Oregon Undergraduate Research Journal
22.1 (2024) ISSN: 2160-617X (online)
ourj.uoregon.edu

Being Bosnian: The Means and Ends of Territoriality and the Genocide of Bosniaks in the Former Yugoslavia

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Abstract

The "Bosnian Civil War" (1992–1996) was a conflict that resulted in the ethnic cleansing of thousands of Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniaks. In the vacuum left by the fall of Communism, religious identification across space opened doors for various populist leaders to campaign for a newly defined Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the 1990 election results, which left a majority Bosniak coalition in power, led to the swift aggression of Orthodox Serbian and Croatian nationalists from the east and west, respectively. This research employs a spatial lens to deeply examine what fueled the genocidal campaigns that ensued, identifying how culture, religion, and history were symbolically challenged through the systematic redefinition of territory. Ultimately, nationalist influences from Croatian and Serbian political spheres played off fears of rising challenges to Bosnia and Herzegovina's nationhood in the political vacuum post-Communism, resulting in violence and the systematic destruction of spatial identity. Though eventually thwarted by NATO intervention, the mark of this genocide scars the former Yugoslavia's geopolitical landscape today, providing a brutal example of how redefinitions of space and place can begin and sustain a conflict—and how historical grievances, differences in religious and national identity, and a lack of individualism across territory can be exploited for personal geopolitical ambitions. There exists much scholarship on the Bosnian War, especially in the realm of international intervention; however, this article seeks to provide a novel historical analysis of the conflict by examining how conceptions of territory and those making place within it were reframed for geopolitical purposes before and during the genocide.

1. Introduction

The 600+ concentration camps and prisons constructed by the VRS (Serbian) and ARBiH (Croatian) armies during the 1992–1995 Bosnian War held thousands of Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniaks, throughout the conflict (Tanović-Miller 2001, 103). The factors that led to the genocide of ethnic Muslims in a state that lacked religious conflict under Communism is a matter of history, but importantly, also a matter of critical geography. Amidst the transition of the post-Communist state of Bosnia and Herzegovina to a democratically elected government in the early 1990s, the ethnic histories of Yugoslavia and the State of Bosnia were strategically retold by Croatian and Serbian nationalists seeking to claim power over newly contested land.

These histories can be related to the geographic concept of place, which is "understood from the perspectives of the people who have given [space] meaning" (Tuan 1979). Leading up to 1992, the volatile political environment, allowing previously unpopular regional visions and dogmas to gain legitimacy, resulted in the combustibility of Yugoslavian places. The connection between

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territory and political will created a geopolitical conflict that tragically ended in the genocide of thousands of Bosniaks, primarily at the hands of Serbian and Croatian nationalists:

> Genocide and ethnic cleansing elicit extensive and intensive geographic themes: the constitution of spatial identities, the geopolitical imagination of territorial purity, the spatial practice of genocidal campaigns, and the construction of international legal jurisdiction for the relevant protections and the geopolitics of intervention. (Dahlman 2004, 176)

In the present article, I seek to clarify that the principal means and ends of this conflict were territorial, arguing that the causes and ideological justifications for the identity-based movements that clashed in the Bosnian War are best examined through a nuanced understanding of how place and community developed from the mid-14th century through 1995. This qualitative research demonstrates that the context, actions taken, and subsequent results of this eventual genocide can all be related to the desire to influence current and past conceptions of place and space—the inclusion of culture, social life, traditions, and religion in how different groups view territory.

2. Methods

I reviewed existing literature and analyzed primary sources—first-hand accounts and post-conflict reporting—to establish a geographic narrative of this conflict. Sources were accessed through library collections and online databases, primarily the University of Oregon Knight Library and the Web of Science. To capture the territorial context in Bosnia and Herzegovina at any given time, it was critical that the present research utilize primary source analysis, interviews, and eyewitness testimonies from Bosniaks and Serbs—the two groups most frequently represented in the existing literature—alike.

3. Historical Conceptions of Place and Religion in the Former Yugoslavia

Religious and ethnic divides in Yugoslavia developed over time to influence how different groups viewed and acted upon Bosnian land leading up to the genocide of Bosniaks. Within the state, there persisted three main ethnic groups that constituted most of society: Catholic “Croats” of Croatian descent, Orthodox Slavic “Serbs” with roots in Serbia, and Muslim “Bosniak” communities, largely established during Ottoman conquest and rule of the region, which lasted for over 400 years. By the time Communism reached Bosnia post-WWII, no formal ethnic hierarchy had been established, and the members of these three ethnic groups lived harmoniously, with varying degrees of open religious practice occurring. However, under Communism, strict penalties forced confessional practice to occur solely in private settings, effectively secularizing the public sphere. In an interview, one Bosniak explained that during this time, Yugoslavia was “a melting pot,” and he perceived himself as a “Bosnian”—in accordance with his homeland—first and foremost, despite his ethnic identity (Gonzales 2021, 4:33).

