

MICHAEL A. SELLS

THE BRIDGE BETRAYED

RELIGION
AND
GENOCIDE
IN
BOSNIA



**"Anyone seeking to understand and prevent a recurrence of the
firestorm in the Balkans will find this brilliant study indispensable."**

ROY GUTMAN, author of *A Witness to Genocide* and the 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning
Dispatches on the "Ethnic Cleansing" of Bosnia

THE BRIDGE BETRAYED

Religion and Genocide in Bosnia

Michael A. Sells

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THE BRIDGE BETRAYED

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*This book is dedicated to the tens of thousands
of Bosnian civilians who are now missing;
and to the effort to find them if they are alive,
to account for their fate if they are not, to
bring to justice those who harmed them; and
to the possibility of a genuine peace.*

*In memory of my mother,
Simona Sally Trbovich
(1926–1961).*

GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

j = English “y”

The names Lejla and Jasmina are pronounced LAY-la and YAS-min-a.

ć = English “ch”

Jović, a last name, is pronounced YO-vich. Some Slavs in the West add an “h” to make the pronunciation clear, while others keep the original spelling.

Mihajlovic (Michaelson) is pronounced Mi-HAY-lo-vich.

č = a slightly different form of English “ch”

The town of Foča is pronounced FO-cha.

š = English “sh”

Pašić and Bašić (common last names derived from the Ottoman honorific title “Pasha”) are pronounced PAH-shich and BAH-shich. Mušanović (Moses-son) is pronounced MU-SHA-no-vich.

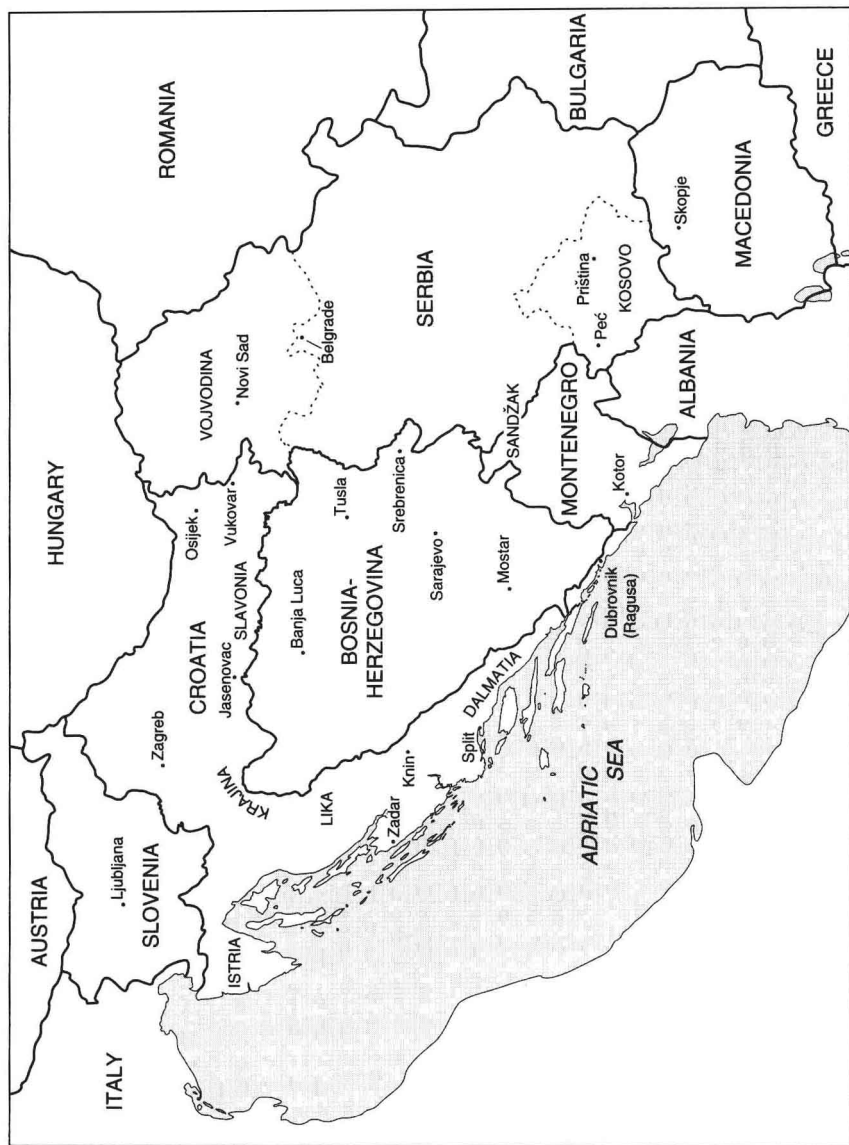
ž = French “j” or “z” as in “azure”

