

Sarajevo, U.S.A.

"After my parents were sent off to the concentration camp, it was the neighbor with whom my father had coffee every afternoon who stole everything from our home before burning it to the ground." —Damir

"My next-door neighbor, who took care of me while mother was working as I was growing up, now lives in our home. They use everything that once belonged to us." —DALILA

"It was three days before my best friend could finally talk. She had returned after being yanked from my side as we slept in the women and girls section of the concentration camp. She said she had been raped all night by seven Serbian soldiers. One of them was our high-school classmate." —ALISA

THESE ARE THE VOICES OF WAR, testimonies of terror from Bosnian students who came to the United States after fleeing their ravaged country.

The conflict in Bosnia seems worlds away from us in the United States. Most Americans would have a hard time finding Bosnia on a map. Few of us understand who are the warring parties, what their conflicting goals are, or why this region erupted in violence four years ago.

Since the beginning of the war, the U.S. media has paid it scant attention—except in the wake of massacres, when the slaughter of innocent civilians reached appalling heights. The less dramatic atrocities—the rape camps set up to humiliate and impregnate captive Muslim women, the concentration camps for the killing of Muslim political, intellectual, and economic leadership, the systematic destruction of libraries and mosques, or the pervasive attack on civilian cities by artillery and sniper fire—barely flickered through our media and our consciousness.

The testimonies of the Bosnian students force us to take a harsh look

Are we
ignoring
the lessons
of Bosnia's
tragedy?

State, Religion, & Identity in Bosnia

YUGOSLAVIA WAS ORIGINALLY composed of six republics and two autonomous regions. In the early 1990s, after the breakup of the Soviet bloc, four of the republics—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia—voted to secede. (The autonomous regions had already been forcibly absorbed by Serbia). Only Montenegro remains with Serbia in the now shrunken Yugoslavia. Slovenia and Macedonia seceded without major incidents, but Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia have been involved for almost five years in a war that has cost over a quarter of a million lives.

Serbia is predominantly Christian of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Croatia is predominantly Roman Catholic. Bosnia, however, is multi-cultural: about 18 percent Roman Catholic Croats, 33 percent Eastern Orthodox Serbs, 45 percent Muslims, with the remaining 4 percent comprised of Jews, Albanians, Italians, and others. (Religious affiliation in Bosnia, though, is largely a nominal matter. As few as 10 percent of Bosnians genuinely practice their faith—a legacy of forty years of atheist communist rule. That hasn't kept opportunistic politicians from using religion to foster ethnic chauvinism and hatred.)

In the former Yugoslavia, "nationality" means ethnicity or religion—distinct from "citizenship," which, traditionally, is established by where one is born. These definitions are further complicated by the fact that during the war Serbia and Croatia were willing to give citizenship on the basis of "nationality." For example, a Serbian national (read Eastern Orthodox Christian) who lived in Croatia or Bosnia was still considered by Serbia to be a citizen of the Republic of Serbia.

Although such distinctions may seem strange to most U.S. citizens, they are not unusual in international law. China, Germany, and Israel, for example, grant citizenship to ethnic Chinese, Germans, or Jews born elsewhere who wish to emigrate to these countries.

This concept has been wielded in novel ways in the war-torn region. The Republic of Serbia, rather than encouraging Serbs from Croatia or Bosnia to immigrate to the Republic of Serbia, has tried to expand the state's borders to unite all ethnically Serbian communities within Croatia, Serbia, or Bosnia. To establish a single country with a continuous border out of these disparate communities, the Serb leaders needed to take over communities which were predominantly Catholic (Croat) or Muslim.

The strategy: "ethnic cleansing." To create "Greater Serbia," the Serbs have killed, imprisoned, or made refugees out of all or most of the non-Orthodox Christian inhabitants of those communities, while destroying their mosques and churches.

—Doug Hostetter

divided between those who fought with the Partisans (Tito's Communist guerrillas) and Chetniks (royalists fighting for the return of the Serbian king). The Croats set up concentration camps in which scores of thousands of Serbs, soldiers and civilians alike, were slaughtered.

