Anthropology and Conflict: The Conflict in Bosnia

Joel Halpern
Cultural Processes

and Transformations in Transition of the Central and Eastern European Post-Communist Countries

Edited by Rajko Muršič and Borut Brumen

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Observations on a War: The Conflict in Bosnia

Recently, in January and February 1996, I had a chance to spend something than a month in the former Yugoslavia, particularly in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo and the Hercegovinian main town Mostar. What follows are some brief observations to share with readers of the volume. My text consists of 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 in the Bosnian tragedy new questions about the meanings of modern modernization, nationalism, multiculturalism, genocide and transnational institutions in a media saturated age. This can be viewed with a variety of temporal perspectives. In this brief paper I will only try to present some kinds of descriptions on which the media, including CNN, have not tended to focus and in concluding 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 Americans by air via UNCHR 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 UN 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 world of U.S. government agencies, the UN 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 barracks 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 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 a container shed. Finally we were shoveled in with our gear into an armored Suburban. The doors closed like a seeming bank vault.

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 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 Bosnian 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 UNCHR logo plastic tape—in 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 stoppage) 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, UN 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.

It is important to take account of this material destruction and I will discuss this further in the concluding part. 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 Kosjevo 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 reconstructed 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 cemeteries 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.

Anthropology and Conflict: Reflections on the Bosnian War

It clearly takes a certain period to reflect on a singular experience in one’s life. In the May 1996 I reported on my winter visit to Sarajevo and Mostar, the two principle towns in Bosnia. I want to begin to approach an evaluation of this situation through a personal lens. Perhaps for some anthropologists their field experiences have been distanced from war and conflicts. I first went to the Balkans in 1953, and researched, principally in Serbia, for my Columbia doctorate. This was then only some eight years after World War II and memories of the conflict were still vivid to the villagers among whom I worked. But conflict was not then the focus of my research. Even if I had wanted to make it so such an approach was imposed by the dictatorial structures in place the then Tito’s Yugoslavia. Formal queries on this topic would have also put the villagers at risk. After the completion of my dissertation, which was a Serbian community study, and a stint at the Washington branch of the Human Relations Area Files, I went to Laos for the American aid program as an FSR (Foreign Service Reserve) officer. There I had a chance to experience that country’s life between the first and second Indochina wars. Presumably, this give me some basis for comparative analysis.

As in World War II where the fighting was part of a worldwide conflict also in Indochina the struggle was waged between formal military units, however, organized. While these conflicts have in common the suffering inflicted on civilian populations, but in Yugoslavia there was no wider military or ideological struggle involved in the breakup of that state. There the conflict began when the Serb-led Yugoslav army and its associated units began to wage war against its own population, first briefly in Slovenia, then Croatia and finally in Bosnia. In the latter two cases, the future political status of the Serbian population, outside the borders of Serbia proper, was at issue. The mass killings of Moslem civilians in Bosnia by Serbs have been called a genocide. But what made World War II unique, of course, was the special character of the Holocaust, the war against the Jews. Ethnic cleansing of Moslems in Bosnian began by Serb forces, horrible as it has been, has not approached either in conception or execution the Nazi final solution, but the internally generated physical destruction may have been more extensive. That is when one considers the ac-
tions involved directly in the rounding up and killing of Jews both within Germany and, even in the occupied territories, there was usually not extensive damage to the towns and cities in which this occurred - aside from the obvious trashing Jewish property and holy places. Proper analogs to the Bosnian-Yugoslav case are, of course, not in World War II or in the Indochina wars, but in the horrendous killing by the communists of defenseless civilians in postwar Cambodia and most recently by national groups in Rwanda and Burundi as well as in the civil wars among armed groups in the now non-states of Somalia and Afghanistan. This of course, does not exhaust the contemporary partial analogs for one can go back in time to the partition of India right after World War II or the Armenian mass murders by the Turks almost a half century before.

The enormous physical destruction of private homes and apartment houses along with commercial real estate, factories, and infrastructure, as well as cultural monuments of all types, is most apparent to the visitor and indicates the contradictory values manifest in the ideology of ethnic cleansing. This situation makes evident the need for anthropologists to give as much attention to how cultures and societies are destroyed, as well as to the ways in which they are constructed and evolved. As mammals we seem unique in our potential to destroy ourselves although some special cases such as the particular cycles of the lemmings do come to mind. At this point it is necessary to say that while the Serbs initiated the conflict, the Croats both in Croatia and subsequently in Bosnia organized armed forces and joined the conflict which had initially focused on the civilian population. The destruction in Sarajevo was the result of continuous Bosnian Serb bombardment from the surrounding hills. By contrast, in Mostar most of the destruction was due to the conflict between Croat and Moslem forces on opposite sides of the river Neretva that divides the city. The Ottoman bridge, emblematic of the city and a revered monument, was destroyed by Croat shelling. The library destroyed by Serb shelling in Sarajevo, with its priceless medieval manuscripts, was a major architectural monument to the Austro-Hungarian imperial rule, which in 1878 had succeeded that of the Ottomans.

Near the Holiday Inn where I stayed the destroyed buildings were small skyscrapers which housed major Bosnian construction firms which sent engineers on major construction projects they supervised throughout the Middle east and other parts of the developing world. The gutted car barns of Sarajevo had many dozens of destroyed trolleys which had once been part of a functioning urban transportation system. Many of the modern apartment houses were similarly gutted. In the destroyed villages we passed through while traveling from Sarajevo to Mostar were the remains of concrete peasant homes built over the last few decades, villages, as well as gutted mosques and churches.

For almost a half century, since 1945 Yugoslavia had been ruled by a secular communist state party whose ideology focused on socialist construction as one of its proudest achievements. During the 1960s this country experienced one of the highest economic growth rates in the world. Also during these decades following the 1960s Bosnian and other Yugoslav workers freely migrated abroad and sent home remittances which were used in large measure to construct modern homes incorporating many of the conveniences they had experienced in Yugoslavia's newly conveniences
they had experienced in Yugoslavia’s newly expanding cities and in their temporary stays in Western Europe. These homes, often constructed by extended kin groups, were meant to last for generations. Part of the strategy of ethnic cleansing involved not only killing but also panned destruction of communities to make it impossible for those who had fled to return. Looting was certainly a motive but separate from that was the burning of villages. A recent Yugoslav film, Beautiful Villages, Beautiful Flames, chronicles this orgy of destruction of people and property in the Serb-Moslem conflict. Like so many other civil wars it involved people who knew each other well. This film pictures the destruction as a direct result of outside influences brought into this village, not as a struggle based simply on “age-old” animosities.

This conflict has meant not only the negation of the ideas of economic development, urbanization and modernization processes which American anthropologists studied in Yugoslavia in the 1960s until the 1980s with such intensity, but it has also involved the reciprocal destruction of markers of past identity.

Ethnic cleansing, also practiced to some extent by Bosnia Croats, ant to a degree by the Moslems has sought to create ethnically homogenous entities which historically never existed. That the conflicting sides have been glorifying their own tradition while seeking to eliminate or undermine the basis for existence of their historic neighbors is clearly both a “post-modern” phenomenon worthy of study as well as a problem of profound significance for the future of the relationship between the European and Islamic worlds. The concept of modernization has clearly proven illusory as is future return to an imagining past in an atmosphere of strife and destruction. It would be tempting to think of anthropologists trying to focus on ways of constructing peace, but first we would seem to need to know more about mechanisms of destruction. Here it is only possible to suggest the complexities involved.

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