The southeast Bosnian town of Žepa is pronounced ZHEH-pa.

k = English “k”

c = English “tz”

Stolac, a town in Herzegovina, is pronounced STO-latz.



Map 1. Yugoslavia, 1945-1991

PREFACE

The story told here is not one I wish to believe or to tell. My mother's family is Serbian American, and I know personally that Serbs have suffered in the Bosnian war—some of my Serb relatives in Bosnia and in Krajina (the Serb-occupied area of Croatia) have been killed, some are missing, and others are living in refugee camps. However, the evidence in Bosnia leads to conclusions that are as unavoidable as they are unpalatable. Genocide has occurred. It has occurred with the acquiescence of Western governments, in violation of the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Convention on Genocide of 1948. It has been motivated and justified in large part by religious nationalism, fueled financially and militarily from Serbia and Croatia, and grounded in religious symbols. And the primary victims have been Bosnian Muslims, selected for destruction because of their religion.

In situations of genocide a disengaged, purely objective stance would be inhuman. Yet precisely to the extent that genocide demands a response, it also demands a continual willingness to examine and reexamine the evidence. For over three years the atrocities were documented by refugee workers, human rights groups, and war crimes investigators (see the Note on Sources). That evidence shows a religious violence far more systematic than the media accounts of the shellings in Sarajevo have suggested.

A particular abuse of history, “Balkanism,” has been used to justify the genocide in Bosnia by suggesting that people in the Balkans are fated, by history or genetics, to kill one another. It is true that, like the rest of Europe, Bosnia was caught up in the violence of World War I, World War II, and earlier conflicts. But just as Germans, Dutch, French, and British today live together peacefully, only a few years ago Bosnians had every reason to believe the peace they had enjoyed for fifty years would continue.* That their friends and neighbors would one day seek to destroy them, that their family members would be sent to concentration camps, that their cultural heritage would be methodically burned and dynamited—such possibilities seemed remote to most of the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

A resurgence in religious violence has caught the post-cold war world off guard. From the subways of Tokyo to the ruins of a mosque in India, from the World Trade Center and the federal building in Oklahoma City to a Jerusalem rally for the Israeli prime minister, religious militants have transgressed the boundaries of civil society in pursuit of their aims. Bosnians have faced the most brutal religious violence unleashed in the aftermath of the cold war, but the forces that assaulted Bosnia are not due to “age-old antagonisms” peculiar to Balkan peoples, as the cliché would have it. They are forces with us all.

The story told here has clear historical parallels with earlier periods of European history. At the heart of the religious nationalism used to motivate and justify the assault on Bosnia, and

*Bosnians are defined in this book as all residents of the internationally recognized sovereign nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, regardless of their religious affiliation, who consider themselves Bosnian, that is, who remain loyal to a Bosnian state built on the principles of civic society and religious pluralism.

on Bosnian Muslims in particular, is the same myth of the Christ killer that was exploited in the past to instigate attacks on Jews. How Muslims, a people whose religion began six centuries after Jesus, could have been singled out for genocide as Christ killers and race traitors is a tale this book seeks to tell.

