The Role of Ideology in the

Genocide of the

Muslims in Bosnia,

1992-1995

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When reading the literature on the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims, one could conceivably be convinced that it was an event that took place decades or even centuries ago. Amazingly it took place from 1992-1995, right before the turn of the millennium. In those three years, Burg and Shoup (1999) provided estimates citing that 200,000 people were killed (p. 169) and 1.2 million more were displaced (p. 171). These astounding numbers lend testimony to the need to study the ideologies that bring about genocide in modern society so that in the future these atrocities can be prevented.

While there are many sides to the argument of how the Bosnian genocide came about, the facts of the matter, as outlined by Markusen and Mennecke (2004) are that after the death of Josef Tito, dictator of Yugoslavia from 1945 until 1980 and the subsequent downfall of Yugoslavia as a nation, there came to be a period of great political instability in a strongly multiethnic region (p. 72). Under these conditions, the Serb’s set out to create their own pure, Serbian nation. This vision was troubled by the presence of the Muslim community in Bosnia, and so, under ideological conditions that proved ideal for breeding genocide the Serbian’s set out on a mission of “ethnic cleansing” which resulted in the aforementioned causalities.

Before analyzing these conditions, it is important to define both ideology and genocide, as both are subject to multiple interpretations. In the context of this paper, the definition of genocide from the 1948 United Nations Convention, as provided by Kiernan will be employed, which, “defines the crime of genocide as an attempt at extermination, whether partial or complete” (2007:10). Insofar as the term “ideology” is concerned for this analysis, the general consensus would assume that ideology refers to the beliefs and goals of a specific, connected peoples. However, such an assumption leaves much to be desires in the way of a concrete theory from which to analyze the Bosnian genocide. For this reason, this analysis will be employing the use of the definition as provided by Tim Cresswell in his book “*In Place, Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*.” Cresswell quotes Goren Therborn to define ideology as “the constitution and patterning of how human beings live their lives as conscious, reflecting initiators of acts in a structures meaningful world” (Therborn as quoted in Cresswell 1996:14). Cresswell (1996: 14) then goes on the explain the three levels on which this works: first, defining “what exists and what does not exist,” second, “what is good, just and appropriate and what is not,” and finally, “what is possible and impossible.” This definition will be useful in examining how genocide could take place among people who lived side by side for centuries.

Chirot and Edwards (2003) argue that there are four motives for genocide: convenience, meaning that there is something the perpetrators wish to obtain and killing the victims is the easier way to go about it (p.15); purification, referring to strongly held cultural beliefs that the victims could ruin cultural purity (p.18); revenge for some wrong done to the perpetrators (p. 16); and perception of threat by the victim group (p. 15).

Kiernan’s (2007) first two components in his theoretical framework for examining genocide are racism and fear of economic competition in agriculture (p. 21). Kiernan (2007:27) also cites “cults of antiquity,” in which the perpetrators long to return to their traditional roots, as well as desire of perpetrator for territorial expansion in conjunction with the victims occupying the desired land (2007:31). Finally, Kiernan discusses the perpetrators developing the idea of a utopian society (2007:23), which is the result of a rapidly changing society.

In Cigar’s book, *Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of “Ethnic Cleansing,”* (1995)his main theoretical perspectives deal with the role of top-down government (p. 63) and self-image (p. 73) in the ideologies that allowed for the Bosnian genocide. Cigar argues that top-down government guidance played a serious role in legitimizing and facilitating the mentalities present that allowed for genocide to take place (1995:63). Cigar also examines the role of a dichotomous self-image among the Serbians as a motivator in the feeling for a need for the genocide of Bosnian Muslims (1995:73).

Klejda Mulaj takes a strongly political stance in her theoretical orientation in her book, *“Politics of Ethnic Cleansing: Nation-State Building and Provision of In/Security In Twentieth Century Balkans.*” Mulaj (2008) argues that with the fall of Yugoslavia as a nation came the “emergence of identity politics” (p. 80). In creating claims to power based off of ethnicity, the Balkan region became ethnically divided which “facilitated efforts for organization of political units on the basis of ethnicity” (Mulaj 2008:80). These ethnic politics then created a need to draw boarders based on ethnic boundaries, and Bosnia, being a multiethnic region was counter to this idea. Mulaj also discusses the importance of legitimacy of power and the importance for creating a genocidal condition of excluding the “other” by means of deriving legitimacy from ethnicity (Mulaj 2008:83).

Of Chirot and Edwards’ (2003) theoretical orientation, the Serbian perception of a threat from the Bosnian Muslims (p. 15) was the element most soundly found in the case of the Bosnian genocide. Within Kiernan’s (2007) theoretical framework, territorial expansion (p. 31) and development of an idea of a utopian society (p. 23) are the most relevant to this analysis of the role ideology played in the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims. In regard to Cigar (1995), both top-down guidance (p. 63) and a dichotomous Serbian self-image (p. 73) played a significant role in understanding the Bosnian genocide. Within these elements, strong connections can be made. For instance, top-down guidance aided in the development among the Serbians of a perception of a threat from the Bosnian Muslims. Mulaj (2008:107), then makes the claim that “ethnic cleansing was premised on the ethnic definition of territory” further promoting the argument that land, ethnicity and power all played central roles in the ideology of the Bosnian genocide.

