

Background Reading #1: Young Bosnia: Teenage Revolutionaries and the Sarajevo Assassination of 1914

If a reporter in early 1914 had posed the question “What is the most dangerous ‘hot spot’ in the world today?”, any well informed European in early 1914 would have said “the Balkan peninsula,” and most would have specifically said “Bosnia.” In fact, Bosnia was seething with revolutionary discontent. At the center of it all was a group of revolutionary teenagers called Young Bosnia, a movement that had spread throughout the high schools of the region. What was Young Bosnia? What were the goals of the movement? And why were many people in Bosnia so dissatisfied with the current state of affairs that they were willing to sacrifice their lives and even the stability of Europe to bring about change?

In 1914 Bosnia was part of the Austro-Hungarian (or Habsburg) Empire, but it hadn’t been part of the empire for very long. Indeed, the parents of those revolutionary students of Young Bosnia had been born under a different empire, the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled Bosnia for centuries. Unlike in other areas of the Balkans, in Bosnia a large percentage of the local nobility had converted to Islam after the Ottoman take-over and so had maintained their power. In other words, in Bosnia it was local Muslims who ruled, people who spoke the same language as the rest of the people, not Turkish-speaking “foreigners.”

Because religion had been the important identifying marker under Ottoman rule, in the new age of nationalism (which arose in the 19th century), religion became the method of determining one’s national identity in Bosnia. Serbo-Croatian speakers who were of the Catholic faith were called Croats even when they lived in Bosnia, not Croatia. Those who spoke a variant of the same language but were Orthodox Christians were called Serbs, even those who had never set foot in Serbia. Those Bosnians who converted to Islam were simply called Muslims. In other words, there was not a separate “Bosnian” nationalism but many different “nationalities” within Bosnia, all of which spoke the same language but had very different cultural traditions.

Because of the movement of people during the years when the Balkans became the battleground between Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East, the population of the area became hopelessly mixed. In Bosnia all the nobility and some of the peasants were Muslims. Other villages or sections within villages were made up of Orthodox Christians (Serbs) or Catholics (Croats), and, of course, there were large Jewish, gypsy, Turkish, and other minority groups as well. This was no American “melting pot” but more of a tossed salad in which various elements were mixed together but continued to exist as distinct elements side by side.

At its height in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Ottoman Empire had provided security and effective government. However, the empire had gone through a slow decline in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the standard of living had fallen. And just across the border was “the West” (represented by the Austrian Empire) which had become more powerful and advanced, politically and economically. With the rise of nationalism and the

existence of independent states in near-by Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia experienced continued revolutionary unrest. Because of this, Austria-Hungary moved in and took control of Bosnia in 1878 though supposedly this rule was only temporary. Thirty years later, however, in 1908, Austria-Hungary formally annexed Bosnia, making it a permanent part of the empire. The annexation was a bitter disappointment to Bosnian nationalists who had hoped to see their land become independent or, at least, a part of Serbia. The Young Bosnia revolutionary movement arose as a reaction to this crisis.

So who was Young Bosnia, and what did it stand for? Young Bosnia was not a formal, unified organization but rather a group of revolutionary secret societies that had sprung up throughout the high schools of Bosnia and among Bosnian students studying in neighboring countries. There were a few differences between these high school students and students in the United States today. In Bosnia around the year 1910, education beyond the elementary school level was relatively rare. Since high schools were usually located only in larger towns, students often had to leave their homes and their villages and move to town, living with relatives or friends of the family. Because of the difficulty and expense, the average age of high school students was higher than in the U.S. today, especially since students would often have to interrupt their studies due to financial difficulties. Thus, it would not be rare for young people of nineteen and twenty to be attending high school along with younger students.

In addition, this generation of high school students was well aware that they were among the most educated people that their society had produced up to that time. This made for a rather large generation gap as the young people were much more politically aware than their peasant parents. The students were also fully aware of the importance of their education and took their studies very seriously. And since this generation of students considered itself the generation that would transform their society, they devoted themselves to “revolutionary” subjects, such as national literature and history, reading widely all the revolutionary writings of the time. A large number of Bosnian students in the early 20th century had a deep desire for rapid change since, unlike most American high school students today, they did not feel that they had a long period of time to achieve their goals and make their mark in society; one out of five people in the area died (slowly) of tuberculosis. Indeed, three out of the six Young Bosnians who were the most directly involved in the assassination of Franz Ferdinand died of tuberculosis within three years of that fateful June day.

Overall, the various Young Bosnian groups had some goals in common. First and foremost, they were nationalists, who wanted the liberation of their country and its establishment either as an independent state or as a member of a Yugoslav state (joined with at least Serbia and maybe even Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro). “Yugoslav” means simply “South Slav” and described a movement among intellectuals of the time to join all peoples of similar language background into a large “national” state. This idea was especially attractive in Bosnia because it solved their identity problem of what to do about the many different national/religious groups in Bosnia itself. Since the main opposition to Yugoslavism, of course, came from Austria, Bosnian nationalists recognized that, even if Bosnia could break away from the Austrian Empire, Croatia and

Slovenia might not, so they were prepared to compromise and join the already independent Serbian state. In other words, the students were a little bit fuzzy on whether they would like Bosnia to be part of a real Yugoslavia or of a big Serbia, but they were very clear that they did NOT want Bosnia to remain under the rule of the multi-national Austrian Empire!

Young Bosnia's second goal, which they felt would follow logically upon the achievement of independence, was social justice. The young people wanted a society in which all of the different nationalities would have equality, in which (freed from foreign control) economic development and advancement would be possible, even one in which women would have a greater role in society. The young people, often encouraged by nationalist teachers, set up secret societies in the high schools, where they would discuss revolutionary ideals and arrange to attend illegal Yugoslav meetings in other areas. The Bosnian Serb and Croatian members criticized their elders for drinking excessively as an escape from their hard lives rather than trying to *solve* the problems of their society, so many Young Bosnian groups were organized as non-drinking groups. (This also showed the unity of the different nationalities since Muslims are not allowed to drink anyway.)

The young revolutionaries were convinced of the justice of their cause. They had all read their great nationalist epics of the Battle of Kosovo and how the Serbs had sacrificed themselves at the Battle of Kosovo for their faith and their country. They felt that their role was to do the same, to risk their lives in a just war. And this time the outcome would be different, and their people would rise to take its rightful place in the community of nations. Yet, how could a small country with no army of its own defeat a powerful enemy like Austria? Clearly, they needed supporters among the other powerful nations of Europe, and, in fact, Russia was clearly interested in helping a fellow Slavic land with a large Orthodox Christian population. But how could one provoke a crisis which would force Russia, and hopefully Britain and France, into demanding Austria's withdrawal from Bosnia? From 1910 – 1914, Young Bosnian students sought a solution to this problem.

In 1914, the situation became more critical. In 1912 and 1913, the Balkan Wars occurred, and even Macedonia and Albania were freed from foreign rule. It seemed to many students quite unfair that Bosnia was still ruled by Austria! Then in June 1914, they learned that Franz Ferdinand, who was to be the successor to the Austrian throne when the elderly emperor died, was planning to visit the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. Worst of all, in their view, Franz Ferdinand planned a parade in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. Many felt it was outrageous that a conqueror would parade down their streets on the day on which Serbs sacrificed their lives at the Battle of Kosovo to save the Christian world from the Turkish invaders! Around the city, young people debated whether assassinating him on this day would be an act of murder or the start a war of liberation.