

The Bosnian Genocide: A Case for Multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to investigate the causes, impacts, and aftermath of the Bosnian Genocide to propose preventative strategies against future genocides. A literature review of primary sources and current scholarly papers is presented to analyze the significant influence of economic and historical events preceding the genocide, the determinant causes of which were the advocacy of the “Greater Serbia” ideology and the changing socioeconomic dynamics between Bosnia and Serbia. The clear intent of the Bosnian War was to systematically enforce a nationalist Serbian agenda whose primary goals were the complete eradication of the Bosniak community through the destruction of their cultural landmarks and the deliberate killings of Bosniak men and mass rape of women. The Bosnian Genocide resulted in the Dayton Agreement that ended the war and the formation of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The results of this study culminate in recommendations to avert future instances of genocide, such as limiting the political power of the head of state to ensure accountability through checks and balances, establishing security measures to protect the Bosniak community from violent crimes, diversifying the national economy by creating job opportunities in non-military sectors, implementing an educational campaign at the primary level to encourage respect for minority groups, enacting anti-discrimination laws, and engaging Bosniak community leaders in decision making. These recommendations are made not only to support preventative measures but also to promote an acceptance of multiculturalism that is crucial to avert future genocides in an increasingly globalized society.

Introduction

Throughout history, diverse ethnic factions have frequently resolved their disagreements through warfare, occasionally descending into the abhorrent extremes of genocide. The Holocaust during World War II stands as the most chronicled occurrences of genocide in the 20th century. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the global community established the United Nations with the hope of sparing future generations from the devastations of conflict and to uphold and protect fundamental human rights (Stanton, 1996). However, the United Nations could not successfully shield the Bosniak population from the sheer brutality of mass extermination in the Bosnian War which occurred between 1992 and 1995 in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina located in the western Balkans (Gavin, 2000). Deep-rooted ethnic hatred between the Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Bosniaks, combined with the economic disparity between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, culminated in the widespread persecution and extermination of Bosniaks. To prevent future genocides, it is imperative for governments to have checks and balances in order to limit the political power of the head of state, establish security measures to protect minority communities from racial violence, create job opportunities in non-military industries and re-educating the workforce, implement an educational campaign at the primary level to encourage respect for other ethnic groups and their religions, enact anti-discrimination laws, and involve minority community leaders in decision making. With a commitment to the promotion and systemic integration of multiculturalism, a future genocide may be prevented.

Causes

Historical Causes

After the fall of Yugoslavia, historical prejudices against Muslims by Serbs intensified, giving rise to a pro-Serbian nationalist discourse anchored in the "Greater Serbia" ideology. The roots of these anti-Muslim sentiments can be traced back to 1804, when Serbians embarked on campaigns against Muslims, notably before attaining their independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. The animosity persisted during events such as the two Balkan wars in the 1910s, the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918, and throughout World War II (Cohen, 1997). Post World War II saw Josip Tito, an advocate of Stalin, merging the diverse Balkan states into the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The region grappled with leadership and power challenges following Tito's death in 1980, with various ethnicities and republics pushing for sovereignty (Gavin, 2000).

During the latter part of the 1980s, a staunch Serbian nationalist leader named Slobodan Milošević, encouraged Serbs to fight against other ethnic communities. Intellectuals backing his ascent to leadership championed the idea of broadening their national borders. Rooted in the 1844 memorandum, *Načertanije*, which proposed a strategic foreign policy to extend Serbia by taking over adjacent areas, this "Greater Serbia" philosophy became a tool for Milošević (Cohen, 1997). He harnessed the longstanding nationalistic and anti-Muslim narratives to rally people to his vision of turning a fracturing Yugoslavia into a Serbia-centric nation. Under the guise of defending the Serbian minority, Milošević dispatched the Yugoslav People's Army to lay siege to Bosnia's capital, shortly after the European Community and the United States recognized Bosnia's independence in May of 1992 (Lampe, 2023). The concern over Bosniaks gaining a foothold in Bosnia and the goal of consolidating Bosnian Serbs within a "Greater Serbia" galvanized Milošević and his Serbian officials into adopting aggressive measures against neighboring entities. These prevailing sentiments became the precursor to potential genocide, justifying the large-scale persecution and extermination of Muslims by pro-Serbian leaders.

