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Separating History from Myth: An Interview

Ivo Banac

Rabia Ali: The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been generally perceived in the West as a civil war or a tribal blood feud —the product of centuries-old enmities between the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. In the media and in the pronouncements of statesmen and political commentators, the conflict is described as a “typical” Balkan convulsion which cannot be understood, much less mediated or settled by any international intervention. One finds much confusion about the war, its causes and likely consequences, even among many educated, normally well-informed people. As a historian, how would you define the war and its historical roots in Bosnia?

Ivo Banac: Let us discuss first “what it is” and then, perhaps, “what it is not.” I view the war as essentially a war of aggression conducted by Serbia and Montenegro, in tandem with the Yugoslav People’s Army which was taken over by Serbia and used for its own purposes. It is a war of aggression against an internationally recognized independent state with a democratic constitution that guaranteed rights to all citizens, including Serbs.

In the process of waging this war, aggressive forces had to instrumentalize the Serbian community in Bosnia-Herzegovina: they had to turn a relatively peaceful population —however large its prejudices about the nature of Bosnia and its role in Bosnia—into a group that would become auxiliary to the aims of the aggressor. This was one of the reasons the instigators of the process had to proceed very slowly, gradually implicating the Bosnian Serb community in their project of aggression and expansion. This could not be done overnight; it had to be done in stages. First, they had to isolate those who were opposed to their plans and had struggled against them. Then they had to implicate all the others in what initially were small acts of repression against the other communities and, ultimately, in very large and horrid crimes.

If one wishes to think in terms of historical analogies (which are sometimes helpful, though not always), the Serbian war policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina resembles to a great extent the approach adapted by the German administration against Czechoslovakia in the late 1930s. Therefore, one could view Radovan Karadžić as being Konrad Henlein and the Serbian Democratic Party as the Sudetendeutsche Partei. Thus, in pursuit of Serbia’s war aims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, one community—the Bosnian Serbs—was essentially subverted and presented with a reinterpretation of its own history: namely, that it had always been on the receiving end of Muslim domination in Bosnia-Herzegovina and that its future and security lay within a “Greater Serbia.” In this reinterpretation, of course, the Croats are accorded a very negative role as auxiliaries to the Muslim aim of domination.

The position of the Croat community was somewhat more complicated. Initially, and to a considerable extent even now, the aims of its leaders were to join with the Muslim community in the defence of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but the dominant party among the Croats went through several changes. There were purges of its leadership which turned it into an instrument of [President Franjo] Tudjman's own aspirations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Lawrence Lifschultz: Are you referring here to the purge of Stjepan Kljui? from the leadership of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia-Herzegovina [HDZ] and his replacement by Mate Boban?

Ivo Banac: Yes, the purge targeted Kljui?—and Davor Perinovi? before him— and it proceeded in several stages exploiting the differences among the Croats of Bosnia. The Croat community in Bosnia-Herzegovina is split between the Croats of Central Bosnia who are greater in number, and the Croats of western Herzegovina who represent about a third of the total Croat population of the country. This latter group has emerged as the politically dominant force principally because of the physical and military control it [Exercises](#) over significant territory and, most importantly, because of the backing its leader Mate Boban receives from Zagreb.

Stjepan Kljui? represented the point of view of the Croats of central Bosnia for whom the defense of Bosnia-Herzegovina was the paramount requirement, as opposed to many Croats from western Herzegovina for whom the defense of western Hercegovina was all that mattered: what happened elsewhere was of little or no importance. Their point of view was well summarized in the statement of one of Kljui?'s political enemies who said, "What is ?ajni?e to me?" (?ajni?e is a town in eastern Bosnia that has no Croats among its population.) This, of course, is a narrow view focused entirely on local interests and is part of the tendency among the Croats in western Herceogovina and adjacent areas of Bosnia, such as Tomislavgrad, to see the areas inhabited by them as suburbs of Zagreb.

These are the forces, which, today, are trying to draw out other Croats from more ethnically mixed areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the exclusively Croat cantons that have been legitimated by the Vance-Owen plan. The Croats in central Bosnia are under tremendous pressure from these elements to leave their areas—to get out of Sarajevo, Travnik, Tuzla—and to migrate to the so-called Croat cantons. Boban's objective is to create on the Croat side the equivalent of what the Serbs have achieved through military force in Serb-populated areas: a nationally homogenized entity. There is significant resistance to these developments, and great division over the issue in Croatia, where it is probably the most important internal issue in Croatia at the moment.

In sum, I see what has happened in Bosnia as a form of aggression clearly instigated and directed by Serbia, which has succeeded in creating an entirely different political climate in Bosnia-Herzegovina to the point where the defense of the Bosnian state has, today, come to be centered largely around the Muslim community. And for things to have reached this stage, the world, too, bears a great deal of responsibility: it has not allowed Bosnia-Herzegovina the right, and thus the arms it needed, to defend itself.

