
DIVIDED THEY STAND

Fifteen years on from the end of the war, Bosnia is struggling economically and politically—and is more ethnically fractious than ever. Will the conflict return?

JANINE DI GIOVANNI



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Thucydides once wrote that war is a violent teacher—meaning, I suppose, that one should take lessons from past brutalities. Yet the Balkans, a region that has suffered more than its share of horror, seems doomed to repeat the past. The war that gutted the region has been over for 15 years, yet the process of reconciliation is nowhere near complete. Postwar reconstruction is always challenging, but Bosnia has deferred it to spectacular levels. Why?

Janine di Giovanni's memoir of life as a war reporter, "Ghosts by Daylight," will be published by Bloomsbury in 2011

When Bosnia's leaders sat down in a dreary airbase in Ohio in December 1995 and signed the Dayton Peace Accords, they ended three years of fighting that had devastated the small, landlocked republic and killed an estimated 100,000 Bosnians. I reported that war, and return to the country often—particularly to the capital, Sarajevo, which sustained a 1,425-day siege. Today the smoke, the smell of burning, and the crowds of ragged people gathered on corners waiting to run the gauntlet of snipers in the hills are memories. In "sniper's alley"—the main drag between the airport and downtown—the graffiti that read "Welcome to Hell" has been painted over. The winding, mountainous roads ▶



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through central Bosnia are no longer littered with rusty tank traps and soldiers pointing Kalashnikovs. The underground “tunnel of life,” used to get medical supplies, arms and soldiers into the besieged city, is now a museum.

Yet there is a feeling that things could erupt again. Before the war, none of my Bosnian friends could tell me what ethnicity they were: half-Croat, one-quarter Serb, partly Jewish with some Muslim thrown in. Or they said they were Yugoslavs. Not so today. When I ask them about the possibility of renewed violence, some recoil, but others nod and tell me the Sarajevo taxi drivers—90 per cent of whom are former fighters—talk about it constantly. Bosnia will hold parliamentary and presidential elections on 3rd October, and the campaign is compounding hostilities. Despite an international rebuilding effort which has cost around £4bn, Bosnia is a mess. Its economy is lagging; corruption and ethnic divisions are rife.

Perhaps this is unsurprising, given what happened to people. A friend who was a frontline commander during the war

once described the transition he had to make. “What the hell did I know about war? I’m a lawyer,” he told me. But he “had great hand-eye co-ordination” (he was an expert videogame player) which helped when he had to start using guns. People like him, with no inclination towards fighting, were suddenly defending their street, their neighbourhood, their city. When the war ended, these same people were thrust into peacetime. And life in peace is never as simple as it seems when you are sitting in a trench desperate for the war to be over.

The war in Bosnia was part of the wider collapse of Yugoslavia from 1991-95 (see below). The Dayton agreement ended the war but fixed the ethnic divisions it created in stone. The new state it brought into being, Bosnia Herzegovina, is divided into two parts: the Republika Srpska (RS) for Serbs, and the Bosnian Federation for Muslims and Croats. Each has myriad layers of government; the Bosnian Federation is subdivided into ten cantons, or counties. Sarajevo is still the capital, but the two smaller entities have more power than the state, as well as their own presidents, parliaments, governments and representatives. The entities control justice, commerce, education, health and policing, and the state takes care of customs, financing of institutions, the army and air traffic control. All this in a country about two thirds the area of Scotland and, with a population of 4.6m, slightly fewer people. Unsurprisingly, the arrangement has bred tension and infighting. “Dayton stopped the war,” says one diplomat. “But it’s no good if you stop the war and have political fighting that goes on and on.”

Thus far, Bosnia has been overseen by the international community in the form of the Office of High Representative (OHR), set up to shadow and protect the state. The OHR, which was run by former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown between 2002-06, is meant to work with communities to “ensure Bosnia evolves into a peaceful democracy.” Yet Bosnians regard it with suspicion and there are reportedly plans to scrap it in favour of a more powerful European envoy who could push through a new constitutional order.

There would be good reasons for such a move. If anything, ethnic divisions in Bosnia have got worse since the war ended. I know many Serbs who stayed in Sarajevo, fighting the

THE WAR THAT BROKE YUGOSLAVIA

1945 Founding of the modern country

Josip Broz Tito establishes the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, incorporating the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tito and his soldiers rose to power fighting the Axis powers’ puppet government in Croatia and Bosnia, which had stoked Croat nationalists into wiping out tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews and gypsies in its territory.

