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Connections on Death, Destruction and the Future - An American Perspective on the Former Yugoslavia

Joel Halpern  
*University of Massachusetts, Amherst, jmhalpern@anthro.umass.edu*

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Connections on Death, Destruction and the Future - An American Perspective on the Former Yugoslavia

by Joel Martin Halpern

In making connections to explain and evaluate the causes and consequences of violence in the former Yugoslavia it seems useful to explore varying temporal perceptions and the relative uses of power. These alternate perspectives range from the highly political linear time bound year frame of American intervention as presented to the U.S.Congress by the Clinton Administration to the unbounded liminal temporal categories of the combatants linked to medieval battles and ancestral graves. In proceeding to evaluate these categories and examine their impact on current historical process I feel it is first necessary to examine our points of departure.

Exploring Balkan Violence by Beginning With American and Western European History

Thus in attempting to construct this perspective on events in the historically "Balkanized" and marginalized former Yugoslavia I have decided to approach this matter by a brief initial inward look at our own history as well as that of Western and especially Central Europe. In doing this I wish to suggest more than the obvious that we are not without blemished virtue but also explicitly that concepts such as the contemporary term
"ethnic cleansing" implies is one with which we are, in somewhat altered forms, most familiar. Further that concepts of structured inequality which underlie such treatment are intimately familiar to us. In taking this somewhat awkward detour I do wish to stress that Orientalizing the Balkans neglects our own history both remote and proximate. Further I wish to suggest that this essay written on the eve of American and NATO military intervention in former Yugoslavia proceeds from the consequences of the conflict to an examination of their causes. I also wish to suggest that images shape temporal perspectives and affect the approach to attempted solutions. Clearly such solutions, as the Dayton Accords indicate, are conceived those who have power and their implementation is imposed, or attempted to be imposed, on those who have less. Further this asymmetry is relative not absolute and like the biological food chain follows a top down process emanating from without and proceeding within the former Yugoslavia.

The American perspective-Amherst

This American perspective is written from Washington, D.C. and Amherst, Mass. These places have had death and destruction in their seemingly remote and not so remote pasts. Amherst, Massachusetts is a peaceful place and the site of two colleges and a university. An important time marker is the tranquil and secure life of the 19th century poet Emily Dickinson who lived here and wrote about life's beauties and troubles as perceived

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from her bedroom window. Amherst is also home to principled Quaker protests against the Vietnam War which were held each Sunday on the town common while nearby the UN flag flew next to Old Glory from the town hall.

For an historical perspective on New England style ethnic cleansing one has to journey a few miles north from Amherst to the recreated 18th century village of Old Deerfield and view a road sign marking "Bloody Brook." It was here that there was a "massacre" of whites by local Native Americans in 1675 more than a quarter of a millennium ago.

This bit of violence was more than reciprocated by the white settlers intent on their own historic ethnic cleansing of the Indians. Here too there was another settler "massacre" in 1704 when the French were aiding the Indians to prevent British settlement. Even today it is the martyrdom of the ultimately victorious settlers that is remembered but their lineal and cultural descendants rather than the destroyed Indians. Classic ethnic cleansing also has its lighter side in freshman college humor as when Lord Jeffery of Amherst, for whom the expensive colonial style hostelry is named, is reputed to have sold smallpox contaminated blankets to local Indians.

Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C. is another matter entirely. Here warfare is more recent. It was after all during the War of 1812 when the British, in a brief stopover, did burn the White House. It is 12/7/95
possible that the British were attempting to also dry out Foggy Bottom and make it more habitable for their future diplomats. But Americans do think of the time of Lincoln in liminal terms. His historical personae are well-known but his commemoration with his statue opposite the Capitol at one end of the Washington Mall does place him in a liminal time frame. We remember the mature, sagacious, bearded Lincoln martyred at the height of his powers. By contrast the mix of secular history and its liminal moments for the Civil War and its epic battles, as in nearby Gettysburg, are commemorated by monuments and special parks. The South may not rise again but our national memories are recurrent. Recorded historical time depth in North America is much shlower than in the Balkans. Nineteenth century Gettysburg for the Americans is not the equivalent of the 14th century Kosovo Field of the Blackbirds for the Serbs but the resonance of historical events and their liminalization, their standing jout apart from chronological reckoning is something that is easily recognizable in American terms.