Economic Causes

While deep-seated animosities between Serbs and Bosniaks played a role in the Bosnian genocide, economic disparities between Serbia and Bosnia after the collapse of the communist Eastern Bloc added to Serbia's hostilities. Bosnia, with its modernized agricultural systems, was better poised to assimilate into the emerging global landscape. In contrast, Serbia relied heavily on its military infrastructure and administrative bureaucracy. Historically, Serbia had limited engagement in international trade since major trade routes, established during the Ottoman period, often favored Bosnia and Croatia over Serbia. Even though Serbia saw some growth in regional commerce, warfare was esteemed by the Serbs. Echoing this sentiment, Milošević once remarked that while commerce might not be the Serbians' strength, "we are good at fighting" (Schwartz, 1999). Such statements reinforced the Serbian warrior persona, at a time when there could have been greater investments in education to elevate the nation's standards in line with other developing countries for global market competition. His emphasis on a warrior mindset can deter foreign businesses from investing in a country perceived as aggressive.

In addition to its proclivity for warfare and historically underdeveloped economy, Serbia's unpreparedness in transitioning to a free-market economy was another major factor that led to the decision to invade Bosnia. During the Cold War, Yugoslavia flourished from navigating the geopolitical tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States, securing assistance from both nations (Schwartz 1999). However, by the 1980s, it was apparent to Yugoslavs that Russian communism was coming to an end, and both the U.S. and Russia would cease sending international subsidies. Out of the Yugoslav republics, Serbia was the least prepared for the ending of financial assistance due to its lack of an economic buffer for a transition to a free market economy. Facing an economic downturn, Serbia opted to wield its military prowess against neighboring former

Yugoslav states like Bosnia in an attempt to reassert control over these regions. By directly seizing the economic assets of these areas, Serbia aimed to counterbalance the economic vacuum left by the Soviet Union's dissolution. While anti-Muslim bias was a significant driver, Serbia's objective to address its economic challenges through territorial expansion and military dominance also played a crucial role in its decisions that resulted in genocide.

Impacts

Facts and Statistics on Bosnian Genocide

Fueled by a deep-seated animosity towards Muslims and the intent to achieve economic resilience through warfare, the Serbians unleashed a reign of terror on the Bosniaks. As stated by the Bosnian Serb government, approximately 19,473 Bosnian Serbs took part in this genocide (Smith, 2023). Throughout the Bosnian war, Serb forces were responsible for the death of 200,000 civilians, while another 20,000 remained unaccounted for (Gavin, 2000). In addition to these horrors, about 50,000 civilians were subjected to rape, over half of Bosnian homes were razed, and more than two million individuals suffered torture, hunger, forced removals, and endured internment in concentration camps. Amid this chaos, over 60,000 refugees sought refuge in Srebrenica, an eastern Bosnian enclave, hoping to escape Serb brutality. They placed their trust in a mere 600 Dutch soldiers dispatched by the United Nations Protection Force for their safety (Morus, 2022). However, tragedy struck in what came to be known as the Srebrenica massacre, where Bosnian Serb forces mercilessly executed at least 7,000 Bosniak males, many of whom were subjected to mutilation (Smith, 2023). This horrifying data not only illustrates the scale of the brutality but also suggests that the Serbs' agenda was not merely to displace but to entirely erase the Bosniak community from existence. The deliberate targeting of Bosniak females and males alike reflects the profound hatred the Serbs harbored. Their atrocities underscore the extreme lengths to which the Serbs would venture to establish their dominance and fulfill their objectives, no matter how inhumane.

Impact on Bosniaks

The Bosnian genocide was marked by the systematic removal of Bosniaks, widespread killings of Bosniak civilians, and deliberate sexual assaults against women. In a bid to drive out Bosniaks from Srebrenica and annex its territory for Serbia, Bosnian Serb republic's President, Radovan Karadžić, directed his military to establish a "situation of total insecurity with no hope of further survival or life for the inhabitants of Srebrenica" (Smith, 2023). Between March and July 1995, the Bosnian Serbs' siege led to the starvation of refugees in Srebrenica, resulting in the death of seven Bosniaks due to hunger. A subsequent Bosnian Serb military offensive in early July prompted around 15,000 predominantly male Bosniaks to evacuate Srebrenica on foot. As they fled, the Bosnian Serb forces trapped and brutalized these men, massacring up to 5,000. The survivors took shelter in woods for months, remaining in hiding until the Bosnian War's cessation in December 1995, marked by the Dayton Agreement (Morus, 2022). The disproportionate fatalities among male civilians underscore the Bosnian Serbs' strategy of selective extermination. Yet, Bosniak women were far from spared; they endured organized rape in both secluded and public venues (Memisevic, 2020). Sadžida, a Bosnian War survivor, recounted the horrific ordeal where she was violated by 20 to 30 Bosnian Serb soldiers in a Vlasenica residence

