IN MEMORIAM - Special Report

(Left), Yossef Bodansky, (center) Darko Trifunovic and (right) Gregory Copley at Belgrade Security Conference

Yossef Bodansky, a Uniquely Talented and Courageous Strategic Thinker, Leaves Us

Analysis. By Gregory R. Copley, Editor, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs.

Yossef Bodansky often seemed to make life as difficult for himself as he did for those who disagreed with his sweepingly insightful and yet granular analysis of world events. Even those who loved him and often agreed with him were not spared his perpetual and humorous pessimism.

When a colleague agreed with him, he would invariably continue to argue: "No, you don't understand. It's even worse than that …"

And yet he was not a prophet of doom; he merely read the winds. His trend analysis invariably showed the sunlit uplands somewhere in the future, but it was a future often nuanced with the changes which he could see or foretell. He refused to conform with comforting, popular narratives. Indeed, popular narratives or even accepted wisdom on sophisticated topics were rarely where he found comfort, or even an echo of his thinking.

The result was that he stirred many critics.

He will continue to do so; his writings will retain their traction because of their enduring themes.

But he will write no more. He passed away in the early hours of December 5, 2021, in his home on the outskirts of Baltimore, Maryland, in the US. His father, Shmuel, died in Israel only two weeks earlier, bringing to a head several years of considerable hardship for "Seffy" and his immediate family: wife Lena and daughter Masha.

Seffy Bodansky was born in Israel on May 1, 1954, to a family with Ukrainian Jewish roots; so he was 67 when he died. He was, at that time, Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association (ISSA), and a Senior Fellow of Strategic Studies at ISSA, while continuing his position as Senior Editor

of the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications. He was Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare of the US House of Representatives from 1988 to 2004.

He met his wife, Lena, in Israel after a combat incident (the blast from an RPG-7 which shattered his jaw) had pushed him out of an active military situation into a research position. The health consequences of the blast never left him. And neither did Lena, who, with Masha, was with him at the end.

Seffy began his association with ISSA and *Defense & Foreign Affairs* as the Cold War ended, at first speaking at our *Strategy* conferences. His first article for *Defense & Foreign Affairs* was in March 1993, and was, predictably, a harbinger of writings to come. His expertise on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and North Korea (DPRK) was already well-known from his work with the Congressional Task Force. The article was "The PRC's Force Modernization Efforts Finally Begin to Show Results".

The article was both incredibly granular in discussing both People's Liberation Army (PLA) doctrine and technologies and the Communist Party of China (CPC) thinking and strategies. But he was equally conversant with the phenomena of terrorism, *jihadism*, and broader global trends. That year his book, *Target America: Terrorism in the US Today*[1], was published in New York. It was almost a decade before the 9/11 *jihadist* terrorist attacks on the US, but the book's readers were well-prepared for the advent of the Osama bin Laden and *al-Qaida* era.

His second major piece, in the April-May 1993 edition of *Defense & Foreign Affairs* ***Strategic Policy***, dealt with great insight into the power transition in the DPRK from Kim Il-Song to Kim Jong-Il. He was so broadly read and had such incredible intelligence contacts around the world, however, that Seffy was able to write with great sophistication about events in Russia, to (increasingly) the post-communist break-up of Yugoslavia.

He was so prolific and detailed in his writings that his work was difficult to edit because it contained so much substance. Where could the articles be cut to size? More often, it was easier to cut out other articles than to constrain Seffy's own pieces. But he rarely cited his sources, and he was greatly criticized for this. He refused to budge, given that his sources were invariably deeply embedded in areas on which he wrote, and he would not jeopardize their security. That was a real mark of his confidence and courage; he did not bow to pressures to justify his invariably-unique perspectives merely to be accepted into the Washington, DC, mainstream.

What his critics failed to understand was that his trend analysis invariably proved to be accurate and prescient. He was, because of the detailed nature of his understanding of terrorist movements and the motivations for terrorism, regularly labeled as "anti-Muslim", but he most certainly was not. He spoke Arabic and Hebrew, and had friends and contacts throughout the Middle East. He was as concerned about the impact of Islamist, *jihadist* terrorism on Muslim societies as on the West.