The ancient bridge at Mostar, destroyed by Croat religious nationalists on November 9, 1993, has come to symbolize the multireligious character of Bosnia. But it symbolizes something larger as well: the ability of a culturally pluralistic society to flourish for almost five centuries, despite the very real tensions among the different religious groups. For those who choose a pluralistic society where different religions coexist—whether in Banja Luka, London, or Los Angeles—the struggle to rebuild that bridge is not something occurring over there and far away, but something frighteningly close to home.

I wish to thank Mark Auslander, Amila Buturovic, Carin Companick, Deborah Cooper, Vanja and Mirza Filipović, Bridget Gillich, Laurie Kain Hart, Nader Hashemi, Richard Hecht, Mark Juergensmeyer, Walter Lee, Kathleen MacDougall, Janet Marcus, Aida Premilovac, Emran Qureshi, András Riedlmayer, Ellen Schattsneider, and the Haverford College community for support in writing this book, and the Greek Studies Yearbook for permission to reprint the lithograph of Adam Stefanović's *The Feast of the Prince*. Special thanks to Douglas Abrams Arava, Reed Malcolm, and Marilyn Schwartz of the University of California Press for their encouragement, judgment, and care during the preparation of this book.

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CHAPTER ONE

FIRE IN THE PAGES

RAIN OF ASH

“It was the most apocalyptic thing I’d ever seen,” said Aida Mušanović, an artist from Sarajevo, describing the burning of the National Library in Sarajevo.¹ For days, a thick black cloud of ash hung over the city and residents would find pieces of charred paper or ashes of burned books and manuscripts in their hair and on their clothes.

On August 25, 1992, the Serb army began shelling the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo from positions on the mountainside directly in front of it. In the next few days, in the largest book-burning in modern human history, over a million books, more than a hundred thousand manuscripts and rare books, and centuries of historical records of Bosnia-Herzegovina went up in flames. Volunteers formed a human chain to rescue what they could. One of them, a graduate student at the University of Sarajevo, never made it home.

What was in the pages of those manuscripts and rare books, survivors of centuries of peace and war, that the Serb army was determined to destroy? What was there in those burning pages that many Sarajevans—Croats, Serbs, Muslims, and Jews—were willing to risk their lives to save?

The destruction of the National Library was one component of a systematic campaign of cultural eradication. Three months earlier, on May 17, 1992, the Serb army had targeted the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo, which housed the largest collection of Islamic and Jewish manuscripts in southeast Europe. More than five thousand manuscripts in Hebrew, Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Adžamijski (Slavic in Arabic script) were incinerated.

The Serb army then turned its fire on the National Museum, hitting it repeatedly and destroying much of its contents. One special item was saved: an ancient Jewish prayer book used for celebration of the *seder* or Passover feast. The *Sarajevo Haggadah*, with its exquisite Hebrew calligraphy and colored illustration, had been created in fourteenth-century Spain. Jewish refugees from the Inquisition in Spain had brought it to Bosnia. During World War II the *Sarajevo Haggadah* had been preserved by a Muslim curator who hid it from Nazi soldiers. In 1992, it was saved at great personal risk by a team of Bosnian museum workers that included a Muslim, an Orthodox Serb, and a Catholic. The *Haggadah* has thus survived three historic persecutions: the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the Holocaust, and what has been called “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia.²

The shelling of these cultural institutions was purposeful. They were chosen for destruction and shelled in a precise manner. Areas around them were left untouched. During one particular shelling of the National Museum, the Serb gunners missed

and struck the Holiday Inn directly in front of it. Kate Adie, a BBC reporter, interviewed the Serb officer afterward. When she asked him why he had been shelling the Holiday Inn, the major hotel for journalists in Sarajevo, the officer apologized, explaining that he had been aiming at the museum and had struck the Holiday Inn by mistake.³

Since April 1992 the Serb army has targeted for destruction the major libraries, manuscript collections, museums, and other cultural institutions in Sarajevo, Mostar, and other besieged cities. What the Serb artillery missed, the Croat nationalist militia known as the "Croatian Defense Council" (HVO) took care of.