(Pincelli, 2012). In another horrific instance, at the Vilina Vlas hotel, around 200 Bosniak females were subjected to systemic rape by Serb forces with the intention that they would no longer bear "Turks," but instead give birth to "Serbs" (Memisevic, 2020). The Bosnian Serbs' objective was not only the physical extermination of Bosniaks but also the use of mass rape as a tool of ethnic cleansing, aiming to prevent the birth of future Muslim generations. The Serbs' barbaric strategies, involving both terrorism-induced expulsion and widespread sexual assault against Bosniak women, have indelibly scarred the survivors and splintered the very fabric of the Bosniak society.

Impact on Cultural Landscape

Serbs strategically displaced Muslims from Bosnia by deliberately targeting and destroying Bosniak cultural landmarks. This is exemplified by the targeted bombardment of the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque and the Ferhadija Mosque during the Siege of Sarajevo (Schwartz, 1999). Since these mosques symbolized the religious and ethnic identity of the Bosniak community, their destruction deeply wounded the community's spirit. To sustain their religious practices safely, Bosniaks relocated to areas less prone to Serb aggression. In a further blow to Bosniak culture, the National Library of Sarajevo was purposefully razed by the Serbs in 1992 (Schwartz, 1999). This institution held invaluable manuscripts detailing the histories of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. The library was targeted by the Serbs as it housed Ottoman Turkish land records, which served as evidence of the longstanding harmonious coexistence between Croats, Serbs, and Muslims. The Serb forces could have occupied the territory by merely damaging vital infrastructures such as highways and bridges, which would have effectively weakened the Bosnian military defense. However, the strategic assault on non-military landmarks underscores a more profound motive behind the Bosnian invasion and genocide: the erasure of Bosniak cultural heritage and a denial of the historical harmony that once existed among the ethnic communities. By destroying cultural landmarks, they aimed not just for territorial control, but to instill fear, break the spirit of the Bosniak community, and reframe history to suit the Serb nationalist agenda and redefine the region's historical narrative.

Aftermath

The assault by the Serb forces on Bosnian land ceased when NATO, spearheaded by the United States, intervened militarily in 1995, leading to peace negotiations in Dayton, Ohio that same year (Lampe, 2023). The resulting Dayton Agreement partitioned Bosnia into the Bosnian Serb Republic and the Muslim-Croat Federation (Gavin, 2000). Before this, the United Nations had struggled ineffectively with the Serbian forces, utilizing diplomacy and limited military responses. This is viewed as "the greatest failure of the West since the 1930s," and the United Nations' passive stance enabled the genocide to persist (Gavin, 2000). As such, the UN held some accountability for the deaths caused by the genocide, deviating from its core objective of shielding people from war's horrors. Although unsuccessful in halting the Bosnian genocide, the United Nations pursued retribution by prosecuting Serbian war culprits. High-ranking Serbian military officials and the Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadžić, were charged with crimes against humanity and genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which was backed by the United Nations Security Council (Lampe 2023).

Though the prosecution of Serbian war criminals may have brought a semblance of justice on the global stage, true peace eluded the survivors of Srebrenica. The aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre left its survivors grappling with emotional scars and poverty, and even two decades later, some found themselves in refugee camps (Morus, 2022). In tribute to the victims of the massacre, the Srebrenica Memorial Cemetery was set up with the help of Bosnian advocacy groups and humanitarian bodies. Here, every year, both families of the victims and influential political figures gather to remember those who perished (Morus, 2022). A quarter-

century after the Bosnian war's conclusion, animosity persisted among the Serbs, Muslims, and Croats, especially in the Genohat region. In a particularly concerning development in 2022, Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, hinted at the possibility of breaking away from Bosnia, raising apprehensions of another impending conflict in Bosnia (Shapiro, 2022). Samantha Powers, the chief of the United States Agency for International Development—which has contributed over two billion dollars to Bosnia since the '90s—explained that many Bosnians skeptically view these tensions. They believe they aren't rooted in actual ethnic disparities but rather see politicians capitalizing on identity politics for electoral gains (Shapiro, 2022). This is especially true amidst global economic setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when politicians like Dodik wield the strategy of stoking ethnic discord as a means to distract their citizenry from economic woes. In light of this recent resurgence of nationalistic politics, similar to that which preceded the Bosnian Genocide, there remains real concern that opportunistic politicians can easily stoke ethnic tensions in the Balkan state without checks to their political power.