He was labeled, too, as being too supportive of the Serb position during the US Clinton Administration-led break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. I had dragged Seffy into greater engagement in that 1990s-long conflict in the Balkans, and he became one of the greatest authorities on it, consistently exposing the media-led information warfare campaign for what it was (and has subsequently proven to be): well-funded by the Croatian and Bosnia-Herzegovina governments and supported for a variety of reasons by the Clinton Administration.

Seffy wrote two books (and many articles) for ISSA/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* about the Balkans war, bringing out substantial new information, consistently and annoyingly contradicting the mainstream

narrative being promoted by the Clinton Administration in the US and the Government of Tony Blair in the UK.[2]

It was Seffy's 1999 book, *Bin Laden, the Man Who Declared War on America*[3], which put him on the map as far as the mainstream public was concerned. But not, however, right away. It first came out to high praise from those key officials who knew of it, but to modest sales. Until, that is, September 11, 2001, when Osama bin Laden's group launched the actual aerial attack on the New York World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. It was exactly as Bodansky had predicted in *Target America* and *Target The West*.

On September 12, 2001, Seffy's publisher called to say that it had begun printing an additional 400,000 copies of the book. It became a runaway best-seller.

Seffy and I undertook many trips together, apart from the travels he undertook by himself (including an interesting time in Iraqi Kurdistan after the toppling of Pres. Saddam Hussein). We monitored elections, staged conferences on strategic issues in various parts of the world, and stood on a bridge in Belgrade as it was being bombed during the Balkan wars. We shared experiences in Africa, in the highlands overlooking Lake Issyk-kul in Kyrgyzstan, and in Greece, and elsewhere.

He was decorated by the Ethiopian Crown in exile as a Grand Officer of the Order of the Star on September 19, 1998, and that was probably the only time we saw him dressed formally.

There is no question that Seffy had become extremely disheartened with the West's embrace of strategic decline in recent years. And disheartened with the growing dysfunction he saw arising in the West. His once-prolific writing levels dwindled, and his pessimism increased. It was understandable. He (we) had seen that it was not being right that mattered when presenting strategic analysis; it was more important to be *acceptable* within the mainstream, regardless of the shallowness of mainstream thinking. He resisted returning to Washington, DC, for any functions at all, even though it was only an hour's drive away.

Yossef Bodansky's body of writing for the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism was enormous, and only dwarfed by his works for GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs*. In recent months, during 2021, I had taken to citing Seffy's earlier, prescient writings on a variety of topics within articles on current issues. That will continue, because his insights will continue to be borne out by evolving history.

Seffy was often an angry or disgruntled man, but one with a sense of humor. He loved a joke; he loved his Labrador dogs even more.

He was, in a sense, a fatalist, accepting that trends in human behavior were explicable but not necessarily easily changed. What is positive is that his critics have largely faded into insignificance, even when they retained their temporal powers within the US and other governments. The bottom line is that they fade into mediocrity, and Bodansky's legacy survives.

And so we move further into an age of bland and myopic perceptions of strategic realities, with such thinkers as Yossef Bodansky exiting the stage.

Footnotes:

1. Bodansky, Yossef: *Target America: Terrorism in the US Today*. New York, 1993: SPI Books. It was also published later in 1993 for a broader audience and entitled *Target The West: Terrorism in the World Today*.

These books, *extensively* footnoted, provide the real primers for the study of terrorism which was to become so important to US policymakers in the coming decades.

2. Bodansky, Yossef: *Some Call it Peace: Waiting for War in the Balkans*. London, 1996: The International Strategic Studies Association. And *Offensive in the Balkans: The Potential for a Wider War as a Result of Foreign Intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. London, 1995: The International Strategic Studies Association (published through International Media Corporation).

3. Bodansky, Yossef: *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America*. Rocklin, California, 1999: Prima Publishing, Forum Imprint, and then *Random* House. Other Bodansky books included: *Crisis in Korea* (1994, Shapolsky Publishers Inc.); *Islamic Anti-Semitism as a Political Instrument* (1999, 2000, ACPR Publications and Tammuz Publishers); *The High Cost of Peace: How Washington's Middle East Policy Left America Vulnerable to Terrorism* (2002, Random House); *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (2004, HarperCollins); and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* (2007, HarperCollins).