To define the war as a tribal feud or a civil war is simply an easy way of dismissing the whole thing. The argument then is that if something has been going on forever, presumably, it will continue forever and hence nothing need be done to alleviate the situation. The best thing to do, therefore, is simply to sit back and watch as this hellish situation plays itself out. The assumption on the part of the outside powers-that-be is that these sub-humans will get tired of killing one

another, and then, perhaps, those outsiders can step in and do something to patch up the situation in one way or another. It all adds up to a combination of political opportunism and intellectual laziness.

Lawrence Lifschultz: Related to the question of definitions is the question of the validity of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a political entity. Many pundits and politicians continue to describe Bosnia as an artificial construct that has never had a distinct identity or presence in history. Notable among these for example, is A. M. Rosenthal, former editor and currently a regular columnist of The New York Times, who has attempted in his columns to ‘inform’ the debate by suggesting on several occasions, in different ways, that Bosnia has no historical legitimacy and the Muslims no national rights since they are a community of converts. “As for the Muslim leaders, he writes, for instance, in the Times of April 16, 1994, “they had declared the independence of a Bosnia which had not existed as a nation and in which they did not have a majority. There are no ‘Bosnians’ —just Slavs who call themselves Serbs, Croatsians, or Muslims.” The corollary of this position is that since Bosnia-Herzegovina has never been an independent state or the national home of any particular people, its defense as an independent state is not imperative.

Influential commentators like Rosenthal thus reflect not only a disregard for history, but also a blithe contempt for facts which are still part of the current record. For example, the vote for independence by a large majority of Bosnians in a referendum which the European Community had asked for, and the joint decision, therefore, to declare independence by a multinational Bosnian government composed of representatives, in equal numbers, of all three of the country’s constituent nations (as well as the representatives of the Jews and other minorities) is presented as an irresponsible and undemocratic act, as it were, of ‘Muslim leaders.’ How do you respond to such statements and interpretations of Balkan —and Bosnian—history?

Ivo Banac: This is all sheer nonsense. I do not know how to account for such statements and arguments except to say that they reflect the great—at times, willful—ignorance which surrounds this matter. If this were all true, I would be the first one to join in support of the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but this is not the case. The historical fact is that Bosnia-Herzegovina has a profile which is unique, and distinct from the identity of the neighboring countries. Its existence goes back to the Middle Ages.

The Bosnian state was the last of the major South Slav states emerging in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was a major regional power which, at various moments, included sections of present-day Croatia and Serbia. During the period of the Ottoman Empire its structure was maintained in a peculiar, local way precisely because it was a frontier area for the Ottomans. Therefore, the maintenance of a landed nobility which was hereditary and, as such, unique in the Ottoman Muslim state gave Bosnia a very clear regional distinction which set it apart from other central Ottoman provinces.

For example, in the nineteenth century, this feudatory structure of Bosnia did assume leadership in a struggle to maintain Bosnia on what was an anti-Tanzimat program. The objective was to assert Bosnia’s uniqueness and to seek a greater measure of autonomy, which, in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, was as good as independence. Indeed, many of the national movements in the Ottoman Empire argued initially for autonomy. In the declining Ottoman state this was one way to maintain the unity of one’s own area which was always subject to the irredentist dreams of others. So the continuity of Bosnia as a distinct political entity was preserved in the Ottoman Empire.

During the Austro-Hungarian period, Bosnia-Herzegovina was a separate province which did not fit very comfortably into the dualist system established under *Ausgleich* in 1867. Nevertheless, in a complicated sort of way it did fit the structure. It was administered both out of Austria and out of Hungary through a joint Minister of Finance, an arrangement which, of course, was not at all logical but which became an ad hoc solution. The political program of Benjamin von Kállay, who was that joint minister of finance and thus the dominant figure at this stage in Bosnia as well as Kállay's ideology of Bosnianism effectively denied the region to both Croatia and Serbia.

This sense of autonomy was maintained during the early years of the first Yugoslav state even though, in royal Yugoslavia, Bosnia did not exist as a formal entity. While it was not divided as some other areas were, its unity consisted essentially of a collectivity of smaller entities. The denial to it of the former status of a province in the interwar period fed into the national program of the Community Party during the 1930s. The autonomy of Bosnia-Herzegovina became an objective of the Party. Its position was codified at the end of the war as one of the constituent republics of the Yugoslav Communist federation, but it was constituted on a non-national basis. It was the only republic that was not a matrix republic, for it was, in fact, a republic that was multi-national by definition.

Thus, from the medieval period to Tito's federalism there has been a Bosnia. It is a land which has its own distinct cultural flavor. An important influence, of course, has been the presence of a very large Muslim community. With the exception of Albania there is no comparable group in the neighborhood. Furthermore, when one examines the national cultures of the non-Muslims, there, the Serbs of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Croats of Bosnia-Herzegovina, one can find unique and distinctive features that are not identical to the national cultures of the matrix countries. The literature of the Bosnian Croats is distinct from that of the Croats in Croatia. Similarly, the literature of the Bosnian Serbs is quite distinct from the literature of the Serbs in Serbia proper.