Before the rise of Communism, Austro-Hungarian rule had decreased the proportion of the population who knew Arabic or had familiarity with the Quran (Hadžišehovic 2003, 45) amidst the push to teach Latin and Cyrillic. Leading up to the 1990s, Muslims in larger cities retained few to no remnants of the practice of Islam in their day-to-day life. While “there was a continuum of degrees of conviction” (Shatzmiller 2014, 29), the practice of religion had retreated to the homes of smaller villages, resulting in the ethnic distinction of a “Bosniak.” In this multi-confessional country, “Islam [became] understood as a cultural heritage, historical legacy, a set of practices and moral values” that were uniquely intertwined with the history of the Bosnian state.Held above these

ethnic distinctions, however, was the identification as a Bosnian, which "did have a collective cultural identity in which all Bosnians, including Muslims, shared" (Shatzmiller 2014, Xv). The formal secularization of Bosnian society after 1945 completely rid the nation of religious identification, turning a multi-confessional state into a multiethnic state where forms of in-group identification were purposefully suppressed. During this secularized period, the Communist revolutionary and politician Josip Broz Tito's political slogan of "Brotherhood and Unity" became an effective rallying cry for singularity in Bosnia. As demonstrated by the CIA census map in Figure 1.1, Bosnia and Herzegovina was a state with spatially interwoven ethnic groups; while some enclaving did occur, most provinces did not hold majority populations of one group but rather were diversified. The Bosniaks possessed a near-equal amount of land to their Serbian and Croatian co-nationals, as compared to land owned by the state, while communities were mostly diversified in urban areas leading up to 1991 (Tanović-Miller 2001).

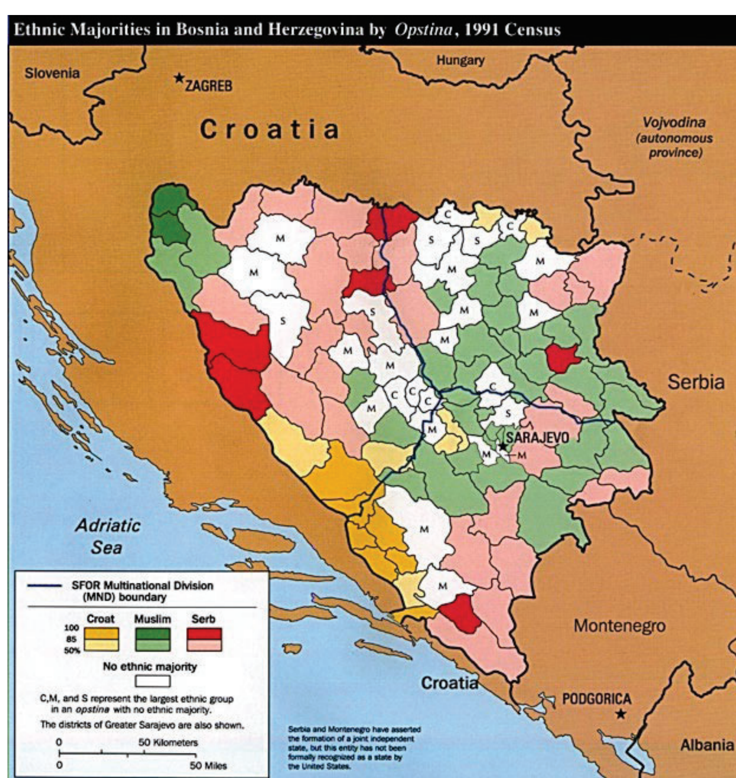

Figure 1. Bosnia and Herzegovina Ethnic Majorities Opstina Census 1991, CIA 1997 (264K), (Map Collection, University of Texas Libraries).[1]

However, when Communist Yugoslavia broke down in 1992, after years of rising nationalist sentiments following Tito's death, religion once again became a topic of discussion. Once-secular communities became battlegrounds in which the newly confessional ethnic groups resumed practicing. Religion soon became a newly present factor in identifying who was going to dominate civil power and space; this came to a head in the first Bosnia and Herzegovina elections in 1990, wherein Serbs feared a loss of political power.