Where the Serb and Croat armies have been able to get closer than shelling range, the destruction has been even greater. The Croatian Defense Council dynamited mosques and Orthodox churches throughout the regions controlled by the Croat military. Serb militias have dynamited all the mosques (over six hundred) in areas they have occupied, some of them masterworks of European architecture such as the sixteenth-century Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka and the Colored Mosque in Foča built in 1551. Between them, the Croat and Serb nationalists have destroyed an estimated fourteen hundred mosques. In many cases the mosques have been ploughed over and turned into parking lots or parks; every evidence of their existence has been effaced. Graveyards, birth records, work records, and other traces of the Bosnian Muslim people have been eradicated.⁴

Western political leaders have spoken of "ancient animosities," portraying Bosnians as a group of Balkan tribal killers who have hated one another for centuries and who are incapable of living in peace. In the fires of the National Library, the irony

of that portrayal becomes apparent. What the Serb and Croat armies were destroying, there and elsewhere, was the graphic and palpable evidence of over five hundred years of interreligious life in Bosnia. Despite the wars and strife of the past, religious monuments and houses of worship in Mostar and Sarajevo had been built next to one another and shared the same skyline. It is this architectural, literary, and human evidence—the monuments, the books, and the people who treasured them—of a flourishing multiconfessional culture that ethnoreligious militants have sought to efface.⁵

The northeast Bosnian town of Zvornik was known for its heritage of Bosnian Muslim poets, saints, rebels, and mystics. From April through July of 1992 the Serb military killed or expelled the entire Muslim population. After all the mosques in the primarily Muslim town were dynamited and ploughed over, the new Serb nationalist mayor declared: “There never were any mosques in Zvornik.” Destroyed with those mosques was the evidence not only of the Muslim heritage of Zvornik but also of five hundred years of shared living between Christians and Muslims. History could now be rewritten according to the desires of those who wished to claim that this land was always and purely Christian Serb. In May 1993 to celebrate Zvornik’s new status as 100 percent “pure” and cleansed of all Muslims, the mayor dedicated a new church, renamed a local, formerly Muslim village “Saint Stephen,” and kissed a crucifix.⁶

Aida Mušanović, the artist who described the burning of the National Library, had visited the hospital in Sarajevo and seen the carnage brought by the war. Yet the burning of the library struck her with a special horror. In the fire of the National Library, she realized that what she was experiencing was not only

war but also something else. The centuries of culture that fell back in ash onto the besieged city revealed a secret. The gunners on the hills above Sarajevo did not seek to defeat an enemy army; at that time, there was no organized, opposing army. They sought to take territory, but not only territory. They sought political concessions, but also something more. Their goal was the eradication of a people and all evidence of that people's culture and existence.

WHO ARE BOSNIANS?

In 1945, communist guerrilla fighter Josip Broz Tito, better known as Marshal Tito, reestablished the Yugoslav federation, which had existed from 1918 to 1941 and then had been dismembered by Nazi Germany. The constituent nations of the reconstituted Yugoslavian republic were Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia (see Map 1).

The word "Yugoslavia" means "land of the South (Yugo) Slavs." The central part of Yugoslavia was populated by three major groups (Serbs, Slavic Muslims, and Croats), all of whom spoke the same South Slavic language, until recently called Serbo-Croatian. The vast majority of Croats were Roman Catholic and lived in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and some parts of Serbia. The vast majority of Serbs were Orthodox Christians and lived in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and parts of Croatia and Bosnia known as the Krajina. The Slavic Muslims were concentrated in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the adjacent areas in Serbia and Montenegro, and in Macedonia. Croats used a Latin-based script, while Serbs preferred a Cyrillic script (based on Greek characters), but despite dialectical differences, Serbs,