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# **ETHNIC CLEANSING IN THE BALKANS**

## **WHY DID IT HAPPEN AND COULD IT HAPPEN AGAIN?**

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# **Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans: Why Did It Happen And Could It Happen Again?**

Paul Mojzes

## *Introduction*

In the writing of my book, *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*,<sup>(1)</sup> among the many definitions of genocide, I followed the formally adopted definition of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This definition was my primary guide in determining which of the many conflicts in the Balkans during the 20th Century were genocidal. The result of my research revealed that there were three major waves of genocides. The first occurred during I and II Balkan Wars, the second during World War II, and the third during the wars of the dismemberment of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. This means that the earliest and the latest European genocide of the 20th century took place in the Balkans.

## *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913: An Unrecognized Genocide*

So far I am the only scholar who identified the I and II Balkan Wars not only as having been genocidal, but being in the unusual category of multiple mutual genocides. This means that nearly all adversaries in these wars were both perpetrators and victims. The major participants were the Ottoman Empire and the four small, recently liberated countries of Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia that had entered into an alliance

to drive the Ottoman Empire out of the Balkans. In the I Balkan War the allies unexpectedly routed the Ottoman armies and nearly took Istanbul. Historians primarily concentrated on the military aspect of the war; only a few paid attention to the horrendous violence against the civilian population. The major thrust of the violence was against the Ottoman armies and the Muslim population, consisting of Turks, Albanians, and Slavic and Greek Muslims. The purpose was to remove them from the territories, which the victors intended to incorporate into their states, and the explosion of violence included killings, torture, rape, arson, looting, deportation, and all imaginable outrages with the purpose of ethnically cleansing these territories of Turks and their allies. The latter naturally retaliated. The members of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan War that traveled in 1913 throughout the area described in distressful detail the horrors of that war.(2) The first war ended by the intervention of the great powers with the Treaty of London.

Bulgaria, having been dissatisfied with the treaty's division of territories, attacked in 1913 Greece and Serbia with the purpose of occupying some territories they considered rightfully theirs. The Bulgarians found themselves fighting not only their former two allies, but also the Ottoman Empire, which re-entered the war to recapture lost ground, and Romania, which sought to take some disputed territories from Bulgaria. The second war was even more gruesome than the first. In order to claim that certain cities, villages, or territory really belonged to any of the warring sides, they considered it imperative to expel all but their own national group, and the more gruesome the violence was, the faster they thought they would get rid of the others. Territories were taken, lost, regained and in the meantime genocidal ethnic cleansing descended into barbarism in which not only uniformed soldiers and armed bands (*bashi-bazouks*, *komitadji*, and *andarte*) but the general population engaged in atrocities, and conversely suffered "excesses of horrors." In the words of the head of the Commission, "the worst atrocities were not due to regular soldiers. . . . The populations themselves killed each other."(3) The populations executed, slaughtered, raped, tortured, imprisoned, burned, looted, destroyed, and banished, the purpose being the complete extermination of

“aliens” from one’s “own” territory. Holy places and holy objects were not exempt from the destruction, not merely as “collateral damage” but with purposive sacrilege by Christians of mosques as well as churches of the other nations (although all of them were of the Eastern Orthodox faith) and by Muslims desecrating churches and sometimes killing the people within.

Eyewitnesses claimed that these were the most atrocious wars in history; little did they know that soon after the end of this short II Balkan War, a much larger World War was to be ignited by an assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a young Serbian radical. And that war would later be greatly overshadowed in destruction and suffering by World War II. Not only were these two Balkan wars genocidal, but no one apologized for the excesses, no one was accused or punished for any war crimes or crimes against humanity. In other words, the people of the Balkans realized implicitly that one can carry out the worst possible crimes with impunity provided one “justifies” it with patriotic or religious slogans.

#### *Multiple Genocides of World War II: 1941-1945 and After*

It is impossible to concisely present the multitude of wars in the Balkans within the larger Second World War. Bulgaria and Hungary had joined Nazi Germany and fascist Italy and their combined forces attacked, conquered, and partitioned Yugoslavia and Greece without a declaration of war. Italy had previously occupied Albania. Yugoslavia was broken up into about ten sections, some of which were directly annexed or colonized while a few others became puppet regimes of the Nazis. Armed resistance on ethnic and ideological grounds flared up so that the international war became also a civil war. It was within this complex framework that the Holocaust and multiple genocides occurred.