After the fall of the Communist government, religious extremists from Bosnian Muslim sects arose alongside Serbian counterparts. In one

[1] Map Collection, University of Texas Libraries. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Maps." Accessed November 19, 2022. https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/bosnia.html

instance, a young Bosniak woman described how a group of several Muslim men aimed their guns at her and her boyfriend, insisting that the couple was not "supposed to have any physical contact in public" (Skjelsbæk 2012, 117).

The resurgence of religious extremism and policing in the public space was an immediate shock to a culture that had thrived over the past several decades in the absence of public acknowledgement of religion. The state of Bosnia soon became ethnically tense as Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats competed for political power, and religion would soon "become the divisive and decisive factor in the conflict when it was combined with ethnic nationalism" (Shatzmiller 2014, xiii).

This tension came to a head in February 1992, when Bosnia and Herzegovina would take its first step towards independence from Yugoslavia under a Bosniak-led coalition. A referendum for independence was supported by an overwhelming majority of the tallied votes, but due to a Serbian boycott of the Bosniak government initiative, it did not formally pass. Despite this technicality, the state was declared independent nonetheless. Serbian nationalists in the newly formed state would quickly declare their own independence and sovereignty, cementing a Serbian resistance that was supported by the Republika Srpska.

Discourse around religion served as a basis for Serbian officials to construct propaganda sensationalizing Islamic leaders holding majority power in the state, a development that was spun as threatening to the interests of Christian and Orthodox Europe. As tensions leading up to the 1990 elections grew, discriminatory rhetoric—such as that "Muslims [were] fixated in the anal phase of their psychosocial development" (Carmichael 2003, 129)—created a subsequent narrative about the "invasion of the state" by Bosniaks, which was spread efficiently throughout the country via Serbian channels. This propaganda marked the beginnings of rhetoric intended to justify violent action in response to the political success of Bosniak coalitions.

4. Political Restructuring and The Effect of a Geopolitical Vacuum

In the final days of Yugoslavia, a new regime would prepare to fill the Bosnia and Herzegovina political vacuum left by Communism and the wildly popular Josip Broz Tito, whose reign lasted for over 25 years (1953–1980). The traits of this new state were to be defined at the hands of a freely elected government, which would have the opportunity to guide the direction of national geopolitics. Previously, under Soviet influence post-WWII, the government of Yugoslavia decreed the dissolution of private property and ran programs such as the National Agricultural Plan that had serious repercussions for individual property rights. Peasants were often forced to enter collective farms, where they contributed land and livestock to the state. Subsequently, there was a massive loss of land and the rise of "a construction enterprise called 'work' …where many people were conscripted to join in the 'no rest until reconstruction'" way of life under the new Communist government. With the construction of communal housing units, for many, "the intimacy of living in a single-family home [was] lost, and people of different faiths [and] classes found themselves as neighbors." Sharing land and increasingly interacting with their multiethnic neighbors, the people of Bosnia began to know their country as homogenous between its borders, united under Tito's "Brotherhood and Unity" slogan.

This rapid unification led to the rapid deterioration of plural national identities based on Orthodox, Catholic, or Muslim heritage. During this period, public celebrations of religious holidays were prohibited in Bosnia; instead, "they celebrated state holidays such as the first of May, the new year, and the day of the republic." One Bosnian who lived through this time testified that the public ethos was "all about Yugoslavia,'" to the point that all citizens wore the "'same clothes… [in school:] a jacket, with caps, or a red cap with the

star,'" homogenizing identity within public spaces (Gonzales 2021, 1:58). From a geographic perspective, the Communist government's modes of creating a monocultural state made common the places that were once defined by dominant religious or ethnic groups, once spatially marked through the process of land ownership and subsequent individualization. Yugoslavia's polar transformation from a state with strong identity politics and varying cultural practices to one with a homogenous and collectivist identity centered around being Yugoslavian deeply influenced how individuals viewed the communities and spaces they lived in.

For Tito's Yugoslavia, "the breakdown of the class system meant [the automatic] breakdown of the party system," which strategically eliminated opposition and laid the groundwork for Tito's extended rule. The ideological move to Communism—imposed by the Soviet Union—was a politically effective way to deal with a multi-confessional place, leading to a largely harmonious state of being for many years. During its 45 years of Communist governance, the country of Yugoslavia quelled historical interethnic division under the framework of "Brotherhood and Unity." Based on accounts within the government, this peace was forcibly monitored, and if any citizen were to mention that they were "a Muslim, and going to go to the mosque... that basically meant prison" (Gonzales 2021, 4:00). People who were openly religious were punished and shunned from the Communist Party; those who worked in public service would often lose their jobs. Furthermore, "under Tito, the expression of any nationalist sentiments were regarded as an anti-state act... and therefore punishable as a form of treason" (Hadžišehovic 2003, 25-120).

