle morally meritorious. Certainly, ‘helping’ (international) activism is something even the critics must praise on a declarative level – and clearly it would be truly praiseworthy if it were in reality the sort of activity it presents itself as being. Finally, I shall offer two examples of how easy it may be to mislead international activists to engage with vigor on behalf of questionable policies and with detrimental consequences. In particular I shall try to expose several of these “word games” pertaining to Yugoslavia, as they have played out in the Western politics, media, and even scholarship affecting deeply what peace activists may have (perhaps mistakenly) found to be the appropriate course of their action.² I shall proceed by focusing on problematic phrases

² For a characteristic example of deliberately misleading, if not malicious, “scholarly” work in this respect see Thomas Cushman and S. G. Mestrovic (Eds.) This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia (New York: New York University Press, 1996) as brilliantly exposed by Robert M. Hayden in his review aptly entitled “The Tactical Uses of Passion on Bosnia,” in Current Anthropology Vol. 38, No. 5, pp. 924–926. Quite a few