Preventative Measures

The roots of the Bosnian Genocide can be traced back to Milošević's strategic use of ethnic prejudice against the Bosniak community as a means to further his ambitions of expansion. As Stanton (1996) points out, evidence of such discrimination emerges when "the dominant group is driven by... ideology [that] advocates monopolization or expansion of power by the dominant group." Motivated by the "Greater Serbia" vision, Milošević aimed to enlarge Serbia's territory by annexing nearby regions. Central to this ideology was a skewed perception of the Bosniak identity, mistakenly depicting them as Serbs who had abandoned their ethnic and spiritual roots. While this narrative served Milošević's motives of territorial conquest and ethnic purges, it was fundamentally inaccurate given the distinct Bosnian heritage of the Bosniak community (Cohen, 1997).

The case for genocide was built on this lie. Accordingly, addressing the discrimination against the Bosniaks necessitates a closer examination of the preventative measures that could have been employed and that could be used to prevent future genocides worldwide.

Impact on Bosniaks

The government could have made several key interventions to curtail the anti-Muslim sentiment. Recommendations for further curtailing opportunistic politicians like Milošević could be implemented through a system of checks and balances to include the following:

- empowering the judiciary to review and potentially overturn any unconstitutional decisions made by the head of state
- distributing authority across various governmental branches or regional administrations to prevent any single individual or entity from amassing unchecked power
- implementing mechanisms for greater transparency in governance to scrutinize actions made by the head of state and to foster a culture of accountability
- involving an international coalition such as the United Nation to oversee elections, governance practices, or human rights conditions to deter abuses of power by individual leaders like Milošević

Establishment of Security Measures

Ensuring a persecuted minority population's safety is crucial to prevent further genocides, especially given the threats from possible militia groups in areas with ethnic tensions. Militia groups should be outlawed, but that will not prevent rogue individuals from committing lone wolf attacks. The government can address these safety

concerns through increased police patrols, community policing, and dedicated helplines. A safe environment will enable displaced individuals to return, fostering community healing and reconstruction.

Economic Development

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Educational Campaign

The racially biased perspectives perpetuated by the older generation of Serbs, who have significant influence in both the government and media, can be addressed by instilling the values of multiculturalism and religious tolerance from a young age. By integrating a comprehensive educational program into primary school curricula, children can be introduced to the rich history, significant contributions, and core values of the Bosniak community. This early exposure can effectively counteract prevailing myths and encourage interfaith and interethnic dialogues, which can help establish a foundation of understanding and respect that promote greater tolerance for co-existence between the Serbs and Bosniaks. Such a program could apply to any persecuted minority group worldwide.

Anti-Discrimination Laws

The government should enact strict laws with severe penalties for those promoting ethnic or religious discrimination. Such acts might include the destruction of places of worship, racist remarks, or housing practices that segregate minority groups. Implementing such laws would demonstrate the state's dedication to protecting minority rights.

Media Regulations

The use of dehumanizing speech by pro-Serbian leadership also paved the way to genocide, as demonstrated by Bosnian Serb president Biljana Plavšić, who proclaimed that it was “genetically deformed material that embraced Islam” (Sloan & Osborne, 2017). The Yugoslavian government could have regulated the media to curb hate speech. Unbiased media fosters community cohesion, making it crucial for the government to draft and enforce policies against divisive content, and penalize media companies with heavy fines or potential censorship.

Engagement of Community Leaders

Inviting Bosniak leaders to participate in decision-making would acknowledge their critical role in the wider community. Such inclusion ensures their concerns are addressed and promotes mutual respect. The involvement of minority voices in government is crucial for comprehensive and fair governance, offering insights otherwise missed.

Conclusion

Historical conflicts between Serbians and Bosnians escalated in the 1990s, resulting in the tragic persecution and extermination of Bosniaks. The Yugoslavian government should have instituted preventive strategies to avert one of Europe's darkest genocides in the 20th century. Despite U.S. intervention and aid to Bosnia, sustainable peace remains elusive in the Balkan states unless Serbians embrace peaceful coexistence with other minority groups within their nation. The Bosnian genocide underscores a crucial point: in our increasing connected and diverse global landscape, without a genuine commitment to multiculturalism, mere preventative measures against genocide are not enough. Deep-rooted prejudice can still be exploited by opportunistic politicians, resulting in conflicts that set the stage for mass atrocities and ultimately, threaten the very essence of our collective humanity.

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