

# Historical Overview: Bosnia

## Bosnia as a Borderland between East and West

By Lisa Adeli, University of Arizona Center for Middle Eastern Studies

For more than 1600 years, Bosnia has been a borderland between East and West. The consequences of this geographic position have been mixed; Bosnia has developed a rich, diverse culture, but it has again and again been a battleground of competing ideologies – and competing armies. “We have more history than we can stand,” a Bosnian journalist remarked, and indeed, Bosnia has often suffered greatly for its geographical position.

Bosnia first became a borderland in 395 AD when the Roman Empire was divided into two parts: a Western half and an Eastern (Byzantine) half. The division left Bosnia within the Eastern part but just along the frontier with the West. Over the next several centuries, Bosnian culture developed. Slavic tribes moved into the region, and Christianity was introduced.

Even after the end of the Western Roman Empire, Bosnia’s geographic location created difficulties. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century onward, Bosnia struggled to develop a medieval state, while Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Byzantine Empire tried to dominate it. Religion also led to conflict. With the split between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, Bosnia again found itself straddling the border, both geographically and ideologically. By the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, religious groups which both sides considered ‘heresies’ grew up: the Bosnian Church, the Bogomils, and others. The intensifying political and religious conflicts were brought to an end by the Ottoman conquest of the Balkan peninsula in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Although (or maybe *because*) the Ottomans did not force their subjects to become Muslims, many people in Bosnia chose to convert to that religion; Bosnia became one of the few areas of the Balkans (and the only Slavic area) where Islam became the largest religion.

During the centuries of Ottoman rule, Bosnia remained a diverse area. The Ottomans separated people by religion, so religious affiliation became (and still is today) the way in which people determined their ethnic identity and later their “nationality.” In other words, people used religion as a marker of nationality. Thus, the people of Bosnia, who are nearly all speakers of the same language (once called Serbo-Croatian ) and who look similar to each other are divided into different ‘nationalities.’ For example, Bosnian Catholics were/are called Croats even if they had never visited Croatia. Similarly, Orthodox Christians were/are called Serbs even if they had never set foot in Serbia. Muslims were considered Muslim in ‘nationality’ as well as religion (though today they are called ‘Bosniaks’ because Westerners got too confused by all of this during the 1990s war). And the Jewish minority was considered Jewish in ‘nationality.’ Note that all these people look basically the same, speak the same language, and live in the same villages or city neighborhoods. In later times, few of them practiced any religion – but they still identified their nationality according to the religion of their ancestors. To make matters more confusing, people began to intermarry, so by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about 1/3 of marriages – and the children from these marriages – were ethnically mixed.

But we're getting ahead of the story. Going back to the Ottoman Empire, life in Bosnia went along fairly well until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the once-great empire began to lose power. This caused big problems for Bosnia. In addition to a declining standard of living, Bosnia found itself on the border of a three-sided conflict between the Catholic West (represented by the Austrian Empire), the Orthodox center (represented by the newly forming states of Serbia and Montenegro), and the Muslim Middle East (represented by the Ottoman Empire). A long series of local peasant rebellions followed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Bosnia went from Ottoman to Austrian rule.

Under the Habsburg (aka Austrian or Austro-Hungarian Empire), political and social tensions grew. On June 28, 1914, the anniversary of a significant battle in Balkan history, a group of Bosnian teenagers assassinated the heir to the throne of the Austrian Empire, triggering the start of World War I. This brutal war eventually brought about the destruction of all the empires in the area and made possible the creation of a new country: "the land of the South Slavs" or Yugoslavia.

## Two Versions of Yugoslavia with a World War/Holocaust in Between

The rejoicing over the creation of the new state was short-lived. The Croats were quickly disillusioned with the fact that the king of Serbia became the king of Yugoslavia and that Serbs dominated the government. The dispute soon degenerated into an argument over which nation was more deserving: the Croats claiming that they were more advanced economically and culturally than the Serbs, the Serbs retorting that they were more experienced in being independent and that they had sacrificed more in the war. The Bosnian Muslims were ignored completely. In 1928 the situation had deteriorated to the point where a Montenegrin (Serb) delegate to the parliament pulled out a gun and opened fire on the Croatian delegation, killing several prominent Croatian members of parliament right there on the floor of the assembly. Needless to say, this act marked the end of parliamentary politics in Yugoslavia; the king declared a dictatorship shortly thereafter. Naturally, the king couldn't dictate an end to the nationality issues within Yugoslavia, and the unrest continued. Such internal instability was especially dangerous in the 1930s in a Europe dominated by the rise of fascism and the threat of a new world war.