As a result of these factors, by the fall of Communism, "all of Bosnian society was very secularized." Subsequently, when support for Communism collapsed in the late 1980s, religious identity resurged as a powerful factor in the motivations and ideations of a population with a new agency to define itself. Many accounts confirm that during this period, the number of Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians attending religious services in public spaces was increasing. During a Bjaram event in 1990 celebrating the end of Ramadan, eyewitnesses reported that one downtown Sarajevo mosque "gathered more people than could fit into the mosque and its courtyard" (Shatzmiller 2014, 13-29). This revitalization of public spiritual practice redefined Bosnia as a multireligious state, creating new opportunities for those living within the country to redefine what was allowed and accepted in their places; these new social norms affected collective visions of territory.

Subsequently, identity played a massive role in the first free elections held in the country in November of 1990. In this election, "all the candidates on the ballot were listed according to their [religious or ethnic] identity." The Bosnian Muslim Party for Democratic Action (PDA) was led by Alija Izetbegovic, and the Croatians were led by Stjepan Kljuic of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Meanwhile, the majority Serbian Party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), was "closely coordinated with political parties in Serbia proper" and Radovan Karadžić, the Chairman of the SDP who helped mastermind the soon-to-progress genocide in the state (Renéo 2008, 202).

Izetbegovic's writings about his vision for an Islamic State were a major source of concern for political opponents, particularly the SDP, and his rhetoric became the subject of much alarmist propaganda, especially as the likelihood of a viable Bosniak-dominated state increased. The concurrent rise of ethnic and religious identification recategorized Bosnian political life and put great pressure on the elections; the Serbian nationalists saw a religiously Muslim-controlled state as a threat to their alternative visions of what the territory should become post-Communism.

Seeking geopolitical control over the territory became the direct goal for the competing religious

groups, who saw the power of religion in the public and private spheres and sought to protect their interests in the developing public identity. Ratko Mladić, a convicted war criminal who was a military officer in the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) commented, "if they [Bosniaks] continue with this kind of behavior I am convinced that 21 December 1991 will be the beginning of the Rebellion against the Dahis" (Suljagić 2021). *Dahi* is a derogatory term for Turkish—subsequently Bosniak—individuals, which will later be discussed in further detail.

In the end, Bosnians voted overwhelmingly along ethnic lines: "PDA Chairman Izetbegovic was elected President... while the Bosnian parliament was made up of 99 Muslim Slavs, 85 Serbs, 49 Croats and 7 Yugoslavs." Radovan Karadžić immediately began leading efforts to delegitimize the results, constituting a Bosnian coup d 'état and laying the groundwork for a geopolitical conflict that would be compounded by growing Bosniak power within political and social spaces.

On February 29, 1992, the referendum to "leave Yugoslavia and establish an independent state" of Bosnia and Herzegovina was passed (Dahlman 2004, 177), and the reaction from Serbian leaders and propagandists was swift. Seeing a potential territory led by the majority ethnic Muslims as an acute threat to their goals of protecting Serbian identity in the collapsing Yugoslavia and stoked by unfounded fears of Jihad, Serbian leaders sought to take control over flourishing Bosniak land and places. These tensions cemented the fight to redefine Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Slavic place with Slavic customs and values; Bosnian Muslims were not included in this definition of Slavic due to their cultural and ethnic roots with the Ottoman Empire.

The result of the collapse of this multiethnic Bosnia could be aptly compared to a slingshot, primed for the powerful release of clashing political and religious revitalization. Serbian groups pulled the pouch holding the ammunition of identity geopolitics tighter. The race for political control was a major catalyst for nationalist expressions in the absence of a centralized and widely accepted authority; coupled with increasing religious identification, Bosniak communities soon became victims of the fight to cement and protect religious identities in spaces across the country.

5. Establishing Bosniaks as "The Other"

During their rule over the late Yugoslavia, the Ottoman Empire had enacted policies of forceful conversion to Islam, creating some of the early Bosnian Muslim communities, and were largely unfavorable to the land rights and political empowerment of the Orthodox Serbs in Bosnia and Serbia. Much of Serbian folklore and national pride is based on their uprising against the "Dahis," a derogatory term for the Muslim Ottomans, espoused in the famous folk song "The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas," which details the first Serbian Revolution against the Ottomans in the early 1800s. The construction of Bosniaks as a dangerous "other" occupying Bosnian territory was often associated with the espousal of terms such as "Turk," "Dahi," or "Dajije," which invoked images of the former Ottoman Empire and a geopolitically dominated history for Serbs and Croats. The "Turk" was not a framing that appeared out of nowhere, but rather, out of the leveraging of years of result of history and culture (Suljagić 2021) with the malintention to pursue territorial gains by painting Bosniaks as illegitimate inhabitants.