1974 Cracks appear in the federation

Pressure for independence in the different republics grows. Tito’s government responds with a new constitution formalising national rights and granting two ethnically heterogeneous

provinces—Kosovo and Vojvodina—autonomy from Serbia. Tito’s death in 1980 is followed by a decade of rising ethnic and nationalistic tensions.

1987-89 Milosevic’s rise to power Slobodan Milosevic becomes president of Serbia. He rewrites the Serbian constitution to make Serbia the dominant voice in the Yugoslav federation. Slovenian and Croatian delegates to the federation walk out in protest at Milosevic’s insistence on a single Yugoslav state.

1990-91 Yugoslavia collapses In Croatia, Serb separatists begin fighting the authorities; referendums in Slovenia and Croatia—boycotted by Serbs—return huge pro-independence majorities, and the central government responds by invading both republics. Slovenia wins its war in ten days, but the Croatian conflict lasts until

1995, leaving 20,000 people dead and 300,000 displaced. Late in 1991, Macedonia declares independence and is allowed to leave peacefully.

September 1991 Sanctions The UN imposes an arms embargo on the former Yugoslavia, putting landlocked Bosnia at a disadvantage.

October 1991 Bosnia fragments Bosnian Serb politicians led by Radovan Karadzic (below)



break away from the government and declare an independent Serb state in Bosnia, later named the Republika Srpska. In November the Croats declare a Croatian republic of Herzeg-Bosnia.

besieging Serb forces alongside their Muslim neighbours. I heard recently from one Croat woman whose Serbian husband was killed defending Sarajevo by his cousin, who was on the other side. Now her Muslim neighbours regularly deface her letterbox; she tells me it never happened before the war.

The problem is that the system now reinforces, rather than downplays, ethnic differences. A new term was coined after the war to describe Bosnian Muslims: Bosniaks. There are now 82 schools in the Bosnian Federation which segregate their pupils. The children are taught their own dialects—Bosniak for Muslims, Croatian for Croats—and their religions separately. “We ceded the educational system—the frontline of Bosnian politics—to the nationalists,” one politician admitted to me. The assumption seems to have been that some degree of ethnic separation was inevitable after the war but that, over time, confidence would return and intermingling would spontaneously arise. But this has not happened.

The economic situation has not helped. Unemployment is 40 per cent and the average income in Bosnia is less than £5,000 a year, so young people don’t travel around the country and see how others live. “We used to go, before the war,” one student in the RS said. “Now we don’t, because of money, but also because people are divided. It makes us insular.”

Sarajevo, once a beacon of mixed ethnicity, is now predominantly Muslim. The many mosques, built after the war, are crowded. The city is flooded by largely illiterate Muslim refugees from eastern Bosnia, who were driven out of their villages by Bosnian Serb nationalists. (The “real” Sarajevans moan a lot about the lost cultural glory of their city.) And the Bosnian Federation has become a little Muslim statelet in Europe. Turkey, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are all vying for influence here—though I was told that the countries would rather do business with the more prosperous Serbia.

In central Bosnian cities like Zenica and Travnik, imams give fiery lectures and help to create what the RS interior minister, Stanislav Cado, called breeding grounds for “home-grown terrorists.” Bosnia is not Afghanistan, but 15 years ago, you never saw women covered up; you do now. In the town of Bascarsija, I even spied the odd Wahhabi wandering about.

And then there is “east Sarajevo”—and the gateway to Republika Srpska. During the siege of Sarajevo, it often took

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reporters all day to get to and from Pale (then the capital), 11 miles away, to buy fresh eggs from farmers, or petrol from black marketeers. You had to either cross the hair-raising airport frontline, or take the icy mountainous roads, where you would be forced to swig plum brandy with the drunken, toothless Serb snipers who took pleasure in aiming at women and children in the city below. These days, the drive into the mountains is gloriously picturesque as you climb to the peaks where the 1984 Winter Olympics were held. But as the air grows thinner, you notice that you are in an altogether different place. The culture of the Republika Srpska seems to breed suspicion of outsiders, a sense of resentment and a fear, perhaps, that their tinpot republic will be snatched away.

If you ask most people who live in the Bosnian Federation about Dayton, they will complain. They feel that their politicians let them down, that front lines got frozen after the war, that the bullies got rewarded. But in RS, people will more than likely defend Dayton. “It is their Bible,” Tanja Topic, a political analyst from Banja Luka, the capital of RS, told me. “Because it created their country. It defines them.” Dayton didn’t favour the Bosnian Serbs, but it did give them a territory of their own.