Lawrence Lifschultz: Arguments which are based on the false premise that Bosnia has no real cultural or historical identity, perhaps, represent something more invidious. They legitimize the idea of the fragmentation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by its division into smaller ethnic entities as proposed by the Vance-Owen plan or some other device which the Western intelligentsia will, in the end, rationalize as the 'best' of all the 'bad' solutions.

Ivo Banac: Of course, this is the direction in which this type of argument leads. If the Western powers want to abandon Bosnia and do nothing, then let them be frank about it and not twist the historical record to rationalize their positions. The rich history of co-existence between these communities is also part of that record.

Rabia Ali: The fact that Bosnia, through history, has existed as a separate and unique entity long before it became part of Yugoslavia still leaves open the question of its viability as a sovereign state under the present political circumstances. If Yugoslavia failed as a multinational state, what legitimacy would an independent multinational Bosnia-Herzegovina, often described as a Yugoslavia in microcosm, have? The constituent nations of Yugoslavia—the Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes—have sought their affirmation, identity, and progress in new states defined by or based on ethnicity. Was it not inevitable that Bosnia, too, would disintegrate as the Serbs and Croats of Bosnia-Herzegovina sought, or were encouraged to seek, the union of "their" Bosnian territory with their "mother" countries?

Ivo Banac: If Bosnia were a collectivity of separate entities, then it would have been a mini-

Yugoslavia. But it is not that. Bosnia is a historical entity which has its own identity and its own history. In other words, it is not a Yugoslavia; it cannot be construed to be a mini-Yugoslavia. There is a temptation to do this precisely by people who seek to divide it. The argument goes more or less the way you put it: Yugoslavia disintegrated as a multinational state and so, too, must multinational Bosnia. This is basically a Serbian argument.

I do not see it that way because I view Bosnia as primarily a functioning society which Yugoslavia never was. My question is how does one keep a complicated, complex entity like Bosnia-Herzegovina together? Undoubtedly the answer presupposes an interest in the maintenance of Bosnia-Herzegovina by its neighbors. This is something that makes the situation extremely complex. Precisely because Serbia does not wish to have an independent Bosnia-Herzegovina, the project becomes immensely more difficult. And precisely because the present Croatian leadership would like to settle all the historical issues with Serbs by the division of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the project is made still more difficult.

Lawrence Lifshultz: So for the Croats of Herzegovina to throw their support behind the idea of a united Bosnia-Herzegovina would require the Croatian state to take a clear stand on the sovereignty and indivisibility of Bosnia?

Ivo Banac: Yes, a different policy in Zagreb would have a tremendous effect especially on the thinking of the Croats in western Herzegovina. Furthermore, I am certain that had the unity of Zagreb and Sarajevo been maintained in a sincere way, Serbian aggression would have been defeated a long time ago.

Rabia Ali: Wouldn't one also say that Tudjman and others who sought the division of Bosnia might have contained their own expansionist ambitions had the West—instead of settling on the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina as the best and quickest solution—sent a very strong and clear message that it would not countenance the carve-up of a sovereign member of the United Nations? In the end, or rather from the very beginning, by putting an international seal of approval on the policy of an ethnic carve-up of Bosnia-Herzegovina the Vance-Owen plan had the immediate effect of encouraging both the Serbs and the Croats to secure their share of Bosnian territory.

Ivo Banac: There is no question that the Vance-Owen plan did precisely that, and the consequences in their fullness are for all to see. The horrors of Vitez and the escalation of the war between the Croat and the Bosnian government forces, which are now fighting on two fronts, are a direct result of the Vance-Owen plan. It was interpreted by the Croats in the way that was, in fact, logical: "This is our canton, which means we [Exercise](#) power here. You do not agree with us? Well, ship out, or submit!" All of the disputes about the use of language in schools, about the flying of national flags in the so-called Croat cantons are all aspects of the logical interpretation of the Vance-Owen plan.

As a result, you have the current situation which, in my view, can be solved only in one of two ways. The first would involve a change of heart in the neighborhood. For the present this is improbable. The second would involve the determined support of the international community which has been solely lacking. And there are many reasons why the international community should act.

To my mind, if Bosnia did not exist, it would be necessary to create it—precisely because it mitigates the hostilities between Serbia and Croatia. Many of the contradictions can, in fact, be

resolved through a policy of equality inside Bosnia-Herzegovina. There is another very important reason why Bosnia should exist as an independent state. It has to do with the Bosnian Muslim community itself which has no other national home. This is why the Muslim community has, to a very large extent, become the cement of Bosnia-Herzegovina. It would be wrong to say that this community is uniquely Bosnian and others are not—because there is a great danger that this argument, too, would undermine the unity of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As mentioned earlier, the Bosnian Croats and the Bosnian Serbs have distinctive cultures that distinguish them from their mainstream cultures that obtain, respectively, in Croatia and Serbia. They are distinctively Bosnian. It is this element which sustains the cultural unity of Bosnia-Herzegovina and explains why so many Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs have supported the Bosnian government.

Editors' Note: This interview first appeared in Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War, edited by Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschultz (Stony Creek, Conn: Pamphleteer's Press, 1993). We thank Ivo Banac for permission to re-publish this still timely text. The second part of the interview will appear in our forthcoming issue in October.

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