Most of the conversions to Islam in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina occurred during the extended period from 1386–1878 under Ottoman rule. One Bosnian woman testified that "to me, traditional means the Ottoman heritage," demonstrating the deep contemporary connections between the Muslim population and the genesis of their customs, even if not practiced during the years of Tito (Skjelsbæk 2012, 114). The

familial ties to an Ottoman past remained inseparable in some regions, and many viewed the present state of Turkey as an ethnic and cultural homeland (Hadžišehovic 2003, 13). These sentiments only contributed to Serbian assertions that Bosniaks did not hold allegiance to a Slavic identity that ought to be considered first in a "Slavic" territory.

At the inception of the Ottoman Empire, religious conflict and the crucifixions of Christian religious leaders became increasingly important in incarnating "Cristo Slavisa," an early form of Serbian nationalism and expansionism that positioned itself against perceived enemies, including the Muslim world (Shatzmiller 2014, xvi). The Serbian nationalists of the 1990s utilized these ancient qualms and sentiments as a form of propaganda that, in one instance, depicted the "same Muslims who built a shared civilization with the [C]atholic and [O]rthodox neighbors, colleagues, friends, lovers, and family members" as the "eternal, inimical other" (Skjelsbæk 2012, 56-57). Leading up to the elections of 1992, Serbian nationalists crucially attempted to invoke the strife of the period of Ottoman rule—playing off rising religious identification—and attempted to "exclude Muslims from the nation, because by adopting Islam they were perceived to have become de facto Ottomans (and were sometimes referred to indiscriminately as 'Turks')" (Carmichael 2003, 115).

The Serbian nationalist narrative was one of Bosniaks as outsiders embodying a land and culture that was not Slavic and was invasive to the Orthodox ideology. This narrative, born out of a period of Ottoman oppression towards Serbians, resulted in a negative association with Islam in the Serbian consciousness, driving much of the nationalist support for a conflict intended to "take back" the land that was being redefined politically and socially by the Bosniaks. Popular—and later propagandized—folklore included the outrageous claim that the Ottomans had built a castle out of Serbian skulls (Gonzales 2021, 8:46). The hyperbolized contemporary aggression of the Ottomans against the Serbs would become a rallying cry for the nationalists mobilizing against Izetbegovic's newly elected government in Serbia:

> Bosnian Muslim identity... lent itself... to reconceptualization. It was used by the Serb nationalist elites... as the permanent motif in the process of construction of Bosniaks as a mortal threat that must be physically removed from the projected Serb states on the ruins of Yugoslavia. (Suljagić 2021)

The Turkish identity was historically conceptualized as an omnipresent threat to non-Muslim groups in Bosnia, such that during the Austro-Hungarian rule, "some Muslims discarded the prefix 'hadzi' from their last names.... so as to mute any reminder of the Turkish" (Hadžišehovic 2003, 123). The Serbian nationalists' propaganda strategy was highly effective in mobilizing these social pressures against the backwards, potentially oppressive "other" that had once dominated that "Slavic" land. When interviewed recently, one 102-year-old Serbian explained that she still believed "the Turks were evil. When they saw a good Serb, they did everything in their power to kill him."

In the end, the ethnicities "of the former Yugoslavia were not destined to play out 'ancient hatreds,' nor was the multiethnic character of the state a primary cause of its collapse" (Carmichael 2003, 132). However, when grievances with the Bosniak "others" were amplified and reconstructed out of conflicts of the past, many ethnic Serbians were reminded of a historical narrative that portrayed Bosnians practicing Islam as menacing conquerors and colonizers of Orthodox/Christian land.

Ultimately, through garnering popular opposition to an ethnic group they characterized as foreign occupiers of their land, the Serbian government and the VRS would bring about the genocide of thousands of Bosnian Muslims (Arendt 1966, 306).

6. Focusing on Religion

Despite the secularization of society in the 20th century, religion became extremely influential in the demonization of a Muslim identity through the eyes of Serbian and Croatian aggressors. Largely, the Islamic "Umma"—the "community of Muslims worldwide"—did not have a major impact on the lives of Bosniaks leading up to the fall of Communism. However, the relic of Islamic and Turkish identities became a pillar of contrast with the European Christian norms upheld by Serbs and Croats. Though it lacked the presence of practice, "Bosnian Islam [was] capable of playing as a bridge builder between the Islamic world and Christian-defined Europe," increasing in relevancy as the secular influences of Communism declined (Shatzmiller 2014, XV).