But in Bosnia the story is very different. The most multiethnic of the republics of the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia has a rich history of tolerance and intercommunal living. In 1492 the Muslim leaders of Sarajevo welcomed and protected Jews who were fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. The earliest known European Passover Haggadah, brought by those early Jewish refugees, has been protected for centuries in the Sarajevo Library. During World War II, the Muslim curators of the library carefully hid the Haggadah before Nazi troops occupied the city.

Early in this current war, the Sarajevo Haggadah was saved a second time. After three days of shelling by Serbian forces, the Sarajevo Library burst into flames. As the library was burning to the ground, the citizens of Sarajevo braved sniper fire and incoming artillery to rescue the Haggadah as well as other priceless books and manuscripts.

Just twelve years ago, the world witnessed the graceful and easy intermingling of peoples and religions during the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. Such harmony is completely consistent with Bosnia's history of tolerance and pluralism. People of different faiths and ethnicities have long lived and worked side by side. In 1991, the year before the war began, almost a third of all marriages registered in Bosnia were interethnic or interfaith marriages.

Prior to 1992 Bosnia would have outranked the United States, by almost any objective criteria, as a successful multicultural, multiethnic, pluralistic society.

WHAT HAPPENED in Bosnia in just a few short years? How could a people with a history of tolerance and pluralism begin to plunder, rape, and kill their friends, neighbors, and coworkers—the very people with

at the realities of war. But they also point to a frightening possibility—that the horrors of their homeland are not all that distant.

PART OF THE reason for our ignorance is the assumption, voiced by some politicians and journalists, that what happens in Bosnia is of no real relevance or concern to us in the

United States. After all, we're told, "They have been killing each other for centuries."

Certainly some ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia have a long history of conflict. Croats and Serbs have been enemies for centuries. During the Second World War, the Croatian government allied itself with the fascists, while the Serbs were

whom they had been peacefully coexisting for so many years?

The answer is complex, involving ideology, propaganda, and a failing economy.

After World War II, Marshal Tito united Yugoslavia under a socialist government but kept his country out of the Warsaw Pact. As the titular head of the Non-Aligned Movement, Tito carefully positioned Yugoslavia between the Eastern and Western power blocs. The United States and Western Europe rewarded Tito for his independence from the Soviet Union through generous amounts of aid and loans, which helped Yugoslavia become one of Eastern Europe's most prosperous countries.

The breakup of the Soviet bloc had a profound effect on Yugoslavia. With the U.S.S.R. in disarray and the Warsaw Pact no longer a threat, support of Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned Movement was no longer a priority for the West. Financial aid dried up, and demands for repayment replaced offers of loans. Inflation and unemployment increased drastically in Yugoslavia.

With the crumbling of international socialism, many Yugoslav politicians chose ethnic nationalism as their ticket to power. When nationality is based upon ethnicity, and ethnicity is identified by religion, people of other religious or ethnic groups tend to be treated as traitors to both God and country.

An article in the *New York Times* in November 1993 quoted Zeljko Razmatovic of the Serbian Unity Party: "We are fighting for our faith, the Serbian Orthodox Church. We are fighting for a united Serbian state. This party will believe in God and Serbia."

Razmatovic is well known in the War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague. His "Christian" irregular forces were notorious for the rape, murder, and pillage of Muslim citizens of the towns and villages of northern and eastern Bosnian during the first year of the war.

"Ethnic cleansing" is the term coined by Serbian politicians to describe their policy of removing all

non-Serbs from territory they control. Murder, rape, and concentration camps have been used to drive Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Croats, and Jews from communities where their families had lived for five hundred years. Houses of worship, libraries, and other cultural institutions were routinely destroyed.

In 1992 Serbs "ethnically cleansed" the 70 percent of Bosnia that they took over with the help of the

How could a people with a history of tolerance begin to plunder, rape, and kill their friends and neighbors?