It is now some 130 years since that Civil War conflict ended and the slaves were freed, not as cause but as consequence, but their descendant’s full integration into American society is not yet. It is from the steps of this same Lincoln Memorial that historic images are etched betaking some of the liminality associated with Lincoln. This is especially true for African-Americans. It is here that Marian Anderson sang in the time of 12/7/95.
Roosevelt’s Presidency and Martin Luther King spoke in Kennedy’s and in 1995 in Clinton’s that the Black Muslim separatist Louis Farrakhan addressed a march of African-American men.

As American troops become involved in Bosnia to deal with the consequences of a destroyed federal state, here in the Capitol opposite Lincoln’s statue a precedent setting debate was being waged on the degree of devolution of federal powers to the states. This is certainly not the time of the splitting of the USA. But contentious Congressional hearings in the wake of the incineration of cult members in Waco, the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the murderous confrontation with federal authorities in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, all reflecting conflict with and questioning of federal authorities and agencies. It is a time of severe testing of federal institutions and the ability of the center to hold and accommodate diversity in all its forms. To date the center has held but we cannot be passive and simply assume its long-term survival.

Unlike the now extinct federal Yugoslavia which was composed of peoples with separate, although interlocking, histories the U.S. has had as its motto, “out of many one.” The ideology of the melting pot has idealized the absorption of generations of immigrants from Europe, as opposed to the historic status of African-Americans and the separateness with which Asian-Americans were treated. But the political correctness of multiculturalism seeing preservation of immigrant and native
American identities as opposed to their merging in a common stream are both long coexisting if seemingly opposed themes. They reflect contemporary aspects of the principal contradictions in the American political experience.

There have been obvious contradictions inherent in the Enlightenment conceived American Republic from its founding days. The mall has an obelisk honoring Washington and nearby is the Jefferson memorial with its inscriptions of enlightenment prose related to the Declaration of Independence and the subsequent Constitution. But there is still debate over the complexities of the Founding Fathers feelings with respect to slavery as an institution and what were their ultimate intentions with respect to their own slaves. Our imperial Manifest Destiny in "conquering" the Indian West and unilaterally altering the border with Mexico reflects absorption by military force not assimilation.

The Third World aspects of our urban life with its insecurities and murderous racial conflict is a direct part of this conflictful heritage although the cause and effect relationships are neither simple nor direct. Sporadic, individualized, and occasional group violence continues to mar our daily life, even that of the military. It certainly is appropriate in our journey of inquiry to the "benighted Balkans" to have in mind historic ideas of American ethnic cleansing, military dominance, racism and structured inequality along with

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some of its long-term consequences for our society. Certainly our
democratic institutions have been a critical and positive factor,
a fundamental distinction from the former Yugoslavia where a
multi-ethnic federal state was imposed by a Communist
dictatorship.

**Germanic Europe and the Holocaust**

In journeying to the Balkans, the heartland of "immemorial
ethnic hatreds," it is instructive to pause as we pass through
Central Europe, the heartland of the Holocaust in Germany and
Austria. Here was not the ethnic cleansing of imperial settler
expansion but the locale of Nazi purification policies within
settled populations. Here were the historically recent and
largely successful attempts to cleanse the Nazi lands by making
them Jew and Gypsy "free." An additional objective was to
enslave, and where necessary also to exterminate, the inferior
Slav races. A further goal was to rid Germanic lands of other
undesireables such as the mentally disabled and homosexuals. The
specifics of Nazi ideology are no long historically pertinent
for they were part of a regime unconditionally defeated in war.
But some of their objectives such as the elimination of Jewish
cultures were just as obviously successful. This devastating
historical experience of mass violence and killing for racial and
ethnic reasons, state supported or state condoned has, however,
clearly continued to have validity. Nazism, as such, has not been
resurrected but the anguished cry of "never again" growing out

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of the Holocaust experience lacks its former validity. One cannot equate the Holocaust with contemporary ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. It is vital to examine differences in ideology, techniques and specific consequences. But comparative analyses of accomplished genocides and attempted genocidal actions are necessary both for understanding and for seeking to preserve civil societies. In this effort omnipresent media images focusing on the dramatic moment or moments sometimes obscure rather than clarify. A scripted film tends to merge with a new video. The all become or seem to reflect linear images in a common chronology of our times.