***Development of a Perception of Threat, as Facilitated by Top-Down Guidance***

The perception of a threat, as cited by Chirot and Edwards (2003:15) was fundamental in the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims. I will argue that the perception of threat from the Bosnian Muslims was a constructed phenomenon, used as a means to gain land that the Serbians viewed as being historically theirs (Cigar 1995:69). In conjunction with the importance of developing the perception of a threat from the Bosnian Muslims, Cigars theory of top-down guidance as a facilitating, legitimizing agent in genocides (1995:63) can be used to explain how the Serbian people developed a perception of a threat from the Bosnian Muslims, and were then mobilized to commit such an atrocity. Cigar (1995) argues that the Serbian political leaders (pp. 64-66), the Serbian Orthodox Church (pp. 66-69), and leading Serbian scholars and intellectuals (pp. 69-70) were integral in propagating the perception of a Bosnian Muslim threat and all three especially focused in on the dangers that Islam presented to the Serbian peoples. The three agents then became the legitimizing forces that created policies and presented arguments promoting how and why the genocide was necessary for the safety and advancement of the Serbian people. I will examine each of these agents, first examining the ways in which they aided in the creation of negative stereotypes of Bosnian Muslims, and thus a perception of a threat; and then I will examine the different top-down tactics used to by each legitimize the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims.

Before examining the ways that Serbians came to stereotype Bosnian Muslims, it is important to examine the ways that Bosnian Muslims viewed themselves. In this particular genocide, where religious affiliation was what delineated the in- and out- group statuses, and as Sells (2003) notes, many Muslims “ had not viewed themselves as religious… until they were singled out for persecution because of it: they discovered they had a religious identity only in the act of its being imposed upon them” (p. 310). The fact that many Bosnian Muslims considered themselves Muslim on a purely ethnic and not religious basis explains why stereotyping was necessary to the success of the Serbians. Additionally, Ivekovic argues, “as for the Bosnian Muslims… it should be remembered that they were probably the most secularized ethno- national group in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (2002: 530). As described by Markusen and Mennecke (2004) Bosnian Serbians and Bosnian Muslims had lived together for generations (p. 73) and so it was essential that Serbian institutions and agents create an image of Bosnian Muslims as, first a group with strong religious convictions, and second, a religious group that threatened the existence of Serbians. If the Bosnian Muslims had in fact been actively engaged in fundamental Islam there would have been no need to stereotype because the Serbian civilians would have experienced this fundamentalism in their daily lives.

*Serbian Political Leaders*

Before the genocide even began, Serbian political leaders had begun to stereotype Bosnian Muslims to create a perception of threat. It was crucial that the Serbian peoples viewed the Bosnian Muslims, whom they have lived amongst for generations (Markusen and Mennecke 2004: 73), in an altered light As Clark notes, “Dehumanization serves to separate, physically and psychologically, the victim from the perpetrator, thus making it easier for the latter to kill” (2009: 423). Had the Serbians still seen the Bosnian Muslims as their neighbors, friends or associates, the perpetrators of the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims would have had much more difficulty in killing civilians. Cigar (1995: 66) points to the fact that political authorities made claims that the Muslims planned “‘to circumcise all Serb boys and kill all males over the age of three, and send the women… to a harem to produce janissaries [elite Ottoman soldiers].’” This claim obviously points to some of the customs of Muslims and was made with the intent of instilling fear in Serbians as well as setting Bosnian Muslims apart as an “other.” Additionally Markusen and Mennecke (2004) discuss the haste with which Milosevic, the leader of Serbia at the time, worked to obtain control of the media so as to be able to efficiently shape public opinion (p. 73) and promote stereotyped views of Bosnian Muslims.

Aside from contributing to the development of dehumanizing stereotypes of Bosnian Muslims, Cigar (1995: 6) argues that the support of the genocide from Serbian leaders “provide[d] an essential dimension of legitimacy to justify, and even require, support of and participation in any activities they may decree necessary.” Simply in and of the fact that the government sanctioned the genocide meant that Serbians who were neutral on the matter were strongly influenced to take part, and could then justify their actions by claiming to be just following policy. While government policies mobilized Serbians who were on the fence, once the actual genocide began to take place, it worked to further divide Serbians and Bosnian Muslims because it “poisoned intercommunal relations” (Cigar 1995:63). Once the Bosnian Muslims began to view the Serbians as the enemy, even those Serbians who were neutral on the matter had little choice but to join their fellow Serbians. Both of these elements worked to create a strong support base for the Serbians. Ultimately, because the genocide was sanctioned by Serbian national policy, the blame was taken off of the individual. Clark (2009) mentions the studies of Asch, Zimbardo, and Milgram to illustrate the ways that people become obedient to systems and justify their actions as simply following orders from superiors.