Jews of the area became the first target of extermination: about 95% of the Jews perished (with the exception of those in “old” Bulgaria).(4) Romas became another target of extermination; the exact numbers are unknown but more than half of the

population was killed. Serbs living in Croatia and parts of Bosnia that were under Croatian control were subjected to merciless genocide, not merely by expulsion but by mass murder in numerous concentration camps, the most infamous being Jasenovac. The Croatian *Ustaše* tortured, killed, raped, burned, destroyed Orthodox churches, and forcibly converted many Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism, and did this with such an unusual degree of sadism that it shocked even their German allies. Jasenovac became a symbol of suffering analogous to Auschwitz.(5) Muslims were not unanimous in their ideological adherence but often joined groups that fought each other. Some of them were members of the *Ustaše*; others ended in their concentration camps. Three SS divisions were formed by Muslim soldiers, *Handžar*, *Kama*, and *Skenderbeg*, the first two of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims, the third of Albanian. In the Italian-occupied Albanian territories which included Kosovo, Albanian Muslims avenged themselves against the real and imagined persecution by the Orthodox Serbs by killing and expelling them, thereby continuing the vicious cycle of alternate dominance or subjection by whoever is in power, which continues to this time.

The Serbs also engaged in mass killings. Their paramilitaries, the *Četniks*, fought, killed, and massacred Muslims and Croatian Catholics, but due to their relative weakness their victims were less numerous. However, *Četnik* leaders also verbally expressed the desire to create an ethnically cleansed territory.(6) There was another major guerilla force, the multiethnic Partizans, led by the Communist Tito who fought simultaneously not only the foreign occupying forces but also all their collaborators (real or imagined), basically fighting everybody else but not on ethnic or religious basis. They also killed large numbers of people but, unlike the others who killed primarily those who were of another ethnicity or religion (thereby making it genocidal), the Partizans fought more on an ideological basis for liberating the country of foreign occupation.

The war ended in May 1945 with the Allied victory and Tito's armies securely in control. But the killing, imprisonment, torture, etc. did not stop. Between 1945 and 1948 (and even later) Tito's government viciously retaliated against all enemies, real and imagined, massacring the majority of captured collaborators. Yugoslavia used to have a

sizable German minority of about 600,000, only some of whom became Hitler's followers. Many of them left the country prior to the end of the war fearing retribution. Those who stayed, who were mostly not guilty of any wrongdoing, were all incarcerated into concentration camps, and again, tortured, killed, starved or worked to death, and finally years later permitted to emigrate—the sum total of all of that being a retaliatory genocide, about which it was forbidden to write in Yugoslavia until the fall of Communism in 1990.(7)

A large number of trials for war crimes and crimes against humanity took place after the war. Many who were executed or imprisoned deserved the punishment, but many of the trials were show trials with the outcome known in advance. Lingering doubt whether true justice was served still troubles many persons. In addition Tito had decided to move quickly by “suppressing both the manifestations and the memories of interethnic conflict. It [Tito's government] made only a limited effort to address the accumulated grievances of the ethnic populations in a constructive manner.”(8) Of course, the terrible devastation after World War II almost of necessity prioritized the rebuilding the country. History was tendentiously interpreted only through a Marxist prism, so that after the collapse of communism people rushed to revise history, resulting in much uncertainty as to what really happened during the war. The current nationalist interpreters of a dismembered Yugoslavia are also guilty of perverting the truth. The unresolved legacy of World War II and the persecution of religion and lack of human rights under communism resulted in the wars of the 1990s and another great wave of genocides.

#### *Genocides During the Wars of Yugoslavia's Disintegration of the 1990s*

Many of the unresolved historical, ethnic, religious, social, and ideological problems left over from World War II, plus the accumulated problems of 45 years of the communist system, couldn't be resolved by the successors to Tito, who died in 1980. A decade later the entire Soviet and East European communist system collapsed. At first it seemed that

Yugoslavia would have the easiest transition into post-communism, but the political leaders that emerged aggravated rather than ameliorated the problems. The result was the worst of all alternatives, a decade of the bloodiest wars in Europe since WWII.

It was not a single war but rather a series of five related wars:

1. War in Slovenia, June 1991.

This war lasted only about two weeks, low casualties, without genocides, but resulting in Slovenia's secession and independence.(9)

2. War in Croatia, 1991-1995/98.

Croatia declared independence while Serbs in Croatia engaged in a civil war with the help of the Yugoslav People's Army. Very high casualties, intense ethnic cleansing, first of Croats from Serb-held territories and at the end of the war by the near total expulsion of Serbs from Croatia, reaching genocidal dimensions. U.N. peacekeeping forces and international mediation had limited success.(10)