Many non-Bosniaks took issue with this prospect in the light of increasing identity politics; their concern was then compounded by Izetbegovic's Islamic Declaration of 1970. In this declaration, Izetbegovic illustrated notions of "Islam in Bosnia" that were later used to fuel the fire of anti-Islamic sentiments when he took power in 1990.

The controversy surrounding Izetbegovic's writings emerged largely from his declarations that "there could be 'no peace or co-existence between Islamic faith and non-Islamic social and political institutions'"—Izetbegovic openly praised radical Islamic states in comparison to multi-confessional ones, such as Turkey (Bardos 2022, 61).

Izetbegovic's work proved useful for propogandists, who "claim[ed] that [a] utopian Islamic state [wa]s Izetbegović's goal for Bosnia" (Shatzmiller 2014, 15). When Izetbegovic defined his vision for an Islamic state, it did not align with the ideas of Serbian nationalist leaders. Instead, it was perceived as a stark threat to the new territorial and culturally protective motivations of groups that knew the place of Bosnia as something different.

7. Place, Identity, and the Pursuit of Territory

Territory served not only as an end of political and social strife, but also as a means of gaining ethnic and religious legitimacy in the advent of increasing competition amongst Serb, Bosniak, and Croat groups. The Bosnian War was inherently a territorial conflict; the political and eventually militant struggle for territory served as an expression of clashing desires to preserve ethnic and religious identity within a pluralist state comprised of places with new and outwardly competing ideologies. The breakdown of Communist Yugoslavia was an opportunity for nationalists in Croatia and Serbia to mobilize to grab land that they now claimed was historically theirs, creating a conflict operationalized by and seeking territorial gain. After the decline of the Ottoman Empire, nationalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed "a strong tendency toward Serbian expansionism" (Tanović-Miller 2001, 153–241).

Some of these ideas were "for the first time openly expressed by Ilya Carcinogen is his *Nacertanije." Nacertanije* was an influential piece of literature released around 1840 that advocated for the creation of a "Serbian Empire" and proposed the Serbian seizure of geopolitical power after the post-WWI fall of the Ottoman Empire in Yugoslavia. Part of this plan included the reintegration of "Serbian" land, backed by claims that Serbs owned 64–72 percent of all land in Bosnia (Tanović-Miller 2001, 153–241). A more accurate account of the proportion of land owned by Serbian citizens, according to census data from 1981, would have been roughly 19.5 percent. Despite the outrageousness of these territorial claims, they were espoused nevertheless, with the intention to gain political and social power through territorial homogenization in the newly independent state.

Amidst these sentiments, some common geographic themes emerged, such as the call to

unite fragmented Serbian populations—"it is now to be completed or perish" (Suljagić 2021)—in order to consolidate all those in Yugoslavia under a Serbian empire. Leading up to the Bosnian declaration of independence and the eventual genocide of Muslims within its borders, leaders in both Croatia and Serbia plotted to capture territory that they claimed as theirs. Underlying these sentiments was extensive anti-Muslim rhetoric from the Eastern Orthodox Serbian and Catholic Croatian nationalists, leading to the proceeding actions of targeted violence and ethnic cleansing within communities where Bosniaks had influence.

The actions of Serbian and Croatian nationalists can be partially explained by the theory that "Cuis regio euis religio," or "whose region is his religion" (Tanović-Miller 2001, 152): fears that a Bosniak-governed region would lead to the imposition of Islam pushed outside groups to attempt to recompose the ethnic and religious makeup of a space they felt was being invaded. Through the use of anti-Muslim propaganda, the Serbian and Croatian nationalists inside and outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina prepared to "homogenize" the territory based on perceptions of their own rightful ownership of the country. Primarily broadcast through television sets, "experts agree that misuse"—or intentional, targeted use—"of the media was largely responsible for the events that triggered the war," fostering deculturing effects (Sadic 2006, 3):

> The practice of genocide does not organically erupt from within a society. It is a planned affair, announced in advance, its practice intimately linked to a small number of individuals who see it as either a desirable or unavoidable part of their wider political concerns. (Carmichael 2003, 128)

Leading up to the first genocidal attacks, it was common to see propaganda claiming, "that the Serbs have a 'natural right' to Bosnia and [that] the aggression was not really an aggression but… the Muslims… being punished for their disobedience." Simultaneously, the crude narrative that the Bosniaks were solely remnants of "slaves who lived in and around the Ottoman empire (whom transmuted nationalized Christianity)" and who should belong to a "Serbian empire" was often peddled (Tanović-Miller 2001, 160). The intent of this propaganda was to convince Serbians and Croatians that Bosniaks were property of a Serbian regime, and it proved to be an effective means of establishing a nation of Serbs who did not want to share space with the Bosniak "other."