**Ethnic Cleansing as Tourism - Dachau**

If we consider only the concentration camps of Dachau and Madthausen we, of course, get only a very partial picture of the imperial sweep of this unique genocidal undertaking. Given the conflicting nature of imaging in our contemporary world it somehow seems fitting to our contemporary modes of perception that in entering the reconstructed area of the Dachau camp from a suburban Munich rail line one is greeted by stacks of brochures from the local tourist office proclaiming the town of Dachau's cultural and historical heritage and its artistic traditions. This before entering a museum detailing how the process of extermination was carried out. For some these visits are pilgrimages of remembrance. But there is also the suggestion implicit in the travel brochures of Dachau that the tourism of 12/7/95
death can be enhanced by viewing highlights of the local culture. There are ovens in Dachau, which enhances the display, but gassing and cremation were not done here but at a neighboring camp. The Holocaust occurred in the pre-video age. Unlike Indochina and now Bosnia, where video exposure links them together in media-time, for the Holocaust there are only linear time distancing films, photographs and memories to document the slaughter. But when these historic elements are recreated in dramatic films such as Schindler's list there is a tendency to equate the artistic creation with the experienced past.

**Macedonian Gypsies and History as Media**

It thus becomes understandable when a staged media event or the attempt to stage a media event and heighten its drama merges the two worlds of experience. Thus Dachau is also a stage in the media focused environment in which we live. This concentration camp site has its memorializing churches and convents. Here the link between the history of the Holocaust and the Balkans can become direct. During part of 1993 the on site Evangelical Church was being used as a site of, stage to dramatize, refuge by Gypsies from Macedonia seeking asylum from deportation. The Gypsies were camped out in the church and in conversation appeared relaxed. The irony of seeking freedom in this memorial to martyrdom and violent death, specifically including their own ethnic ancestors appeared to be secondary to securing means to an end.

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This Gypsy group was, of course, undertaking this action in the land of, and requesting this asylum from, the descendants of their tormentors. This at a time some half century after the destruction of Nazi Germany but also in the context of ongoing crimes of individual and gang violence conducted against persons and family groups of Gypsies, Turks and other racially defined groups. The Gypsies’ desire to remain in Germany is eloquent testimony to the continuing economic inequality between Central Europe and the Balkans, especially its more southerly and eastern areas. World War II with its horrors and the complete defeat of the Nazis seems, in the long run, now to have affected some aspects of these relationships at all. Today’s Germany is, of course, a democratic state which has acknowledged its role in the Holocaust but attitudes and inequities persist with important implications for the future.

Madthausen - Aesthetics and Memory

The less visited camp at Madthausen in Austria provides a visitor with a more direct link to the genocidal past of the Holocaust. Here in a relatively isolated bucolic setting, on a hilltop amidst rolling terrain and prosperous farms the setting for unalloyed evil and barbaric depravity still seems, despite its similarities with Dachau, incongruous. Viewed on a beautiful spring day with the blue sky full of fluffy cumulus clouds and fields of bright yellow mustard and other ripening grains this site seems to speak so much for life and beauty and not death and

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destruction.

But one has only to enter to surviving bunker shaped headquarters building and descend several stories to reach the killing areas. Here are the infamous "shower rooms" with their tinny fake shower heads and the vault like doors to seal the rooms. Outside are the slots where the xylon-B gas was inserted to kill rooms full of Jews, Gypsies, Russians, Poles and others who met the extermination criteria. Nearby is a room with a stone slab, like an artifact from Pompeii, where skulls could be smashed to extract the gold teeth.

Nearby are the cremation ovens, now left permanently open in a room with memorial plaques. Outside beyond the immediate area of the main building and the reconstructed rows of barrack sheds which housed the prisoners was the infamous stone quarry with its very steep steps where the prisoners were worked to death carry stones. This made the killing easier because, especially in mass killings, it is easier the exterminate when people are made less human and become objects or things and no longer approximate the exterminators in those characteristics which make them fully human.

This journey through not really remote American colonial history as well as our recent imperial experience in Indochina and the brutal Central European-Germanic near past is all a most necessary prelude to encountering the contemporary Balkans with their "age-old" hatreds and their contemporary version of ethnic
cleansing with its rape, torture and murder. Here too there have been massive destruction of cultural monuments and even the burning of books. While in approaching to view and listen to the repeated horrors perpetrated in former Yugoslav lands it may be that those with links to Germanic heritage may carry the heaviest baggage of the recent past yet neither West Europeans nor North Americans can approach these sites of carnage and destruction as putative virgins entering an exotic and disorderly whore house.

Our perceptions of pasts are shaped, in significant measure, by the visual images to which we are exposed. This is especially true of recent events, newsreels films of the Holocaust, the TV coverage of Vietnam and, most recently, of Rwanda, and Bosnia come to mind.

