

ETHNIC CLEANSING AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS: CONCENTRATION CAMPS DURING THE BALKAN WARS OF 1992–1995

Review article

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Abstract:

The Balkan War of 1991–1995 in the former Yugoslavia was the worst war-related crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Clearly, ethnic cleansing, the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians, became the signature event of this conflict. The main vehicle for ethnic cleansing was the forceful removal and internment of sectarian rivals into facilities that were generally crowded and where torture, rape, starvation, and killings were commonplace events. All parties, Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosniaks, and Orthodox Christian Serbs, participated in these ethnic purges. This article highlights the nature of this unfortunate consequence of the Balkan Wars.

Keywords: *ethnic cleansing, human rights, concentration camps, the Balkan wars.*

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Introduction:

Atrocities associated with the Balkan Wars that erupted in 1991 with the secession of Slovenia, followed with Macedonia. Croatia and then Bosnia-Herzegovina, often

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portrayed Serbia as the major, if not the only, offender. This was especially the case when the United Nations established the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) with its mandate to prosecute crimes against humanity, including genocide. One of the most significant cases before ICTY was the trial of Slobodan Milošević, the former president of what remained of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, who was charged with genocide. With the arrest of Radovan Karadžić, the political leader of the Bosnian Serbs in July 2008 and the 2011 arrests of Ratko Mladić, the military leader of the Bosnian Serbs, and Goran Hadžić, the leader of the rebel Serbs in Croatia, the UN indictments against the 161 high-level war-time leaders came to an end. However, the mandate for crimes against humanity and/or genocide now rests with the respective states carved out of the former Yugoslavia. It is crucial to review the geopolitical events leading to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the emergence of Nationalistic leaders which, in turn, incited the fears and horrors associated with *ethnic cleansing*.

Many Serbs felt that the ICTY was overly influenced by the United States and its NATO allies focusing mainly on Serbian crimes while ignoring similar offenses committed by Croats, Bosniaks, and later by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Indeed, it has only been recently that cases have been leveled against the Bosnian Muslims, most notably, Ejup Ganić, and convictions established against Croatian generals, Ante Gotovina, Mladen Markač, and Ivan Čermak. And now that Serbia has turned over its long sought after war criminals to The Hague, it wants the Court to investigate the former KLA leaders for atrocities including trafficking in human body parts allegedly harvested from Serbian and Roma prisoners. Our paper looks at the use of concentration camps by all parties involved in the ethnic cleansing process that pitched Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosniaks and Orthodox Serbs against each other during the segregation efforts of 1992–1995 in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Associated Press, 4/16/2011).

The Genesis of Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans:

Things began to unravel in Yugoslavia following Tito's death on May 4th, 1980 and further intensify with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. After Tito's death Yugoslavia was governed by a rotating presidency selected from the six republics. And with the fall of Communism, many of the former communist leaders now became heads of ultra-nationalist groups claiming to represent the majority of their sectarian members. Each group promoted their own interest through propaganda and fear tactics forcing even reluctant members of their group to view their neighbors as the enemy resulting in reciprocal antagonism. Naming the "out-group" as the enemy tended to increase the "in-group's" cohesion. This split within the former Yugoslavia was further fueled by economic reasons as well as the fact that the lid on sectarianism, maintained under Tito, brewed under the surface for a hard-core segment of the society for centuries. The outside influence of both the Roman Catholic Church and international Islam did not help matters. Serbian ultra-nationalists, on the other hand, drew their support from radicals within neighboring Orthodox communities notably, Russian, Greece and Romania. Nonetheless, all three major sectarian groups within all six republics were represented, to varying degrees, in this civil war. To the ultra-nationals leaders *ethnic cleansing* was deemed the only solution toward a pure state (Benson, 2001; Lampe, 2000; Ramet, 2006).

The chronology of events leading to the unraveling of Yugoslavia began in 1990 at the 14th Congress of the Communist Party with Slovenia and Croatia delegates leaving in protest. Then on June 25, 1991, Slovenia, after voting the Communists out of office, began the secession process resulting in their *Ten-Day War*. Their neighbors to the south, Croatia, also declared their independence from Yugoslavia. The standoff between the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and the Slovenian police and territorial defense resulted in several dozen deaths but no major battles. A tentative peace was established on July 9, 1991 and Milošević withdrew the JNA from Slovenia on October 26, 1991. This minor scrimmage fueled the ultra-nationalism that fanned the flames of the ensuing Third Balkan War (Gow & Carmichael, 1999).

