

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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Always a Cosmopolitan Crossroads

Dayton International Peace Museum

Bosnia-Herzegovina has always been coveted. Its first known settlers were Illyrians. We know them only from the ancient Greeks, who traded with them for gold, copper and tin, and from the Romans, who conquered them as part of their empire, starting before 100 BCE.

The Roman Empire, too large to govern, was divided into Eastern and Western halves in 286 CE, and each side had its own emperor. The eastern half, which included the Balkans, became known as the Byzantine Empire. It was richer and stronger than the Empire in the west and withstood attacks by “barbarians” much longer, although Visigoths and Alans raided and settled here. By 814 CE, Slavs had also settled into what we now know as Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. All these various peoples practiced Christianity, which at that time in history meant Catholicism.

Meanwhile, Muslims were assembling their own empire under the Ottomans. They spread from the Middle East into Africa and parts of Europe. They conquered the Christians in this land as early as the 1300s but did not insist on converting them. Jews escaping from the Spanish Inquisition settled here in the late 1400s and found refuge. By then, the Slavs in the area had allied themselves with groups in Russia and converted to Orthodox Christianity, the first major break in that religion. Croat people remained mostly Catholic Christian.

By the 1800s, Austria expanded to the south and east and took over part of the Balkans, yet the southern area was still under the Ottoman Empire. By 1878, Serbia had been freed from the Ottomans and wanted to ‘free’ all Slavic peoples, including those being ruled by Austria, which led Mr. Gavrilo Princip, a Serb, to assassinate an Austrian archduke and begin World War I.

Austrian and German fascists ruled the Balkans during World War II. Josip Broz Tito led the resistance, ruling a new country at the end of that war: ‘Yugoslavia’, meaning ‘land of the Southern Slavs.’ As a communist who broke with Russia, his motto was “Brotherhood and Unity.” After Tito’s death in 1980, the cooperation among the descendants of these groups broke down. Smaller republics within the former Yugoslavia began to declare their independence. This instability led to war in the early 1990s. By that time, the land had been home to a diversity of peoples for at least 1100 years.

Online Exhibit at Dayton International Peace Museum

“The Dayton Peace Accords is a story about the challenges of finding peace after
wartime.

To do justice to what people in the Balkans endured, we cannot shy away from the
larger issues of the conflict: xenophobia, genocide, rape, war crimes, and redress.”

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