

## The Bridge Builders: Cultural Survival in Bosnia after Genocide

by Jasmin Mujanovi? - Sunday, July 10, 2011

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This is as close to a eulogy and an ode as I can write for a place with which I struggle every day.

As I write this, [a now yearly procession is making its way to the town of Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina](#). The remains of hundreds of men of all ages are making their way to the memorial site there, to join the bodies and remains of thousands of others already interred in the earth. They are Bosniaks, what some in the media still refer to as “Bosnian Muslims”, though presumably there were atheists, agnostics, and lapsed Muslims amongst them.

But such is the discourse in Bosnia. You see, the Muslims were late to “nationalize”, that is, to turn their religious identity into a secular, national one like the Serbs and Croats did before them. Hence, the “Muslims” of Bosnia were akin to the Jews in the rest of Europe: in practice, as much an ethnic group, as a religious collective.

Of course, the extremist variety of Serbian and Croatian nationalism remains hyper-religious (“clero-fascism”, as [Michael Sells calls it](#)), and national or “ethnic” identity remains deeply intertwined with religion in most of the Balkans—so “secularity” is problematic in the region as a whole. Even the term “Bosniak” is one which, historically, was used to refer to Bosnians of all faiths, of all ethnicities.

To the chauvinists, however, the simple virtue of *existing* as such is evidence of the historic “betrayal” of the Bosnian Muslims of their Christian heritage. In converting, they abandoned their Christian duty to resist the Muslim, Ottoman invaders and for five hundred years enjoyed the fruits of their despotism. Sells refers to these notions as “national myths.”

In contrast to these mythologies he offers a more historically grounded retort: he rejects the idea that “groups are or ever were stable entities that remain fixed down through the centuries...that Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslims of Bosnia are direct descendants through stable ethnoreligious communities of ancient Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim ancestors.” “The various loyalties in Bosnia were complex and shifting,” he continues “conversions followed many patterns. Orthodox Christians converted to Catholicism, Catholics converted to Orthodox Christianity, Orthodox Christians and Catholics converted to Islam. Some Muslims converted to different forms of Christianity.” As such, the fact that the Ottoman period, for instance, was no less glowing for the common Muslim Slav than the common Christian Slav is not merely irrelevant but, to the chauvinist, quite dangerous.

But that’s the strange thing about Bosnia: its history is sort of a stubborn thing, as stubborn as its accompanying mythologies, unfortunately. It is to history that we must turn in the face of militant mythology, if we are to have any hope for the future.

It is worth noting this much, as it pertains to the effects of this militant mythology: to speak of a “Srebrenica genocide” is a twisted sort of neologism. Genocide did indeed occur at Srebrenica, but not

only there. This is the warped logic of contemporary international law, which has become a handmaiden to the continued apartheid-like and segregated peace in Bosnia. [The tragic logic of a country organized along the preferences and mythologies of indicted and convicted war criminals—all of it now with the full support and endorsement of the international community. Bosnia's continued segregation as critical to peace.](#)

The peace of the chauvinist to live in “ethnic purity.” Such is the irony of the continued trials of Radovan Karadzic, Ratko Mladic and similar war criminals: the world may prosecute them for their crimes, [but their actual political project, the creation of an ethnically-pure Serbian faux-state, the so-called \*Republika Srpska\*, exists to this day with full international support as part of the Dayton Peace Accord.](#) Worse still, its present-day leaders continue to deny the genocidal practices of their predecessors, were in many cases party to these efforts themselves, [to traffic in chauvinism and nationalism](#), and actively [work against re-integration and reconciliation](#).

Peace through genocide...

Building bridges...

Genocide, by its very nature, by its very legal definition, cannot *only* occur in one town. One cannot speak of the Serb nationalist crimes in Srebrenica as genocide, and then not consider [identical or worse events in Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Visegrad, Bijeljina, Foca or a hundred other towns or cities](#) in the country as part of the same process. Are we to ignore the documented, systematized, planned, bureaucratic nature of this campaign? To ignore the rape, forced expulsions and detention camps? To ignore the [destruction of mosques, libraries and cultural centers](#)—so that once you had destroyed the flesh, you could destroy the *memory* of the flesh? To speak of Srebrenica as genocide in isolation, as so much of the Western press

does, is to ignore the totality of the *Bosnian genocide*.

But Bosnia's history still hums, though quietly.

The perpetrators of the genocide in Bosnia sought as much to destroy the bodies of “opposing” nationalities (mostly Bosniaks, but also Croats, and non-nationalist Serbs) as to destroy the memories of their “own” people. As important as butchering the “enemy” was to destroy the very *idea of Bosnia*—a sense of commonality is antithetic to genocide, after all. The idea that a small, rugged, mountainous land could have a thousand year old history of diverse peoples, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Roma, tribes and nations of every sort, sharing a single place—sharing and borrowing each other's customs, beliefs, practices, hopes and aspirations. *Dangerous*. That for every episode of inter-communal difficulty or even hostility, there had been a dozen examples of collective mobilization—usually against some foreign invader who, tellingly, sought to *divide and conquer*.

Such was the motivation behind the continuous shelling and eventual destruction by Serb nationalists of the old Sarajevo library that housed the physical chronicle of this idea and of this experience. Such also was the aim behind the destruction of the old bridge in Mostar by Croatian nationalists—to do away with the evidence of generations of bridge builders. In order to construct myths, you must destroy history.

In Serbia proper, the continued patriarch of Bosnia's Serb nationalist establishment, they have continued this process through different means. They have issued indictments and arrest warrants for those good men and women of conscience who resisted the siren song of myth. [Bosnian Serbs like Jovan Divjak](#) or [Bosnian Croats like Ilija Jurisic](#) who refused to abandon the idea of Bosnia and did not hesitate to fight against the forces of chauvinism and hate.

“Those looking for the essence of culture and language” Sells writes, “in ethnic, racial or religious purity will find Bosnia incomprehensible. On the other hand, those who see culture as a creative process that by its very nature involves intermingling and creative tension among different elements will treasure Bosnia-Herzegovina.”

“Those who want a wall between Europe and an allegedly alien and inferior ‘Orient,’” he continues, “a wall between Christian and Islamic worlds, face one problem: the stubborn propensity of Bosnians to think in terms of bridges instead of walls and their courageous effort to save or rebuild their bridges. Cultures are hard to kill. Fire meant to destroy them may steel them instead.”

When the dead are brought to Srebrenica, when the dead are interred in any place where hatred has burnt the earth, they should not be commemorated with the epitaph that these are *our* dead and look what *you* have done to them. There are better, more important, more constructive words already in use in Bosnia, written a generation before this horror: [“Because we do not merely live here to live / We do not die here merely to die / We die here / So that we may / Live.”](#)

And in little, mountainous, rugged Bosnia they have lived for a thousand years by building bridges, not walls.