Populist theory concurs that "a crowd can be united only by emotions, never by reason: reason would be lost on the masses" (Lederer 1967, 31), and nationalists from outside of Bosnia made use of this theory in molding a vast nationalist network within a country that felt disaffected and taken advantage of by its perceived Bosniak oppressors. Within the nation's boundaries, Bosnians were drawn into a "vortex of inter-ethnic hatred and… neighbors were no longer able to live beside each other." Ironically, Dragan Obrenović, a convicted Serbian perpetrator of the genocide, once stated, "in Bosnia, a neighbor means more than a relative. In Bosnia, having coffee with your neighbor is a ritual" (Obrenović 2013, 2:24). One first-hand account from a Bosnian Muslim describes,

> My best friend was Serb… I slept in his house. I ate dinners, lunches, and everything. I mean, it was like, my best buddy, you know, and everything. And then it comes to the point where I receive this call from him where him and his parents are saying that they're going to come and kill us because we're Muslims. (Gonzales 2021, 8:46)

Where interethnic ties with neighbors once were strong, and boundaries previously meant little in the way of access to civil life, the impact of the targeted propaganda was immense, especially in the vacuum of a fallen Communist regime, and its intended results were favorable to the interests of

nationalists who wanted to "take back control" of their country. The Serbian nationalists achieved political power through a process that strategically redefined Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely by reframing popular perspectives that often incarnate "place," such as history, language, religion and social relations. This process was undertaken by physically and culturally cleansing, repopulating, and conquering space by force; as a result, this multi-ethnic state underwent stark, bloody, and undeniable changes intended to disrupt the political momentum and presence of practicing Muslims in public spaces.

For the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), the Serbian-controlled sect of the Yugoslav people's army, "ethnic cleansing was primarily a policy of territorial domination" (Dahlman 2004, 177). The VRS resurrected the historic "Usta š se policy of… 'kill a third, expel a third, convert a third,'" which was ironically once applied to Serbians by the Croatian Axis "puppet state" during the cleansing of Slavs during WWII (Shatzmiller 2014, 15). Throughout the Bosnian War, concentration camps—including the infamous Trnopolje and Omarska facilities—popped up, strategically utilized to fragment Bosniak communities and cover the most land possible within their radii. The largest of these camps is estimated to have held 7,500 Bosnian Muslims over the course of the war, though it is still unknown exactly how many concentration camps were established. The areas targeted for ethnic cleansing and resettlement, pictured in Figure 2, were selected to strategically cut off bubbles of historically Bosniak territory, such as the Sapna Thumb, and decrease the total area they could occupy safely.

Figure 2. Bosnia and Herzegovina Muslim Resettlement in the U.S. Sector: Target Areas CIA 1997 (221K), (Map Collection, University of Texas Libraries).

Primarily behind this ethnic cleansing was the clear intent to recategorize the Bosnia and Herzegovina land as Serbian. Mass killings; the rape of Bosniak women; and the destruction of private, public, and religious property were intentionally leveraged to erase Bosniak heritage, culture, and self-autonomy. Through the wrongful violation of the autonomy of Bosniak women—and by extension, it was reasoned, the culture to which they belonged—the mass rapes were ideologically

contorted as operationalizing "greater Serbia" or "pure Serbian territory" (Tanović-Miller 2001, 110). In some instances, Muslims were "made to urinate in the mosque and had crosses carved into their flesh. It is well recorded that Serbian and Croatian nationalists targeted the material culture of the Muslims in Bosnia," which included artifacts, libraries, and other relics (Carmichael 2003, 131). The dehumanization of Bosnian Muslims and defacement of their religion was a means by which to destroy personally and spiritually significant places; Serbian nationalists could more easily conquer the locations if they no longer held the untainted memories and culture of the Bosniaks. In desecrating the Bosniak vision for and presence on the land, the Serbian nationalists sought to erase these memories and reframe political and social life to their own territorial benefit.

