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Some Anthropological Observations on a War - The Conflict in Bosnia

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For AnthroWatch

SSome Anthropological Observations on a War - The Conflict in Bosnia

Since I recently (in January and February) had a chance to spend something less than a month in the former Yugoslavia, particularly in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo and the Hercegovinian main town of Mostar, I thought I might briefly share some of my observations with readers of AnthroWatch. My mini series will consist of this initial section focusing on description and the second part will involve an attempt to put these comments in some analytical perspective. Since my Columbia dissertation dealt with this area I have thus been involved with researching this area over some five decades, from the fifties to the nineties. The end of this millennium has brought together in the Bosnian tragedy new

questions about the meanings of modernization, nationalism, multiculturalism, genocide and transnational institutions in a media saturated age as viewed through a variety of temporal perspectives. In this brief space I will only try to present some kinds of descriptions on which the media, including CNN, have not tended to focus and in concluding, hopefully, raise some points of specific interest to the anthropological enterprise.

Being retired has its advantages, one of which is a flexible schedule. Thus when I was invited on short notice to join a US government technical assistance mission to Bosnia as an anthropologist cum "cultural advisor," focusing on ethnic affairs, it was possible to take advantage of the opportunity without undue difficulty. This fit in well with my plans for preparing a book on the region. I had very much wanted to see first hand the impact of the war. My work on this mission (the implication of the spreading of a faith implicit in this term is not entirely irrelevant) involved me in technical economic matters not related to direct social impact programs but my time was reasonably structured so that I had adequate opportunity for observations on my own outside of the context of my formal work.

I begin with minutiae which I think nicely set the stage for this small post-colonial experience. Our group flew business class, defined as a bonus for the technically difficult work ahead. Zagreb (Croatia) was thus easily and most comfortably reached. But from

there it is not easy to reach Sarajevo although as the truce travel will doubtless improve. It is possible to proceed by land from Croatia (a constituent republic of the former Yugoslavia, now an independent state adjoining Bosnia) and indeed the Sarajevo newspapers now advertise bus routes from Split on the Dalmatian coast and from Zagreb in the north but all official American travel is by air via UNHCR flights from Zagreb. Waiting times vary but generally a few days are necessary and one must first obtain a picture ID and get a reservation on what UN personnel call, with due cause, Maybe Airlines. I mention all this minor detail because travel of this sort involves simultaneously a series of journeys, sometimes simultaneous, in the worlds of U.S. government agencies, the UN bureaucracy, IFOR (NATO forces) and the bitter realities which are part of contemporary Bosnian life. U.S. government agencies and varying cultural settings are not news to anthropologists but some aspects of the world of Maybe Airlines may be a bit of a departure. What I remember particularly about boarding our flight for Sarajevo in a cordoned off section of the Zagreb airport was that the rough barrack walls of the boarding area site were adorned with travel posters from Nigeria, Nepal, Denmark and Bangladesh. After a Nigerian non-com checked us in and tossed our gear on the appropriate pallet we boarded a freight ramp to a Russian cargo plane and sat out the flight on opposing wooden benches with a small Iranian delegation and some Ukrainian and other UN soldiers.

We arrived in a snowstorm at what had been Sarajevo airport. A surviving building was sandbagged outside with army tents in the partially destroyed interior. Since our embassy escort was awaiting the departure of a ranking U.S. diplomat we spent a late January afternoon hour outside. The open air was preferable to a garbage strewn container shed. Finally we were shoveled in with our gear into an armored Suburban. The doors closed like a seeming bank vault. We were told that these vehicles cost about six times the regular U.S. model. It should be noted that our subsequent travel both within and outside of Sarajevo was in rented well-aged, locally made Fiats. A month later on our departure through this same airport the Danish officer in charge offered us a variety of UN souvenir T-shirts, and caps, each cost close to a week's pay for a Bosnian worker, there was also an optional free Bosnia stamp for one's passport.

Our hotel was the Holiday Inn, a few hundred yards from the then existing Serbian front lines. The former glassed in lobby was thoroughly over with UNHCR logo plastic tape in some areas the tape was punctuated with bullet holes. The elevator door had major shrapnel dents. We were told that if the electricity failed while in the elevator (there were occasional stoppages) extraction would be within a fraction of an hour. On the corridor to our room on the seventh floor there was more of the now familiar tape. I curiously looked through an ajar door, there was a direct window to ceiling view outdoors. No musty corridor smells here. A brisk winter stroll

to the lobby did provide constant stimulation. The heavy plate glass window in our modestly heated room shifted when we tried to open it (later wooden wedges helped). The war was now officially over. We were told that the light arms fire we heard was not directed at us but represented Serbian snipers targeting French IFOR troops. (Several of the former were killed the night of our arrival). On the other hand, the substantial explosions we heard resulted from the destruction of nearby mine fields. Our fellow guests at the hotel included U.S., British, German and other military. The enlisted men were in full battle gear and went to their rooms with their carbines. Outside our room on the main road below IFOR tanks, armored personnel carriers, UN and various embassy cars sped by with quite a bit of local traffic as well as an occasional tram. A month before a rocket had hit the tram as it was passing outside the hotel. There were numerous casualties. At the time I was there the room rate was then \$200 U.S. payable in German Marks, the only official currency in Bosnia, cash only.

It is perhaps easiest to describe the physical destruction. Before the war -- for almost five decades in Yugoslavia this phrase has always meant before the Second World War, it now means before the present war, which had its beginnings just five years ago. At that time Sarajevo was a modern city with an old urban core, one that had proudly hosted the Olympics in the 1980s. But many of its corporate headquarters and apartment complexes are now gutted hulks with the areas around them strewn with glass. But while it is

important to focus on the material destruction and I will discuss that further in the concluding piece and also focus on positive human aspects of my visit in the next issue it seems here appropriate to stress the human toll of this the greatest tragedy to befall Europe since World War II. This is best seen in the graveyards, the newgraveyards. They are everywhere in Sarajevo and Mostar, especially in the parks where children used to play and groups of old men and women went for the sun. Here they all lie together, Moslems, Catholics and Orthodox. Sometimes the areas are vast as in the slopes below the main new hospital Kosevo, itself bombarded and its facade and blood stained corridors so familiar to CNN watchers. This expansion of an older cemetery now also covers an olympic soccer field. The interment of the dead is still provisional since the headmarkers are wood but they are even now, as one would expect, places of family pilgrimage. But nowhere is the life/death confrontation more poignant than in those graves in the small grassy areas between large apartment blocks. Here in 1992-93 it could be life threatening to bury the dead far from one's home because of the snipers and the rockets. So now in some apartment houses as you come down the steps there are graves immediately before one. A few feet away are the vegetable gardens so important for survival even last year. In some areas there are also heaps of uncollected garbage, a service just now starting again. Nearby children play soccer. It is true that some areas were little damaged but for those who lived near the lines of confrontation a visit to an apartment can also be a tour through

past tragedy or fortunate escape as the visitor listens to the story behind the bullet holes and the rocket impact places.