The heart of the political problem is the imbalance of power between the two entities and the state. It has resulted in a puerile struggle between Haris Silajdzic, the Muslim president of Bosnia, and Milorad Dodik, the Serb prime minister of the RS. They go at it like babies trapped in a playpen, fighting over the same toy. They loathe each other, but pretend not to. Dodik will hint—or even say, as he did in 2006—that RS will leave the federation, as Montenegro left Serbia. Silajdzic will shoot back that they are bound together by Dayton. When I asked Silajdzic if Dodik was serious about leaving the federation, he said, “He might want to.” Then he paused and smirked. “And I might want to buy Hawaii.” ▶

February 1992 The UN arrives A 39,000-strong UN peacekeeping force, which moves into Bosnia later in the year, is deployed in Serb-held Croatia. In eastern Bosnia, Serbs begin ethnic cleansing of Croats and Bosniaks.

April 1992 The siege of Sarajevo As soon as the EC recognises an independent Bosnia on 6th April, Bosnian Serb forces led by Ratko Mladic begin a siege of the capital, Sarajevo. Ten thousand people die in the siege and a further 56,000 are injured, as Serb forces shell civilian areas. “Yugoslavia” now comprises only Serbia and Montenegro, which form a federation.

May 1992 The Graz agreement Karadzic meets the Bosnian Croats in Graz, Austria. They agree to minimise fighting between their factions, and concentrate on taking territory from the

Muslim Bosniaks. The Croat-Bosniak war, the “war within a war,” begins the following month.

1992-1994 Ethnic cleansing Thousands of Bosniaks and Croats are massacred in Serb concentration camps in Bosnia. Over 20,000 women are thought to have been raped. Croat paramilitaries murder thousands of Bosniaks.

1994 The Croat-Bosniak war ends A US-brokered ceasefire holds; Nato shoots down Serb planes violating a UN no-fly zone.

July 1995 The Srebrenica massacre Ratko Mladic’s forces execute 8,370 Muslim men and boys around the town of Srebrenica, designated a “safe area” for refugees by the UN. Peacekeepers (above right) fail to prevent the massacre, in part because a Dutch colonel’s request for an airstrike on Bosnian Serb



positions is submitted on the wrong form. Nato eventually brings in air support and ends the siege of Sarajevo.

November 1995 The Dayton Agreement Milosevic and the presidents of

Croatia and Bosnia meet in Dayton, Ohio and agree to end the war in Bosnia. They negotiate an agreement which splits Bosnia’s government into two autonomous entities, roughly establishing its present-day structure.

2006 Montenegrin independence After a referendum, Montenegro splits from Serbia, finally dissolving what was left of Yugoslavia.

It's tiring, sometimes, watching politicians mess up this country after one of the most expensive postwar reconstructions in modern history. Dayton could have done more to help thaw ethnic divisions, but Bosnians also have a responsibility that many are not living up to. "No one here has collective guilt," one young, educated Bosnian Serb told me as we sat in a café in Banja Luka. She was adamant that all of Serbia should not pay for what a bunch of warped militiamen did. "I didn't go to Srebrenica and kill anyone," she said, sipping espresso and pushing back her Ray-Bans. "I did not dig the graves. Why should the whole Serb people bear the shame?"

Others, notably Bosniaks, believe the country will never move forward into a South African-style truth-and-reconciliation epoch until there is some kind of collective acknowledgement of the Srebrenica massacre, in which nearly 8,000 Muslims were killed by Bosnian Serbs in July 1995. (In March the Serbian parliament narrowly voted to adopt a resolution "condemning" war crimes in Srebrenica, effectively apologising but still stopping short of calling it genocide.)

There is also the complicated question of identity. Who are the Bosnian people? Are they former Yugoslavs? Muslims, Croats, Serbs, Slavs, Jews, Slovaks, Romas? It does not help that under Dayton, politicians must be from one of the three "constituent peoples"—Bosniaks, Croats or Serbs—to stand for election to the parliament or presidency. As Srećko Latal, a former journalist who is now the Balkans analyst for the International Crisis Group, a conflict-resolution NGO, puts it: "This is a marriage where three partners rape each other."

Bosnia's leaders should be angling to join the EU and Nato. It has vast natural resources—an oil refinery recently opened in the RS—a promising agricultural sector and the population is young. But, for the most part, people still look back to the war. A psychiatrist told me she believes nearly all the wartime population suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. "So it's a walking insane asylum," she said dryly.

