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BOSNIAN WAR POSTERS

Daoud Sarhandi Williams

I got involved with Bosnia on a political level—and emotionally, too. Like many foreigners who went there during the war, I was bewitched by the country, horrified by what was happening, and fast became obsessed by playing my little part in righting such a huge and glaring wrong. It may sound rather twee to put it like this, but looking back, I see that I fell in love with Bosnia. I think I'm still trying to understand exactly why and how that happened. Perhaps it was connected with my complex mixed-faith and multiracial background; perhaps it was an aching desire to be on the humane side of history. I know that at times I would gladly have given my life to try to save Bosnia. Finally, I gave both less and more than my life; I gave her a book: *Bosnian War Posters*. It is, if you like, my love letter to this complex and beautiful country.

Where did it begin—this epic work that has occupied me on and off for the last quarter of a century? It began with a simple idea: posters produced by Bosnians during the war might hold the key to telling a fascinating first-hand story, I thought, about what happened, who did what to whom and why, between 1992–95.

I had the idea in Tuzla in late-1997 and over the next year my research assistant, Alina Wolfe Murray, and I found over 600 examples of graphic design that told the whole sad story. We unearthed not only posters, but magazine covers and postcards; and not only in Bosnia, but also in Croatia and Serbia: leading players in Bosnia's destruction. We also got hold of "democracy building" posters created by international organisations after the war, Nato "WANTED" posters for mainly Serb war criminals, and a lot more besides.

As anyone older than the Internet Age knows, before the end of the last century, posters were a vital means of mass communication. And this tool was used with maximum effect to spread a powerful message about the injustices of the Bosnian war. Most of the posters we found were produced by Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), although *Bosnian War Posters* contains images from all sides. It also has some great contemporary photos of Bosnia taken by Rupert Wolfe Murray in 2021, as well as a selection of highly-emotive photos from the war period from numerous sources.

After collecting the posters, my next challenge was to select from these powerful works of art and shape them into a coherent story of the war. Here, my skills as a film

editor (my original and parallel career) came in useful. I put *Bosnian War Posters* together in much the same way as a film is cut: poster-by-poster (i.e. "shot-by-shot"), section-by-section (i.e. "scene-by-scene"), from the "first act" to the "dénouement". The book's captions work as a kind of "voice-over", guiding the reader on an informational level in contrast to the images that work on a more emotional one.

When I edit film, I sometimes feel I am sculpting with images, sounds, and text. When I edited *Bosnian War Posters*, I had a similar sensation, only without the sound. I hope that when the book is browsed (even without reading any of the texts) it provokes an emotional response in the reader and stimulates personal thoughts, memories, and reflections—in much the same way as a great movie can impact the viewer.

Fortunately, I had the great luxury (encouraged by Interlink Publishing) to edit and design the book myself. And I did this over more than a year—taking infinite care with each visual juxtaposition as well as the overall tonal composition of the book. When designing the book, if I felt I needed a photograph, I commissioned it or searched for one in an archive. If I sensed I had a hole in the story, I went back to my extensive poster collection and found a suitable one to plug the gap. Caption texts were written as the book expanded visually. And those texts were then rewritten many times with investigative rigour. My Introduction was the first long text to be completed (along with first drafts of the captions), followed by three Prefaces (by Bojan Hadžihalilović, Vehid Šehić, and Carol A. Wells) and four Afterwords (one by me, and others by Rupert Wolfe Murray, Alina Wolfe Murray, and Steven Gordon). All long texts have been translated into Bosnian by the amazing literary translator, Senada Kreso, since I very much wanted the book to be understood in Bosnia and the rest of ex-Yugoslavia, too.

When I look at *Bosnian War Poster* as it has just been published, I see that the book is much more than I imagined it could be. It shows us not only that the human spirit is indomitable, but that human creativity is, too. I imagine the same forces are at play in Ukraine right now. Like everyone, I look forward to the end of Russia's brutal attempt at conquest—and also to seeing how Ukrainian artists responded to the horrors that are enveloping them. Art teaches us as much about war as journalism, but in very different ways.

Bosnian artists did their country proud, and I am happy that with many people's help I was able to save this priceless material. It has a lot to teach us, and a lot to teach young Bosnians, as they explain in this short video.

Bosnian War Posters *is available on Amazon, and through all good bookshops everywhere. It can also be purchased directly from the US publisher. Daoud Sarhandi Williams is a British film editor and filmmaker. His films have been shown around the world and have won many awards. He is also a writer and book designer. As a journalist, he has written many articles about visual subjects for* Eye *magazine, London, such as this one about* Bosnian War Posters.

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