World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939 when the Germans launched their blitzkrieg against Poland. Yugoslavia managed to stay out of the war for another year and a half. However, on April 6, 1941, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria launched a joint invasion of Yugoslavia and divided up the country among them. Only one region retained any autonomy: the so-called "Independent State of Croatia" (or NDH) which included Bosnia.

The most unusual, and controversial, situation was the Holocaust/ethnic persecution in the territory of the NDH. This state was led by a homegrown Croatian fascist organization called the Ustaša (only a small minority even within Croatia itself), which planned to create an ethnically "pure" Croatian state by eliminating all the foreign elements of their population. The victims were to include not only the 40,000 Jews, but also the 30,000 gypsies and the 1.9 *million* Serbs who lived within the borders of the state!

It is interesting to note that the Bosnian Muslims were NOT on the list of intended victims. They were told that they were also Croats, even though “real” Croats were Catholic. Naturally, the Bosnian Muslims were divided in their reactions to the new government. However, it is interesting to note that the Bosnian Muslim community was the only religious group in Europe to write an official, public letter of protest about the ethnic persecution in their country. Interestingly enough, those who signed the document – and others who risked their lives to save Jews and Serbs – claimed that religious tolerance was a Bosnian tradition dating back to Ottoman times.

Croatia/Bosnia became a scene of incredible horror. In deference to the Nazis, Jews were the first victims, subject to very strict anti-Jewish laws and forced to wear identifying badges. By June 1941, two months after the formation of the Independent State of Croatia, two-thirds of the Jews of Croatia were imprisoned in various local concentration camps although a small percentage was sent out of the country to Auschwitz or to do forced labor in Germany.

The most notorious of the local camps was the Jasenovac complex. This camp system, in which tens of thousands of prisoners died, was unique for several reasons. For one thing, the methods of execution were much more elemental than in German-controlled camps. While the Nazis preferred methods of killing that afforded them some distance from their victims, the Ustaša preferred more direct, hands-on methods, such as killing with hammers, mallets, and knives. In addition, Jews and gypsies, although persecuted unconscionably, did not represent a threat to Croatian nationalism as the much more numerous Serbs, who were the Ustaša’s primary victims. There was something primal and urgent in the Ustaša hatred of the Serbs. From spontaneous massacres of Serbian villagers at the hands of their neighbors, the Croatian fascists progressed to rounding up entire Serbian villages and deporting them to Jasenovac, where the vast majority found death in the killing fields outside the camp. The percentage of people persecuted in Croatia became so great that even the Nazi leaders criticized Ustaša policies for provoking widespread resistance, which made it difficult to maintain order in the area.

In fact, it is not a coincidence that the scene of such a bitter genocidal conflict during the war, became at the same time the stronghold of resistance against a narrow interpretation of nationalism. Faced with the competing claims of Germany and Italy and torn by a civil war between the Serbian ultra-nationalist Chetniks and the Croatian ultra-nationalist Ustaša, Bosnia especially proved fertile ground for the development of the Partisan movement, led by a man named Tito (a.k.a. Josip Broz). The Partisans were a multi-ethnic, all-inclusive force, in which it didn’t matter if one was Serb or Croat, Muslim or Jew, male or female. It is not a coincidence that the Partisans’ distinctive ‘Yugoslav’ character, which was later to separate it from all other Communist-led movements in Eastern Europe, developed in Bosnia, where the horror of a narrow interpretation of nationalism was most evident. (The Bleiberg massacre carried out by Partisans against Croats retreating with the fascist armies was terrible, but an unusual act of vengeance; usually Partisan forces strictly adhered to the policy of ethnic tolerance.) Nor is it surprising that the Partisan movement, with its broad focus, became a genuinely popular movement.

By May 1945, Yugoslavia was reunited as a single country free from foreign rule. It is significant that most of its territory was freed by Yugoslav Partisan forces, *not* by the Soviet Red Army. Unlike most other countries in Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia was not occupied by Soviet troops, and its postwar government, although a Communist one, enjoyed a great deal of public support. In these differences lie the roots of Yugoslavia's eventual break with the Soviet bloc and the development of its "separate road to socialism."

The new Yugoslavia was organized as a federal state rather than a unitary, Serbian-dominated one (as the pre-war Kingdom of Yugoslavia had been). The state was comprised of six republics, of which Bosnia was one. Bosnia prospered economically and culturally.