3. War in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1991-1995.

This was a three-way war between Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), with changing alliances, the bloodiest war and dirtiest war with participation of foreign volunteers and mercenaries on all three sides. UN intervention was only partially effective. Huge casualties with about 100,000 killed, many more wounded, almost 2 million (out of 4 million total inhabitants) exiled from their homes, genocidal rapes, large scale destruction of sacred objects, and mass burning of homes. Many of these brutalities were carried out in the name of religion.(11) In the early stages of the war Serbs were dominant, but at the end they did not achieve their objectives. However, Bosnian Muslims sustained the greatest casualties as they were the least prepared for

the war. Ethnic cleansing became successful as the ethnoreligious composition of the previously mixed population was forcefully segregated into fairly homogeneous Bosniak Muslim, Serbian Orthodox, and Croat Catholic areas.(12) Places of worship and other symbols of the religious and ethnic identity of adversaries were frequently demolished not merely as a result of the fighting but even in areas not affected by military activities, for instance the demolition of the historic Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka.(13)

Not all the numerous claims of genocide can be legally ascertained but the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in the Hague concluded that the murder of about 8,000 people, mostly men, in Srebrenica in July of 1995 was a genocide, that many of the rapes were genocidal in character, and that the intention existed of expelling populations from their ancestral areas, in which case the ethnic cleansing had a genocidal character. While members of all three ethnoreligious collectives perpetrated crimes against humanity and war crimes, those by the Serb ethnicity were most numerous and most severe. Several of the major Serb war criminals have been sentenced or are likely to be found guilty of conspiracy to commit genocide. Typically people of each ethnoreligiosity blame the other two of having committed genocide but insist that they themselves were only victims who acted in self-defense. To this day there are radically different interpretation of who is responsible and guilty and what actually took place.(14)

#### 4. War in Kosovo, 1999.

Kosovo/Kosova was the region of Serbia where the wars of the dismemberment of Yugoslavia actually began with low level violence and unrest between Kosovo Orthodox Serbs (a minority) and Muslim Albanians (the majority).(15) This occurred already in the 1980s, then subsided as the conflict took the form of civil disobedience on part of the Albanian population(16), only to break out into a full-fledged war in 1999 with the attack by NATO air forces led by the USA upon Serbia. President Milošević's ultimate surrender led to Kosovo's secession from Serbia and its final declaration of independence in 2006.

During the major phases of the war from March to June 1999, several hundred thousand Kosovar Albanians fled or were expelled from Kosovo; that lasted briefly and most of them returned, causing the flight and expulsion of Serbs by the revenge-seeking Albanians. An uneasy peace was imposed by United Nations forces and led to a sharply segregated Serbian minority complaining of frequent Albanian attacks on their churches, graveyards and other monuments, whereas the Kosovar Albanians also claimed prior destruction of mosques. Massacres were carried out by both sides. Again, genocides were claimed by both sides.<sup>(17)</sup> But when one looks at the resolution of the conflict up to 2013 it would seem that at first nearly half of Kosova Albanians were uprooted from their homes, while in the later stages the vast majority of the Serbs were driven out. Great distrust and even hatred persists between these two ethnoreligious groups, far greater than in Bosnia and Herzegovina because there is no ethnic, linguistic, or religious affinity between Kosovo's Albanians and Serbs.

#### 5. Low Intensity War in Macedonia, 2001-2002.

Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia attempted an insurrection in the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 that led to small-scale population expulsions and killings. But with the wise leadership of Macedonia's President Boris Trajkovski and the decisive intervention of the international community, negotiations resulted in a change from a military confrontation to a democratic political accommodation. Genocide was averted. It is mentioned here only because interreligious dialogue was a contributing factor to avoiding the war.

*Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans: Why Did It Happen and Could It Happen Again?*

My son, Bernard Mojzes, is correct in providing a snap-shot of the Balkans: "The Balkans have always been a microcosm of the world, a dollhouse, a crucible in which everything

that could go wrong has gone wrong and will go wrong again, and everything that could go right has gone right and will go right again, and in which every mix of good and evil and love and hate and avarice and generosity has been endlessly played out over the ages.”(18) This being a fundamentally accurate assessment of this part of Europe, in answer to the question “why did the genocides/ethnic cleansing happen and could it happen again?” the following can be succinctly stated:

In addition to the common reasons why any genocide happens, numerous factors led to the Balkan genocides and ethnic cleansing, such as,

- The explosion of pent-up feelings of frustrated centuries-long occupations by neighboring empires leading to a powerful desire for revenge.
- A belated rise of nationalism emanating from Western Europe.
- Previous outbreaks of massacres, war crimes and crimes against humanity for which no one has been tried (until the middle of the twentieth century, and then only sporadically and unevenly).
- Upon the creation of the two successive Yugoslavias (1919-1941 and 1945-1990) the leadership could not solve the national question in the multinational and multireligious state.
- Manipulation of ethnoreligious sentiments by rival political and religious elites (especially Slobodan Milošević, Franjo Tuđman, and Alija Izetbegović) doomed the transition from Titoist socialism to post-socialism.
- Complicity in this destructive process by scholars, the press and media, armed forces, nationalistic intelligentsia, and war criminals lead to popular support of the wars of the 1990s.(19)