The main battle leading to a full-fledged war was associated with Croatia's bid for independence. The problem here was that Franjo Tuđman, on December 22, 1990, got the Croatian parliament, to adopt a new constitution that eliminated the protective elements of the 1965 and 1974 Yugoslav Constitution that provided equal treatment for Serbian enclaves residing within Croatia. This action gave superior status to Croatian Catholics while discriminating against the indigenous Serb minority. This action led the Serbs in the Krajina (Military Frontier) region to demand its own independence within an independent Croatia. Serbs lived for generations in the Krajina region, brought there by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the mid-16th century to serve as a buffer against the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, the Serbs in this region constituted about 12 percent of the Croatian population at the time of its declaration of independence in 1991. The ensuing Croatian civil war pitted Tuđman's ultra-nationalists against the *Serbian Autonomous Oblast of Krajina* (SAO) which now proclaimed themselves the *Republic of Serbian Krajina* (RSK). When this element of the Balkan War ended in 1995, tens-of-thousands of indigenous Croatian Serbs were forced into exile, mainly into Serbia, while those who remained were subjected to torture and murder. Likewise, the RSK attempted to cleanse its territory (a third of Croatia) of Croatian Catholics also resulting in mass displacements of people, the murder of civilians and the destruction of cultural artifacts. This action resulted in the introduction of the *United Nations Protection Force* (UNPROFOR) into the Balkan War and the establishment of *United Nations Protected Areas* (UNPAs).

In 1991, Macedonia also declared its independence with little resistance from its parent – the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The second major battle front in the 3rd Balkan War erupted when Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) declared its independence in April 1992. This conflict involved all three sectarian groups with extreme violence initiated by all parties – much of it directed toward civilians. Initially the fighting involved the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosniaks whereby the indigenous Serbs feared a Bosnia ruled by Islamic Slavs and a situation where they would again be labeled as second-class citizens. In 1993 the conflict now included Bosnian Croats, supported by Croatia, battling the Bosniaks. Some of the heaviest fighting in this theater was in the Herzegovina section of Bosnia. As early as March 1991, the ultra-nationalists leaders of Serbia (Slobodan Milošević, also the leader of what remained of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and Croatia (Franjo Tuđman) conspired to partition BiH between their respective countries. This was known as the Karadžorđevo Agreement which essentially promoted both a *Greater Croatia* and a *Greater Serbia* out of the remaining Yugoslavia. The United Nations Security Council, in anticipation of growing conflicts in the region, passed Resolution 713 imposing an arms embargo throughout the former Yugoslavia (Sibler & Little, 1995).

Tudman's ultra-nationalist party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) attempted to do the same thing in Bosnia-Herzegovina that the Croat Serbs attempted in Krajina – taking over a segment of BiH and naming it the *Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia*. This action occurred on November 18, 1991, when the HDZ branch leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina declared their independence. In a similar fashion, the Bosnian Serbs, on October 24, 1991, abandoned the tri-ethnic coalition that governed BiH since 1990, creating their own Assembly of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On January 9, 1992, the assembly established the Serbian Republic of Bosnian and Herzegovina which later was changed to the *Republika Srpska* in August 1992. The stage was now set for the battle of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a conflict that engulfed the entire country until late December 1995 with the signing of the Dayton Accord.

There was the possibility for peace with the Cutileiro-Carrington Plan (Lisbon Agreement) forged by the European Economic Community (EEC) on March 18, 1992. This agreement proposed ethnic power-sharing at all administrative levels but with respective communities defined according to their sectarian majority – Bosniak, Bosnian Croat, Bosnian Serb. But apparently under pressure from the United States, the leader of the Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), Alija Izetbegović, withdrew his signature and support for the agreement ten days later setting the stage for the horrific battles that ensued. The U.S. Congress also attempted to override the UN arms embargo but these efforts were vetoed by President Bill Clinton. The embargo, although often breeched through the porous mountainous borders, left the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) with the bulk of heavy armaments including artillery and tanks. The JNA leader, General Ratko Mladić, sided with the Bosnian Serbs and the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS). These forces were responsible for the 44-month siege of Sarajevo where even the UN Protective Forces had limited results other than keeping the airport open allowing for the basic essentials to sustain the besieged population. Another failure of the UNPROFOR was the protection of Srebrenica where it is estimated that some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were massacred from July 12–22, 1995 by the army led by Ratko Mladić. Interestingly, the forces defending Sarajevo during the siege, the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Armija RBiH; ARBiH) not only outnumbered the RS forces surrounding the city, but was comprised of all sectarian and ethnic groups residing in Sarajevo.

