Observations on a War: The Conflict in Bosnia Part 1

Joel Halpern
Observations on a War: The Conflict in Bosnia

PART I OF 2

by Joel Martin Halpern ('56)

Recently, in January and February, I 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. What follows are some brief observations to share 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 been involved with researching this part of the Balkans over some five decades, from the fifties to the nineties. The end of this millennium has brought together the fifties to the nineties. The end of this millennium has brought together the Bosnian tragedy new questions about the meanings of modernization, nationalism, multiculturalism, genocide and transnational institutions in a media saturated age. These can be viewed with 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 in the next section 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 very short notice, to join a U.S. 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 trip has fit in well with my plans for preparing a book on the region.

Understandably, 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 on a most comfortable flight to Zagreb (Croatia). But from there it was not easy to reach Sarajevo although if the truce endures 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. As far as I know, all official American travel is by air via UNHCR flights from Zagreb. Waiting times in Zagreb vary, but generally a few days are necessary. One must first obtain a picture ID and get a reservation on what U.N. personnel call, with due cause, "Maybe Airlines."

I mention all this minor detail because travel of this sort involves a series of journeys, sometimes simultaneous, in the worlds of U.S. government agencies, the U.N. bureaucracy, IFOR (NATO forces) and most importantly, the bitter realities which are part of contemporary Bosnian life. 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 U.N. soldiers.

We arrived in a snowstorm at what had been the 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 shoved in with our gear into an armored Suburban. The doors closed like a seeming bank vault.

There was also an optional free Bosnia stamp for one's passport. This was symbolic of the fact that today's Bosnia is a state without control of its own borders.

These vehicles, I understand, 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 U.N. 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. This was symbolic of the fact that today's Bosnia is a state without control of its own borders.

Our hotel was the Holiday Inn, a few hundred yards from the then-existing Serbian front lines. The former glassed in lobby was plastered over with UNHCR logo plastic tape in a some areas the tape was punctuated with bullet holes. The elevator doors had major shrapnel dents. We were told that if the electricity failed while we were in the elevator (there were occasional stoppages) extraction would be within a fraction of an hour. Along 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. Subsequently, a brisk winter stroll along the corridor provided constant stimulation. The heavy plate glass window in our modestly heated room shifted in its frame (later the management provided wooden wedges to block it). The outer window had been shattered. At the time of my trip, the war was officially over. From military personnel at the hotel, I heard that the light arms fire crackling in the vicinity 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, U.N. and various embassy cars sped by with quite a bit of local traffic. There was also an occasional tram. A month earlier a rocket had hit a tram as it was passing outside the hotel. One person was killed and there were numerous casualties. At the time I was there the room rate was some $200 U.S. equivalent payable in German Marks, the only recognized currency in Bosnia, only cash was accepted.

It is perhaps easiest to describe the physical destruction. This occurs in a new time frame—"before the war"—for almost five decades in Yugoslavia this phrase always meant before the Second World War. It now means before the present conflict, which had its beginnings just five years ago. At that time Sarajevo was a modern city with an old urban core. Sarajevans had proudly hosted the winter Olympics in the early 1980s. Now, many of its corporate headquarters and apartment complexes are gutted hulks with the areas around them strewn with glass.

While there is sometimes separation, all the different peoples lie together—Moslems, Catholics and Orthodox. Here together are the young and old killed by the mortars and snipers next to the soldiers who died in battle. In some places the areas of the dead are vast as in the slopes below the new Kosevo hospital, itself a target...

It is important to take account of this material destruction and I will discuss this further in the concluding piece. There I will also discuss some of the positive human aspects of my visit.

But at this point it seems appropriate to stress the human toll of this, the greatest tragedy to befall Europe since World War II.

The presence of graveyards is a dominating visual reminder of the war's human cost. These graveyards are everywhere in Sarajevo and Mostar. This is especially so in the parks where children played, women sat with their babies, and old people enjoyed the sun. Now many users of these parks are buried there. While there is sometimes separation, all the different peoples lie together—Moslems, Catholics and Orthodox. Here together are the young and old killed by the mortars and snipers next to the soldiers who died in battle. In some places the areas of the dead are vast as in the slopes below the new Kosevo hospital, itself a target. Its facade and blood stained corridors are familiar to dedicated CNN watchers. On these slopes an expansion of an older cemetery now also covers the entire soccer field built for the Olympic Games. The interment of the dead is still provisional since the head markers are wood but even now, as one would expect, these cemetaries are places of family pilgrimage. Looking across these slopes, a multitude of satellite dishes of the American army dominate the horizon. One can't help but speculate as to how they relate to the dead who lie there.

Nowhere is the life/death confrontation more poignant than in those
graves in the small grassy areas between large apartment blocks. In 1992-93 in Sarajevo 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 people come down the steps exiting their home, the graves are immediately before them. A few feet away are the vegetable gardens which even last year were so important for survival. In some areas there are also heaps of uncollected garbage. A municipal service is just now starting up 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 sites of rocket impact. END OF PART 1. NEXT - PART 2 ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONFLICT: REFLECTIONS ON THE BOSNIAN WAR.