**Images of Holocaust Induced Nostalgia and Refugee Realities**

But ironies abound in the world of visual images which can create an improvised nostalgia for the past as well as intensify the horrors of the present. It is for this reason that it somehow seems appropriate to enter into our perceptions of the contemporary killing fields of the Balkans through the Croatian village of Lekenik not far from Zagreb's international airport. This village was one of those in the former Yugoslavia that I began studying in the early 1960s. More to the point, at that time it had a relatively large number of still standing old-fashioned two-story rough hewn wooden houses, characteristic Croatian village architecture for this region. It was for this
reason that it was chosen at that time as the locale for the making of the Hollywood film, "Fiddler on the Roof," based on the classic tales of a Yiddish writer. No matter that the setting was eastern Poland. Lekenik apparently had just the right nostalgic Eastern European peasant appearance for an American audience.

In 1993 during a visit to Croatia I returned to Croatia together with an Austrian colleague. He was doing research on the historical background of this village to provide a comparative study with my earlier researches on the socio-economic development of this community. I wanted to share with him my earlier experience of the architecture. A few of the old houses are still standing. We cam upon a woman in the courtyard hanging out the wash and asked if we could view the interior. But we were strangers visiting strangers to this village. She invited us in but explained that she was not from here (Lekenik).

As we explored the rooms we noticed that not only was each room filled with a family's belongings but that they were all neatly arranged on the floor. Then we noticed that one of the women who courteously invited us in to view her room was wearing dimija, the baggy trousers of rural Bosnian Moslem women. It was at this point that our original acquaintance explained to us that they were three women here with their children and that their men were away fighting. At this point their tales of horror began to pour out. How their homes had been burned and that they were forced to flee, barely escaping with their lives while many of
their neighbors had been violated and then killed.

These horrifying details are now regrettably all too familiar. But it was not the fragments of recounted stories that is etched in my mind but rather the emotions that they brought forth. First, as we were departing, the small blond woman in the baggy dimija, initially shy, began to follow us down the stairs as we were departing. She looked sixty but with her young children was clearly in her early forties. As we exited to the courtyard she began to cry and was joined by her two housemates who also began to weep. Tears from strangers on the dole from a reluctant and overburdened state, living out fractured lives in a village that was once an imagined nostalgic setting for a now extinct culture -- the human detritus for a national power struggle that knows no boundaries. Their tears deeply moved us and our polite platitudes only succeeded in emphasizing our irrelevance and impotence. By the way have you seen the video of Zubin Mehta conducting in Sarajevo accompanying the burning of the Sarajevo Library - is there a parallel here to the tourist brochures at Dachau? The picturesque old farmhouses - a ready made site for commercialized nostalgia of a culture destroyed by the Holocaust now linked to a newer variety of brutality.

Lipik a Croatian Case of War’s Impacts on Civilians

But there is more to Death and Destruction than tales of killing, grieving and romanticized destruction. There are open spaces and silences where none had existed before. The
Brotherhood and Friendship Highway between Zagreb and Belgrade was once one of the busiest highways in Europe being not only the route from Western Europe to Greece but also to Turkey and the Middle East. Relatively small for a main highway but always overburden with trailer trucks and speeding Turkish workers from Germany. But while Serbs still occupied Krajina and nearby areas one only had to drive an hour or so from Zagreb to where the traffic fell off drastically. One of the huge gas stations would have only a single car - that of the sole attendant. Driving on the deserted highway along silent nearby rail lines one could powerfully sense the scope of the disaster.

We were headed for the spa town of Lipik in Slavonia. Our guide told us all the proper things about the Serbs from the Croatian point of view. But when he had finished he added not as an afterthought but as a primary manifestation of his feelings, how he missed his brother, a talented student, who had been killed wearing his sneakers in the initial days of fighting. They had been so close and shared so much. In wars, of course, the ultimate sense of personal loss remains both in defeat and in victory.

In approaching Lipik we passed through a number of casual UN check points manned by Canadians from Prince Edward Island and Victoria. We also were given some preliminary instruction in architectural forensics in viewing houses that had been burned out with their walls left standing. Those that had been shelled

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with inward collapsing walls and some which had been blown up with their walls splayed outward. Entering Lipik we were greeted by the shell of what had been the local branch of a Yugoslav chain, Buducnost (Future). The sign still hung but only by one of its supports. One of the features of the spa had been its large glassed in area, including a number of swimming pools. Now one could walk on acres of shattered glass piled high on the floor in irregular mounds. Nearby was the remains of a solidly built Catholic Church blasted to its foundations.