By the 1970s, though, people began to worry about what would happen when Tito died. As Tito advanced in age, the decision was made to form a nine-man presidency, which would include a president from the Communist Party and one from each of the republics and autonomous regions. Each year, one of the eight regional presidents would become the "president of the presidency", so that there would be a rotation in power that would presumably be fair to all the ethnic groups. When Tito died in May 1980, the system took effect and actually worked for about ten years. However, the fall of the Soviet Union and the accompanying rise in nationalism throughout Yugoslavia set in motion a chain of events which has torn Yugoslavia apart and plunged the area into a new cycle of genocide and horror.

## The Disintegration of Yugoslavia, Civil War, and "Ethnic Cleansing"

The reasons Yugoslavia fell are complicated. Ultimately, though, in June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia, plunging the area into a bloody civil war. Slovenia, a small province with few national minorities, was able to achieve its independence with relatively little bloodshed. However, the issue of Croatia was far more controversial because Croatia had a large Serbian minority in the middle of the country, and that group of Serbs had a deep-seated fear of becoming part of an independent Croatia after the horrors they had endured under another Croatian "independent" state during World War II. Ironically, the Serbian population's memories of being the target of genocide led to a brutal civil war in which some Serbs became the perpetrators of genocide. The most controversial issue during the fighting is the destruction of the city of Vukovar, where Serbs and Croats battled street by street until the city lay in ruins.

By the time a United Nations-brokered peace agreement was reached in January 1992, Croatia and Slovenia had achieved international recognition as separate countries. Bosnia and Macedonia soon asked for and received the status of independent states as well.

Now the focus turned to Bosnia, which declared its independence and erupted into civil war in April 1992. In Bosnia, the ethnic situation was much more complex than that of Croatia as no single group had a majority. Bosnian Muslims, the largest segment of the population, made up approximately 44% of the population; Bosnian Serbs about 31%; Bosnian Croats 17%; and gypsies, Albanians, and others made up the remaining 8%. The populations were not separate groups but intermingled, and up to 1/3 of Bosnian marriages were mixed. Indeed, the

different ethnic groups were so closely linked together in Bosnia that it took acts of terrible violence to force everyone to take sides.

For three long years, from 1992-1995, Bosnia became a battleground with Serb forces shelling Muslim forces – and frequently targeting innocent civilians – in the capital city of Sarajevo, bitter fighting between the Croats and the Muslims devastating the once-beautiful city of Mostar, and “ethnic cleansing” by the Serbs wiping out the Muslim enclave of Srebrenica. In a particularly awful historical twist, the Serbs of Bosnia, many of whose relatives had been interned in Croatian concentration camps during World War II, now opened concentration camps for their Bosnian Muslim rivals. Within three years, whole cities had been reduced to rubble. 20,000 people were dead; two million Bosnians were refugees; and those that remained in Bosnia lived in ruined cities, amid minefields, in an area devastated economically, politically, culturally.

The international community eventually managed to broker a peace settlement, the Dayton Peace Agreements of late 1995, and to send in 45,000 United Nations peacekeeping forces. An uneasy peace has been maintained ever since, while the International War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague has worked to prosecute those accused of war crimes during the conflict.

### After the Bosnian War

While all sides involved in the conflict were guilty of atrocities and crimes against humanity, the Bosnian Serbs, and by extension their Serbian backers in the Yugoslav government, were especially guilty. An International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was set up in the Netherlands to try war criminals. U.S. troops in Bosnia helped hunt them down. But the biggest war criminal of them all, Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, the one who ordered the bloody siege of Sarajevo and the massacre of 8,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica, was not arrested until August 2008. The search for justice continues until this day, and signs - in English – all over Bosnia carry the words “Never forget.”

Today Bosnia has rebuilt its cities, and survivors have tried to continue with their lives. However, tensions between the nationalities still exist. Bosnian Serbs have a separate entity, the ‘Serbian Republic,’ within Bosnia. Croats and Muslims share the rest, but it’s an uneasy coexistence with a very segregated school system in which Croatian and Muslim children learn extremely different stories of their history and culture. Bosnia won’t even take a census to see how many people live in the country for fear that counting people could raise difficult questions of nationality. Bosnia remains a breathtakingly beautiful country with an often tragic history. The fact that it, even today, brings together East and West makes it culturally rich but painfully divided.