Equally efficient in erasing Bosniak identity within territory was the "destruction of schools, churches, and mosques, individual homes belonging to [Bosniaks], along with infrastructure, to ensure that they [the Bosniaks] would not return" (Dahlman 2004, 177). In Sarajevo, shelling destroyed "anything and everything that makes a city in a civilized life," from museums to hospitals to sports centers, further wiping away the documented sociocultural impact of Bosnian Muslims (Tanović-Miller 2001, 8). The physical destruction of significant Bosniak infrastructure was a very potent strategy, and, in essence, it attempted to clear Bosnia of its Muslim culture and religion so that previously shared space could be redefined as wholly Serbian. The mass rapes and destruction of historical and religious property were symbolic in their violation of bodily and cultural autonomy, and these strategies were highly effective in capturing not only land but also the perception of ownership over place and people. Before NATO intervention in 1995, Serbian leaders had largely succeeded in mobilizing co-nationals to expand their territorial claims and wipe out the Bosniaks.

The relationship between religion and the need for territorial control presents a framework to understand how the Serbian nationalists utilized propaganda and violence to accomplish broader aims of gaining power in Yugoslavia. Contemporarily, there existed a popular sentiment that the Serbian nationalists did not pay mind to the methods they employed to reach their geopolitical goals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was said in local spheres throughout the former Yugoslavia that the violence had "been directed against non-Serbs in general," including Croatians; in specific instances, fellow Serbians who opposed the nationalist movement were killed as well, eliminating any obstacle to territorial domination (Shatzmiller 2014, 27). During the bombings of Sarajevo (1993), the Serbian offensive could not "distinguish between religious affiliations of the Sarajevans they kill[ed]." Many within Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed confusion and shock about the inclusion of "Bosnian Catholics and even some Bosnian Orthodox [in] death camps" (Tanović-Miller 2001, 4). Given the conflicting presence of Slavic individuals in notable concentration camps, it is clear that the Serbian objective throughout this conflict was simply to eliminate opposition in their pursuit of territory, even while employing nationalistic ideals that reconstructed the country as one that was threatened by outsiders seeking to claim "Slavic" land.

8. Discussion

The results of political restructuring, propaganda, emerging religious identification, and political disputes created the tense geopolitical environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina that reached a turning point in 1992. National identities of religion and power were molded throughout centuries of outside rule, first by the Ottomans and eventually by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These histories were suspended in time and place by Communism, ready for directed use by nationalists when the homogeneity of the state weakened after the fall of the Soviet Union. It is

critical to understand how the space of Bosnia and Herzegovina was ascribed different meanings through individual experiences; through the strategic recounting of history, negative experiences with the Ottomans could be mobilized with the goal of stifling Bosniak participation and life in the state. Geopolitical analysis of the Bosnian War in the 1990s clearly suggests that the perpetrators of the genocide were territorially motivated, perpetuated by nationalist movements from both the east and west of the country. Additionally, in qualifying this genocide as a territorial conflict, the understanding is formed that territory itself encompasses cultural, religious, and social agency. Achieving power over territory requires gaining influence over the dynamics of daily life, history, and the interactions they beget in order to change the meaning of places, and with the homogenization of space comes the homogenization of power. In 1990s Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbian nationalists employed these processes to work towards their greater ambitions of a Slavic ethnostate.

9. Future Directions

Multiethnic states have proven difficult to manage throughout recorded history, and today, Bosnia and Herzegovina exists as a partitioned state—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska—divided along ethnic lines. The nature of the Bosnia and Herzegovina multiethnic state in the 1990s presents a nexus of experience in understanding the complex dynamics of territory and the intentions of political actors in controlling land and culture; some of these dynamics are reflected in the ongoing conflicts on the Gaza Strip and Palestinian territories and the current events in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Gaining sociopolitical influence over the masses by remolding historical grievances, appealing to nationalistic sentiments, and espousing false information are apt tools to control territory. The resulting inability of marginalized populations to fight back through social, political, and cultural resistance has powerful ramifications, the significance of which has been demonstrated by landless workers' movements across the world, such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST).

This research creates an apt case study for geographic inquiry into the jus ad bellum and jus in bello aspects of "Just War Theory"; encourages scholars and students to engage with and clarify how territorial motivations are a highly effective means and ends of war; and reminds political historians that the tenets of nationalism—of yesterday, today, and tomorrow—can be best understood and combatted through adopting a geographic lens that encompasses the social, political and cultural push-and-pull factors of conflict.

Acknowledgements

Primarily, I would like to thank Dr. Rebecca Schuman of the Clark Honors College and the English Department for her consistent and candid guidance throughout the writing of this project. Within the context of her class, HC301: "Issues of the 90's," taught in Fall of 2022, I was able to blossom in my interests and connect geographic themes to modern historical writing with the help of her honest and directed support. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude towards the Clark Honors College itself for providing the opportunity for and encouraging students to engage in research throughout their time within the university. Their curriculum that requires the classes under which this research was formulated has expanded my horizons in the academic field, and I look forward to continuing to research freely and creatively as a result.

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