Yugoslav Army and irregular Serbian militias. Last July the Serbs "ethnically cleansed" the Muslim inhabitants from the U.N.-protected "safe areas" of Srebrenica and Zepa. The women, children, and elderly men were pushed across the battle lines to territory controlled by the Bosnian government, but the seven to eight thousand men and boys over fifteen were slaughtered.

Religious nationalism and bigotry seem to breed hatred and brutality on all sides. One month after the Bosnian Serbs "ethnically cleansed" almost fifty thousand Muslim inhabitants of Srebrenica and Zepa, the Croatian Army used a similar policy to forcibly expel over 150,000 Croatian Serbs from the Krajina section of Croatia.

We in the United States look with indignation on the ethnic slaughter in Bosnia. We pride ourselves on our national commitments to pluralism and tolerance. We insist that our society could never succumb to such extreme and violent ideologies.

But are we suffering from historical amnesia? During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, our European ancestors "ethnically cleansed" the Native American population of this country through forced relocation and slaughter—every bit as brutal and deadly as that in present-day Yugoslavia.

Nor can we forget the legacy of slavery, which, with religious sanction, was an essential component of our socioeconomic system until only 130 years ago. More recently, during World War II, very few Americans spoke up as our own government incarcerated American citizens of Japanese ancestry and confiscated their property.

THE HORRORS of Bosnia are rooted in a dangerous conflagration of religious nationalism, political ideology, and economic instability. When we start to assume, "It could never happen here," we would do well to consider this volatile mix.

The religious nationalism that divides Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim in the former Yugoslavia is simply a modern version of an old terror. During the Middle Ages, similar kinds of religious nationalism led to the crusades where Christian warriors slaughtered Muslims, Jews, and other "infidels" in order to reclaim the Holy Land for Christianity.

Modern-day Christians like to assume that this kind of idolatrous confusion of God and state perished with the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, it seems to be enjoying a worldwide rebirth. And it is not confined to the extremist movements of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, or Judaism.

In the United States and Western Europe today, religion is feeding into dangerous social polarities. Much of the religious Right promotes forms of nationalism tinged with ethnic exclusivism (championing English only,

Sparrow

I am having a hard time remembering
Why I thought it was a good idea to bring
Children into the world. In a magazine in my home
Is a picture of a Croatian child,
Naked and spread-eagled on a hospital bed,
The camera pitilessly poised from above.

The child's small red face is contorted in a way that is
All child, all need. Mouth stretched wide, eyes clamped
Narrow, every muscle bawling *Mother*, silently,
On page sixteen.

The child is spread-eagled, but not in quadrants
As that would imply. The lower right quadrant
Is empty. The sheet yawns.
From the hipbone to the pelvis is a socket, newly-healed over,
Where a leg used to grow. The male parts dangle there,
Like a too-short tail on a kite.

It isn't decent to be writing such a thing, even simply
To describe it for you. But then, why is it sitting
In a magazine in my living room, for anyone to browse upon
As dinner is prepared? How do I explain to my children
This picture, should they stumble upon it,
Should they look over my shoulder now?
How it came to be, how they might help,
Why they should not be afraid.

I think they should be very afraid.

opposing multiculturalism and "alternative lifestyles," fighting affirmative action, limiting immigration). Some aspects of the movement are explicitly racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and at times anti-Catholic.

In its most extreme forms, White supremacist movements drape themselves in the mantle of Christianity. Radical militia groups similarly use religious language in promoting their cause. Some religiously motivated groups opposing abortion have sanctioned the killing of doctors who perform abortions.

The "god of our tribe" mentality is alive and well—and, if left to grow, it cannot help but lead to violence and genocide.

A CRITICAL PART of Bosnia's slide into war was the economic instability of the post-communist era. Many Bosnians, remembering the early waves of ethnic nationalism that swept through their communities, have told me that much of the mass hysteria and prejudice was rooted in fears of severe economic crisis. A comprehensive social-welfare system

had fallen apart, leaving in its place high inflation and unemployment.