The Croat-Bosniak War from June 19, 1992 until February 23, 1994 engulfed 30 percent of the country into a separate war. The purpose of this war was Croatian domination of central and eastern region of BiH known historically as Herzegovina. Again this conflict involved ethnic cleansing and atrocities against both combatants and civilians. Mostar, long considered the de facto capital of Herzegovina, was held under siege for nine months by Croat forces and the destruction of the city and its religious and cultural structures including the iconic Stari Most Bridge. This time both Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs became the targets for Croat aggression. It is widely understood that the United States favored both the Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks over the Orthodox Serbs. Toward this end, the US began efforts for these two groups to settle their differences and form a coalition that would unite against the Serbian forces. Both warring parties signed the US-initiated peace agreement (the Washington Agreement) in March 1994 leading to the creation of the joint Bosniak-Croat Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH) with the population divided into ten cantons (seven predominately Muslim and three predominately Bosnian Croat).

At the same time the USA was clandestinely using private military security forces, MPRI (Military Professional Resources, Inc.) to arm and train the Croatian Army in its fight against Serbian forces as well as smuggling arms to the ARBiH. These initiatives allowed the Croats to break the stalemate with Serbian forces in the summer of 1995 in two actions, Operation Flash and Operation Storm driving the Serbs out of most of Croatia. These actions were followed by Operation Maestral, a combined Croat/Bosniak effort to push back the Bosnian Serbs in BiH. This operation, along with the ensuring NATO bombing brought the combined Croat and FBiH troops to the outskirts of Banja Luka, the de facto capital of RS. The signing of the Dayton Peace Accords on December 14, 1995 effectively ended the fighting in both Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina resulting in the FBiH comprising of about 51 percent of the country and RS with 49 percent with Sarajevo separated into two segments with East Sarajevo belonging to RS (Ripley, 2001).

While the United States played a significant role in forging the Dayton Peace Accord, it was seen by many as the party that allowed the war to rage in the first place by influencing Alija Izetbegović to pull out of the March 1992 EU Lisbon Agreement. Ironically, the Dayton Accord came to reflect the same basic thesis as the Lisbon Accord but with the added ingredient of nearly four years of war laced with sectarian-led atrocities on all sides leaving a festering legacy of inter-group segregation and hate even to the present. In the final analysis, Bosnia-Herzegovina became divided along sectarian lines with seven Bosniak cantons and three Bosnian-Croat cantons comprising the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (FBiH) and 51 percent of the land while the Bosnian Serbs ended up with their own territory- the Republika Srpska (RS) and 49 percent of the country. A third internationally protected Brčko District was also established at the critical border areas where Croatia and Serbia and BiH meet within the greater RS region. There is also a shared, albeit weak, national assembly with representation from all three ethnic populations. Nonetheless, the prospects for a truly unified Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite the rhetoric of the Dayton Accord, are remote, at best. It is unfortunate that the Balkans emerged as the final Cold War encounter with the former Yugoslavia being the proxy battleground for geo-political gamesmanship. Many elements of the Dayton Accord were not realized notably the return of refugees swept from their traditional homes during the ethnic cleansing forced exodus frenzy. And the war continued beyond 1995, now in the lower Slavic states of Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia (USSD, 1995; Chandler, 2005).