A straightforward answer as to whether it could happen again cannot be given by me as I am neither a prophet nor a futurist. That being said there are some relevant observations. The current division of the former Yugoslavia into seven independent countries created several independent states in which sizable segments of citizens are

unhappy about which state they have been allocated to live in, and who would rather live in or with the adjacent states with which they share ethnic ties. Hence many Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina would rather live in Serbia (witness Republika Srpska which is deliberately undermining the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The same can be said of Herzegovinian Croats who would rather live in Croatia.(20) Serbs in Kosova would rather live in Serbia; Albanians in Serbia would rather live in Kosova. Albanians in Macedonia would rather live in Albania or Kosova. These facts are conducive to political manipulation by nationalist extremists. In Bosnia and Herzegovina the same three political parties that manufactured the crisis in the 1990s still receive the majority of votes by their ethnoreligious supporters.

One factor that works against this doomsday scenario is that the current populations have seen that war does not solve the problems. Democracy is slowly making some advances. Most would like to follow Slovenia and Croatia into the European Union, which would solve some problems but not others. Under conditions of economic scarcity, uneven demographic growth in the Balkans still threatens those ethnic groups that have slower rates of population growth, who fear being overrun and overwhelmed by some of their neighbors.

The imposition of legal conditions for NATO and EU membership may coerce the elites to restrain themselves in regard to inter-ethnic rivalries. IF NATO and EU (supported by the USA) continue a sizable presence (observers and advisors, investment, diplomatic and economic pressure, academic cooperation, etc.), gradual effective integration into the European community could take place, and these populations, who fundamentally possess sufficient creativity, skills, and life force, can eventually become not the powder keg of Europe but a haven of hospitality and friendship.

## ENDNOTES

(1) Paul Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011). Abbreviated to *Balkan Genocides*.

(2) *The Other Balkan Wars: A 1913 Carnegie Endowment Inquiry in Retrospect* (Washington, DC: A Carnegie Endowment Book, 1993).

(3) *Ibid.*, 13.

(4) The Bulgarian government semi-protected those Jews who lived within the original rather than expanded borders, while Italian administrations inconsistently protected some Jews but deported others to extermination.

(5) Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 52-65, based on a large amount of documentation and analysis. Estimates of the number of murdered in Jasenovac range from an obscenely minimized figure of 20,000 to an vastly exaggerated number of 700,000. While this author refuses to engage in the numbers game because of moral concerns, a number of serious scholars estimate between 65,000 and 150,000.

(6) Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 96-99.

(7) *Ibid.*, 109-121. See also Georg Wildmann, (ed.), *Verbrechen an den Deutschen in Jugoslawien 1944-1948: Die Stationen eines Völkermords*, (Munich, Germany: Donaueschwäbische Kulturstiftung, 2000), *passim*.

(8) Steven L. Burg, "Intractability and Third-Party Mediation in the Balkans," in Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds), *Grasping the Nettle: Analyzing Cases of Intractable Conflict*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005), 185. I would substitute Burg's choice of the word 'ethnic' with 'ethnoreligious.'

(9) Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans*. (New York: Continuum, 1994), 97-99. The concept of ethnoreligiosity connotes the synthesis of ethnic nationality with belonging to a religion so that by being born of a particular ethnicity automatically confers religious affiliation to nearly all members of the group.

(10) *Ibid.*, 100-106.

(11) Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation & Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Translated by Rang'ichi Ng'inja. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 259-262.

(12) Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 172-193.

(13) Michael Sells, "Religion, History, and Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina," in G. Scott Davis (ed.), *Religion and Justice in the War over Bosnia*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 25.

(14) E.g. Sells places the responsibility on the Serbian extremists, whereas Darko Tanasković, *U diajlogu s Islamom* [In Dialogue with Islam], 3rd rev. ed. (Gornji Milanovac, Serbia: Dečje novine, 2006), 275-316, attributes the dangers and reasons for the conflicts to the expansion of radicalized Islam.

(15) The Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church had issued a declaration in 1988 of a genocide upon Serbs by Albanians. See Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno*, 136.

(16) Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms in Prishtina, *Knocking on Europe's Conscience*. (Prishtinë: Infotrade, 1992), *passim*. (Collection of documents promoting the Kosova Albanian cause).

(17) Mojzes, *Balkan Genocides*, 217-219.

(18) Bernie Mojzes, "Red Danube" *Betwixt Magazine*, October 4, 2013, <http://betwixtmagazine.com/the-red-danube-by-bernie-mojzes/>

(19) Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno*, especially ch. 8 "Who or What is to Blame," 152-175.

(20) When Bosnian sports teams play the teams of Croatia or Serbia the B&H Croat or Serb fans invariably root for the teams of their ethnic confreres rather than the home team.