Another legacy of the conflict is criminality and a gangster culture. Hampered by a UN arms embargo, the Bosniaks turned to criminals to buy guns. After the war, according to

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him for names, he obliged. The first was Bakir Izetbegovic—son of Alija, a Bosniak and the country's wartime president.

Yet when I went to see Bakir, who is now leader of Alia's old party (the right-wing Party of Democratic Action), I found an apparently balanced man with a strong resemblance to his late father. "We did not have any winners in this war," he said in careful English. "The fire was only put out by the international community. The fighting is still going on. Except it's in parliament." He blames "ethnic" (read: Serb) politicians for splitting up Bosnia—then told me the best man at his wedding was a Serb. He claimed that during the war, everyone was united: "Grenades knew no ethnicity—12,000 people were killed in Sarajevo and 2,000 of them were Serb." But as I left, he warned me of a new generation of nationalists: "The Serbs were treated like bad guys," he says. "So the young ones... they have a big, *big* complex."

The extraordinary thing about the war in Bosnia was that, since all the central institutions had broken down, a journalist could wander anywhere and do anything. If you were mad enough to go out with the Bosnian soldiers, who said "*nema problema*" to most life-threatening situations, then you could visit any frontline.

And the doors of the presidency were open. Ejup Ganic, the wartime vice president (who the Serbs recently failed to extradite for alleged war crimes) thought that any journalist who risked their life to walk from the Holiday Inn to the presidency building deserved a cup of coffee and an interview. I spent afternoons cocooned in his office (which was heated, a rarity during wartime), while he explained Yugoslav history. Haris Silajdzic, another senior politician, was often around too. He was a brooding, melancholy man with the long hair and romantic demeanour of a rock star. He had the impossible task of trying to break the arms embargo and shuttled back and forth through the "tunnel of life" with the weight of the world, or more accurately Bosnia, on his shoulders. "We are going to be annihilated," he told me more than once.

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“Destroyed. And we can’t even fight back properly.” It was hard not to fall in love with Bosnia and its fight for survival.

When I met him again this summer after a gap of 15 years, Bosnia was no longer so lovable. Silajdzic, now the country’s prime minister, looked exhausted. As we sat in the office where I last saw Alija Izetbegovic, I recalled something a diplomat once told me: “Bosnian politicians have a huge responsibility for the disasters in this country. The international community—yes, of course. But the politicians here as well.”

Wartime can make people idealistic. But in the aftermath—the state-building, the horse-trading, and the disappointment—it’s easy to forget the ideals that you were fighting for: democracy, freedom and liberty. Silajdzic chain-smoked and talked about “the sins of the past”: Dayton; privatisations gone wrong; refugees not having the right to return home; constitutional reform. “We must have a system that helps us to unblock,” he said. “We are a stuck country.”

Why should we care? For one thing, it is not in Europe’s interest for Bosnia Herzegovina to become a failed state. And the rise in Islamic tendencies and homegrown terrorism is worrying. “You cannot find one terrorist attack in Europe without the involvement of federation citizens,” claimed Milorad Dodik after a bomb exploded in Bosnia in June. It was an outlandish exaggeration, but one that alludes to a real problem. As the west looks at the aftermath of Iraq, and for an exit route from Afghanistan, it should take note of Bosnia’s recon-

struction. As another diplomat put it: “The lessons learnt here... should be analysed to be used in places like Afghanistan. We have to be brutally honest with what went wrong.”

So what can we learn? Certainly the war could have been stopped earlier—the 1999 war in Kosovo fought by Nato took only three months. And the hope that Bosnia’s ethnic divisions would fade after the war was a futile one. Combined with the frantic and complicated political system specified in the Dayton Accords, these leave the country exhausted.

So what can be done now? Getting rid of the Office of High Representative and letting Bosnia stand on its own—as has been privately discussed in the EU—would be a good first step. “Then the question will be, how do we establish a rule of law—and what is the state of Bosnia after OHR goes?” Srdjan Blagovcanin told me, a view echoed by high-level politicians.

The real issue, however, is more philosophical. “We just want to know who we are,” said Srečko Latal. “We are struggling for the soul of the Bosnian people.” And Bosnians have given up looking outside for help, he added. The former British foreign secretary David Owen, co-author of the failed Vance-Owen and Owen-Stoltenberg peace plans put forward during the war, warned the Bosnians long ago not to “dream dreams” and think the west was coming to save them. Sarajevans hung homemade American flags from their bombed-out windows, believing the US would send air strikes to lift the siege. But they had to wait more than 1,000 days before anyone came. This time, Latal said, if it all goes wrong, “We know we have to look only to ourselves for help.” **P**