Sectarian Prison Camps during the Balkan Wars: 1992–1995:

All participants in the 1992–1995 Balkan War, Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs, had camps. The most intense fighting occurred in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina during this segment of the Balkan Wars. Starvation and torture, including rape of both men and women, and death were common occurrences in these camps. Part of the ethnic cleansing process, practiced by all warring parties in the conflict, was to herd people up and place them into concentration camps. Croats and Bosniaks were the inmates of Bosnian Serb camps while Serbs and Bosniaks were inmates of the Croatian camps. According to the most reliable count, there were 507 concentration camps run by the Serbs; 131 run by the Croats; and 536 joint Croat-Bosniak camps. The following list, while not comprehensive, provides a picture of the nature of these holding facilities. Some were liberated earlier than others as refugee camps became available throughout Europe where more humane and compassionate care was provided for the estimated million displaced refugees.

The most common places used for concentration camps:

- Warehouses
- Private apartments and/or their basements
- Basements of private dwellings
- Stables
- Mines
- Slaughter houses
- Jails & prisons
- Bus stations
- Stadiums
- Sports halls
- Minister of Interior facilities
- Elementary & high schools
- Hotels

Places with 10 or more facilities run by the Serbs:

• Banja Luka	10
• Bijeljina	15
• Bosanski Šamac	16
• Bratunac	23
• Doboj	37
• Foča	18
• Kotor Varoš	37
• Prijedor	57
• Sanski Most	20
• Sarajevo	50
• Sokolac	12
• Srebrenica	13
• Tuzla	6
• Ugljevik	12
• Višegrad	18
• Vlasenica	13
• Zvornik	21

Places with 10 or more facilities run by the Croats:

• Čapljina	10
• Donji Vakuf	11
• Konjic	11
• Mostar	11

Places with 10 or more facilities run by the Bosniak/Croat coalition:

• Bihać	15
• Bosanski Brod	10
• Brčko	21
• Bugojno	13
• Goražde	19

• Konjic	14
• Livno	12
• Mostar	17
• Sarajevo	125
• Tomislavgrad	17
• Travnik	12
• Tuzla	28
• Visoko	11
• Zavidovići	12
• Zenica	15
• Živinice	10

The major cities within Bosnia-Herzegovina were often divided throughout the war with each faction running their own prison camps within the same municipality. For example, Sarajevo and Tuzla had camps run by both the Serbs and the Bosniak/Croats while the Croats, and later the Bosniaks/Croats, had camps in Mostar, the de facto capital of Herzegovina. The Serbs had camps housing thousands of inmates in Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Bileća, Bosanska Krupa, Bosanski Novi, Bratunac; Derвента, Prijedor and Sarajevo. The largest Croat prison camps were located in Čapljina, Mostar, and Odžak while the largest joint Bosniak/Croat prison camps were located in Brčko and Sarajevo. The Bosniaks had large prison camps in Konjic and Sarajevo prior to their coalition with the Croats. The most brutal camps included rape of men and women, starvation, beatings, humiliation and killings. All factions had these types of camps as well as bordellos where female inmates were forcefully raped repeatedly. The largest camp run by the Bosnian Serbs was at Bratunac where some seven thousand inmates were kept at the Bratstvo Stadium while the largest prison camp run by the Bosniaks was at the Koševo Stadium in Sarajevo with over six thousand inmates including men, women and children. The largest prison camp run by the Croats prior to their coalition with the Bosniaks was the Gasnice Camp in Čapljina with four thousand Bosniak and Serb inmates comprised mostly of women and children. The largest camp following the Bosniak/Croat U.S.-forged coalition was located in Gornji Rahić in Brčko with over one and a half thousand Serbs men, women and children. The FBIH also maintained the notorious Hadžići rape camp in Sarajevo which held about one thousand Serb women.

These camps reverted to their original purpose following the Dayton Accord in late 1995 but to those who were interned, memories of their internment and abuse remains a significant trigger for untreated war trauma, notably Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Few would argue that untreated war trauma represents a significant unmet need within these war-torn countries – notably Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia. Research shows that those most vulnerable to severe PTSD are those subjected to torture and other potentially traumatic events like being a POW. A 2009 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports on the most comprehensive meta-analysis of the association of torture and other potentially traumatic events and mental health outcomes for populations exposed to mass conflict and displacement like that associated with the Balkan Wars of 1991–2002 (Steel, et al., 2009). These experiences need to be openly exposed and discussed if healing is to occur among individuals and societies comprised the new nations of the former Yugoslavia.

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