A feature both of the current Balkan Wars as well as World War II in Yugoslavia has been the personalized style implicit in rape, torture and killing. Here we could see the style of Serb violence. One of our guides related the story of a local doctor who had been captured. According to this account while still alive his legs had been each linked to a tractor which were then driven in opposite directions. There is a parallel here to epic poetry which we recorded in Serbia in the 1950s. In that case it was a Serbian widow who consorted with the Turkish rulers and as punishment was tied to teams of horses which were then driven in opposite directions. Such stories and linkages can, at this point, be no more suggestive of a style of execution.

More direct was an experience related by a woman whom we encountered in her garden while wandering around unescorted. She told us how she and her family fled Lipik when it was temporarily occupied by Serbian forces. However, her old parents remained
behind. When she returned she described how she found her parents garroted and hung from hooks in their kitchen.

Such an incident parallels the descriptions of Western reporters in the Krajina after the defeat of Serbian forces and the entry of Croatian troops. They describe how old people who remained behind here had been shot or murdered in various ways. In citing these instances my purpose is not to make some sort of equivalent between various kinds of events and, in effect, to say simply that this has been a brutal conflict and all sides have committed atrocities therefore all sides are equally guilty and by implication then no one is really guilty. Rather the point made is that there are observable parallels in individualized styles of killing. In this respect one can compare indictments against both individual Serbs and Croats already drawn by the War Crimes Tribunal at the International court of justice in the Hague. Overall responsibility is another matter entirely and needs to be considered separately.

**Personalized Nature of Yugoslav Ethnic Cleansing**

What these individual acts of murder in Lipik and Krajina have in common, and documented on a much larger scale in Bosnia, is the personalized nature of the killing. This is unlike the bureaucratized mass executions in the Nazi concentration camps. The distinctions are not absolute, of course, but there is a clear contrast in predominant styles. Also the executions of civilians in the former Yugoslavia have occurred in an overall
context of armed conflict and not on the part of an organized state against civil populations as was the case in the Holocaust which aimed at total annihilation of specified populations such as Jews and Gypsies.

**Styles of Destruction**

The personalized nature of the conflict is revealed not only in the killing but in the style of destruction. Just as the killings discussed above cannot be linked to a disciplined military campaign so the destruction of Croatian Serb forces observed in Lipik and elsewhere is not easily linked to the necessary consequences of military engagement. The smashing of all the glass in the covered spa took time and effort as did the incineration of the contents of houses which we visited and the style of destruction of the Catholic church with the thick walls leveled to foundation. It was not simply the gutting of the interior but the blowing up of the walls as well. This represents time consuming, purposeful destruction. Such destruction aims to obliterate the enemy’s past while one’s own culture and history are exalted.

Such acts can be reciprocal. In defining such reciprocal relationships there is not an attempt to somehow equate one act of destruction with another and therefore somehow to excuse all such acts as part of a bitter civil war. Such criminal acts need to be seen in the context of specific regional circumstances and must be judged individually. What is attempted here is to suggest

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reciprocal styles of behavior adapted by diverse groups in differing regional circumstances. But the intentionality of destruction in Lipik is linked to the video-documented and consistent destruction by Bosnian Croat forces of the famous historic bridge in Mostar. It was well built by the Turkish Ottomans and was a symbol of historic Moslem architecture. It was well built and could only be brought down by repeated shelling.

Another dramatic incident was the persistent Bosnian Serb shelling of the main library in Sarajevo. Its burning now achieving a physical liminal martyrdom in a tape made of the New York Philharmonic’s Zubin Mehta conducting a Sarajevo orchestra in the burned out shell of the National Library. The concert is now available on tape to supporters of Bosnian relief.

The physical destruction is emblematic of the time war being conducted. In the Second World War Hitler was focused on creating his Thousand Year Reich by selective destruction of people and the architecture of racially inferior cultures and exalting the pagan Germanic past as in a banalized Roman style imperial future - to judge by Speer’s plans for a future Berlin. The inferno that Berlin became in the closing days of World War II under Allied bombing and the advance of the Soviet army has no parallel in the former Yugoslavia. Here destruction has been more episodic sometimes seemingly random.

There has been killing, raping, wounding, looting and accompanying refugee creation on a regional level. Often these
events are restricted to a local community. But such happenings although at time seemingly unplanned have never been spontaneous or have emerged from "age-old hatreds." The wastage of people and the reciprocal destruction of historic pasts and infrastructure of the present has been rationalized by the desire of the Serbs and the Croats to create sterile and, in many ways, non-viable ethnic homogeneity. The Moslems remain formally committed to a multi-ethnic framework. But regional variation is important and the practical effect of implementation has varied.

The Role of the Past in the Future

As this article is being written 12/16/95