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Anthropology and Conflict: Reflections on the Bosnian War Part 2

by Joel Martin Halpern ('56)

It clearly takes a certain period to reflect on a singular experience in one's life. In the May 1996 issue of *AnthroWatch* 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 conflict. But this has not been my experience. Rather my anthropological journeys have been contextualized by major 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 on my research. Even if I had wanted to make it so such an approach was impeded by the dictatorial structures in place in the then Tito's Yugoslavia. Formal queries on this topic would have also put 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 world-wide 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 Bosnia begun 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 actions 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.



Sarajevo, 1996. Graveyard for those killed in siege.

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 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 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 planned destruction of communities to make it possible 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, and 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 imagined 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. ■

A Student's Lament

The following e-mail from an undergraduate anthropology major was received by a CGAAA member. We present it here, without identifying details, as one perspective on the state of anthropology.

Hi. How is A—? Here in X— things have been o.k. I am becoming more and more confused about some things, and I'd like to get your opinion on them. This semester I took Classics in Ethnographic Writing... a bit of a bad title, because the only "classic" we read was Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*. We also read Gloria Raheja and Anne Gold's *Listen to the Heron's Words*, Roger Lancaster's *Life is Hard*, Ruth Behar's *Esperanza*, Lila Abu-Lughod's book (not *Veiled Sentiments*, but the one after), Tsing's *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, and Robert Kelly's *The Construction of Inequality Among the Etoro*. Lancaster and Kelly were my two favorites.

So here is the question: for most of the semester we discussed the New Anthropology. There are new terms, what my professor calls "Newspeak." This includes such words as deconstruct, deploy, inscribe, "turtles all the way down," transgressive, hegemonic, and others. The thing is, most of the class, and myself included do not really like this new anthropology. I like the old school stuff. The readings focused on one aspect of the culture and in most cases it was gender inequality and women's resistance to men in many different ways. That is not the anthropology that I want to study. I really like Kelly's book because it had lots of analysis on things from long house construction to the food production and distribution and it was just good, like anthropology should be.

What do you think of all this? Do you agree with the new school? Do you think that anthropology is in the middle of an identity crisis and cultural anthropology will not exist in twenty-five years? I've been worried ever since my professor handed out the syllabus! So, I'd really love to hear your opinion on all of this. I do not want to spend my life "anthro—apologizing" for those who went out and wrote great ethnographies on cultures. I don't think they were wrong and promoting the Self/Other concept. What's going on? Please respond...

AnthroWatch readers are invited to respond.