



Bosnia-Herzegovina casts a spell on all who live there or who were privileged in the past to acquaint themselves with the republic. Sentimentalism plays little part in this – it is through the middle of Bosnia that East meets West; Islam meets Christianity; the Catholic eyes the Orthodox across the Neretva, the line of the Great Schism; Bosnia divided the great empires of Vienna and Constantinople; Bosnia was perhaps the only true reflection of Yugoslavia. It is both the paradigm of peaceful, communal life in the Balkans and its darkest antithesis. Nowhere else does the local culture resonate with so many sounds which have defined European consciousness in such a fundamental way.

Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia*

I felt a thought the gates of hell had opened. I expected war, but I did not expect genocide.

Former president of Bosnia, Alija Izetbegovic

Mostar is only 20 miles from the Croatian border in the heart of the former Yugoslavia. Its geography made it strategically important during the Balkan Wars of the 1990's. Spread out along two sides of the Neretva River, Mostar was known for its riverside restaurants and cafes and its ornate monuments and mosques, developed by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century.

Before the wars, the area around Mostar was the most economically developed in the Herzegovina region. The river was to become the dividing line between opposing forces. Mostar was ravaged in two sieges, first in spring 1992 as Muslims and Croats fought against Serbian forces, and again in 1993 when Bosnian Croats and Muslims fought for control of the city.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was the most ethnically mixed of the six republics that made up Yugoslavia after the Second World War, with a population of 4.5 million - similar in size to that of the West Midlands here in England. Muslims, Slavs who had converted to Islam during the centuries of rule under the Ottoman Turks, made up 44 % of this population; Serbs, Orthodox Christian Slavs, made up another 31%; Croats, Slavs who speak Serbo-Croat but are Roman Catholics, were 17% of the population. In the 1991 census, the remainder identified themselves as Yugoslavs.

The wars of 1991-95, in what was once Yugoslavia, killed more than 250,000 people and displaced over 3.5 million people. (Imagine the eradication of the population of nearly the whole of Sandwell or Walsall, with most of the population of Birmingham and the Black Country as refugees.)

“In Mostar and Sarajevo, no food, no medicine and no ammunition made it in and nobody made it out.”

In the first siege, the Serbian JNA blockaded the city and continuously bombarded the city in a campaign of ‘urbicide’, the destruction of a city and everything that it represents. Among them were a Franciscan monastery, the Catholic cathedral and the bishop's palace, with a library of 50,000 books, as well as Karadžić-bey, Roznamed-ij-Ibrahim-efendija and twelve other mosques. By the time the Serbs had been defeated and driven from the city, in June 1992, Mostar was in a ruinous state.

Less than four months later, conflict broke out between the Croatian and Muslim forces. This second siege, as bloody as the first, included Croats turning on the Muslims and *“rounding them up at gunpoint in the middle of the night, assembling them in detention camps, putting them on buses to leave the area, or subsequently expelling them to the ghetto on the east side, which they then bombarded from previously prepared artillery positions.”*

The Bosnian Croats launched an offensive where they relentlessly bombarded the Muslim quarter of the city the east side – laying waste to it. Virtually every

single historic building was severely damaged, and 90% of the east side lay in ruins.

The only surviving structure connecting the east and west banks of the city, the ancient bridge - the *Stari Most* - was destroyed in November 1993 by Croatian gunners. Designed by the Ottoman architect Mimar Hajrudin in 1566, it was both a real and symbolic bridge between two cultures. Journalists reported Croatian militia commenting: *"It is not enough to cleanse Mostar of the Muslims, the relics must also be destroyed."*

With the intervention of the United Nations, a cease-fire was signed in February 1994. The wars that tore the fabric of Bosnia-Herzegovina apart formally ended when a peace treaty was signed in November 1995 at Dayton, Ohio, and 60,000 NATO troops sent to enforce it. A European Union-led peacekeeping force, Eufor, is now responsible for safeguarding peace and stability, taking over in December 2004.

Bosnia today, after the Dayton Peace Accord, has two parts, the Bosnian Muslim/Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosnian Serb-led Republika Srpska, each with roughly half of the country. According to official statistics, unemployment is hovering at around 40%. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) calls it "the burning problem of the Bosnian economy".

The city remained divided between two ethnically-divided and hostile entities: an almost exclusively Croat city on the west side, with its own administration and infrastructure, and a Moslem counterpart on the east side. It is only recently, with ultimatums from the European Community's High Representative that the city has begun to reintegrate.

The 1995 Dayton peace accord also established the Office of the High Representative, a role fulfilled by British politician Paddy Ashdown since May 2002, whose job it is to work with the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the International Community to ensure that the country is a peaceful, viable state on course to European integration. The Representative has wide-ranging powers to impose decisions in cases where the authorities are unable to agree, or where political and economic interests are considered to be at stake.

"When people come here and they ask me what do I do to prepare for Bosnia and Herzegovina - I say read one book, see one film. The book is Ivo Andric's great classic, 'The Bridge on the Drina' that won the Nobel Prize but the film is 'The Third Man'. Now, do you remember The Third Man? It was shot in 1952, seven years after the Second World War. It was about Vienna - a wonderful European capital stable and brilliant today - but, at that time, absolutely infected with crime, darkness, criminal networks etc. The truth of the matter is that it's not the Balkans that are uniquely criminal, it is that war is uniquely followed, like a

dark shadow, by criminality and unless you fill that space, criminality will. So it was after the Second World War in Europe, so it is in the Balkans today, so it will be in Iraq.”

- Paddy Ashdown, interviewed by Edward Stourton on BBC Radio 4, September 2003

The Stari Most – and the surrounding area of the old town of Mostar – has been rebuilt with international support, including the support of the World Bank and UNESCO. It reopened in June 2004, a new symbol of hope for the future.

The bridge is now a World Heritage Site – there are only two bridges in the world with this special status, the other being in Ironbridge in the West Midlands of England.

Further reading:

Janine Giovanni, Madness Visible: A Memoir of War, Bloomsbury

Misha Glenny, The Fall of Yugoslavia, Penguin Books

Misha Glenny, The Balkans, 1804-1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, Granta Books

Martin Bell, In Harms Way, Penguin Books

Noel Malcom, Bosnia, A Short History, Pan

Allan Little, Laura Silber, Aleksandar Ciric (Illustrator), The Death of Yugoslavia, (BBC) Penguin Books