The Bosnians know all too well: when facing uncertainty and hardship, people tend to become more ethnocentric and more vulnerable to demagogues who focus popular insecurity onto scapegoats.

The phenomenon is hardly limited to the former Yugoslavia. In this country, studies have demonstrated an inverse relationship between the price of cotton and the number of lynchings in the South in the early twentieth century. When the price of

My neighbor is spraying the sparrow's eggs with Pam.
This sounds much crueler than it's meant to be.
Sparrows are one of the farmers' worst pests.
Even apart from the damage to the fields is the way
They nest and roost in ever-growing numbers in the barns—
Splattering hay, grain, barrels, benches,
Fleece and tools with their dung.

The farmers connive endlessly to eliminate them.
They order complicated woven-wire traps, paint
Smelly sticky liquid on their roosts, hang
Scary balloons. Yet the sparrows twitter and wheel
Ceaselessly through the barns.

Now a neighbor advises, spray their eggs with Pam.
Not only does this suffocate the embryos. It puts
The mother out of production for the long while it takes
To realize, to accept, something is wrong.

I used to dislike political poetry; I still do.
I do not go to poetry for headlines, demonstrations,
Disasters, debate, analysis, commentary, news.

I didn't realize that writing political poetry
May not be something one does out of choice.
That it may come up from one's gut like bile.
That a child with a leg blown off is not a metaphor for
anything.

Nor, really, a sparrow brooding stone.

P. H. Crosby

cotton went down, lynchings of African Americans went up.

In 1996, the United States is in a situation similar to Bosnia ten years ago. As our once-vaunted economy begins to falter, Americans are feeling insecure and vulnerable. Large numbers of economically anxious Americans are susceptible to opportunist politicians who would build their own careers through the use of ethnic hatred, religious chauvinism, and convenient scapegoats. The popularity of hard-line radio commentators like Rush Limbaugh and Oliver

North, the surge of Pat Buchanan during the early presidential primaries, the growing backlash against minorities and persons on welfare—are these benign cultural and political developments? Or are they more ominous indicators?

Not long ago I was speaking with a leader of a peace organization in Croatia. She recalled ten years ago when a handful of politicians and university professors started preaching the "gospel" of ethnic chauvinism. She lamented that, at the time, most of the religious and peace communi-

ties simply dismissed them as crazies.

"We didn't take them seriously," she told me. "They were such a lunatic fringe. We had no idea of the appeal their message would have during times of great insecurity."

I THINK OF two images of Sarajevo: the Olympic city of a decade ago, a sophisticated, cosmopolitan city rich in history and culture, alive with diversity and pluralism. Then, the Sarajevo of today, a city of death and destruction, torn apart by ethnic and religious factionalism and vicious ideologies.

Today in the United States, we are challenged by the two Sarajevos. We can embrace the path of pluralism, tolerance, and inclusion—or we can succumb to the voices of ethnic and religious bigotry, of fear-driven ideologies of exclusion and extremism.

As Christians, our commitment must be to God, who transcends all nations and races, even all forms of worship. We need to clearly label as idolatry any attempt to harness God to an ethnic group, nation, or political party. We must look to Jesus, who constantly broke down social barriers and proclaimed that all people are God's beloved children.

We must also listen to the students of Bosnia, who remember a time of peace and harmony only a few short years ago. They bear witness to the horrendous cost of sectarianism and hatred.

Will we hear them?

Author DOUG HOSTETTER directs the Fellowship of Reconciliation's Bosnian Student Project, which has brought 120 Bosnian students of all ethnic and religious backgrounds out of the war zone and into U.S. homes and schools. Doug will be leading two work camps in Bosnia this summer. For information, call 914-358-4601.

Artist HANS BURKHARDT was a prolific painter, creating antiwar paintings throughout his lifetime. In his "Black Rain" series, charred wood, and shredded material are arranged in scenes of devastation. Hans Burkhardt's estate is represented by Jack Rutberg Fine Arts in Los Angeles.