*The Serbian Orthodox Church*

The Serbian Orthodox Church also played a central role in developing negative stereotypes of Bosnian Muslims and thus a perception of threat. The targeted group was categorized by their religious affiliation, and thus, the church could be considered, by default, to be an important authority on the matter. As noted by Cigar (1995) the idea of “jihad” was important in constructing the Bosnian Muslims as a threat to Serbians. Quotes from the Quran were frequently taken out of context and used to paint a violent picture of Muslims (p. 67). In addition to presenting the Muslims as a dangerous group, Velikonja (2003) argues the point that the Serbian Orthodox Church also worked to create an image of Serbs as being a historically more legitimate people.

In turning the Bosnian Muslims into a threat, the Serbian Orthodox Church frequently enforced the idea of a cosmic war, as defined by Juergensmeyer (2001: 148-149). The Serbian Orthodox Church took careful measures to present the idea that Muslims were engaged in a religious jihad and had a religious incentive to kill “non-believers” in that it put the killer closer to heaven (Cigar 1995:67). Patriarch Pavle, leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church as the time, made claims that the Quar’an directed Muslims to use “‘holy war as a means to spread the faith’’ (Pavle as quoted in Cigar 1995:67). In presenting this view, Serbians came to view Muslims as not only a political threat, but also a threat to Christianity as a whole. In ethnically cleansing the Bosnian Muslims, the Serbians were not only engaged in a political war, but in a larger cosmic war that pitted the good, Christian side against the dangerous, murderous Muslims side.

In addition to portraying the stereotype of Bosnian Muslims as religious warriors engaged in a jihad, the Serbian Orthodox Church also aided in constructing the stereotype of Bosnian Muslims as traitors. Sells (2003) describes how the Serbian Orthodox Church held to the belief that “Slavs are Christian by nature and conversion to another religion entails ethnic or racial betrayal and the adoption of a new ethnic and racial identity” (p. 311). Using this tactic, the Serbian Orthodox Church presented the Serbians as being native to the region and juxtaposing the Bosnian Muslims as a people who had only come into being during the Ottoman invasion. Thus, Cigar (1995) argues, because the Muslims were not native to the area it followed that at one time they *had* been Serbian and were now traitors (p. 69). It goes without saying that traitors present an obvious threat to the in-group and in constructing Bosnian Muslims as traitors to their Serbian roots, the Serbian Orthodox Church aided in constructing the perception of a threat from the Bosnian Muslims.

Once the Serbian Orthodox Church had aided in constructing the Bosnian Muslims as a threat to the Serbian people, they established themselves as a legitimizing force. Velikonja (2003) discusses the many way in which the Serbian Orthodox Church acted as an incubator for anti-Bosnian Muslim ideals to formulate, and provided a safe place for Serbians to speak out against Bosnian Muslims, on religious grounds, before it became acceptable to do so in the secular sphere. The Serbian Orthodox Church actively turned away from peaceful agreements, while simultaneously endorsing policies that promoted genocide and aligning themselves and associating with Serbian leader such as Mladic and Milosevic (Velikonja 2003). Patriarch Pavle, as well as other prominent figures in the Serbian Orthodox Church, played a vital role in establishing his Church definitively on the side of the Serbians.

Patriarch Pavle played arguable the most important role in aligning the Serbian Orthodox Church with the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims. Using the stereotypes on Muslims that had been created, Patriarch Pavle supported and promoted the idea that the Serbian Orthodox Church was under attack from the Bosnian Muslims and met with many of the political and militant leaders of the genocide movement. As described by Velikonja (2003), “international felon and war criminal Zelijko Raznatovic Arkan... met with Patriarch Pavle, who justified his actions and presented him with an autographed icon of Saint Nicholas…” (p. 265). There was a great show of support for the anti-Bosnian Muslim stance from the Serbian Orthodox Church and they supported the idea that under the leadership of Karadzic and Mladic Serbians were “‘following the thorny path of Jesus’” (Velikonja 2003: 265).Statistics show that by the end of the genocide, in 1998 81.6% of Serbians declared themselves to be “very religious” or “medium religious” (Velikonja 2003: 261). In interpreting this statistic, one could infer that the prominence of the Serbian Orthodox Church was high during the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims. Even if a Serbian civilian did not adhere to the political reasoning for the genocide, the Serbian Orthodox Church acted as a legitimizing force, not only putting its legitimacy behind the politics of the genocide, but also offering its own religious justifications for the necessity of the genocide of Bosnian Muslims.

*Scholars*

Third and finally, Serbian scholars and intellectuals played a key role in developing a negative stereotype of Bosnian Muslims to be used to create a perception of a threat. Cigar (1995) demonstrates that, much like the Serbian Orthodox Church, scholars portrayed Bosnian Muslims as partaking in a jihad (p. 69), but the jihad they presented had a definitively more political overtone. And, Cigar (1995) adds, much like the Serbian political leaders, Serbian scholars argued that Bosnian Muslims were descendents of the Ottoman Empire, and were thus an alien people (p. 29). The literature produced at the time by Serbian intellectuals uses straightforward language to describe the negative attributes of the Bosnian Muslims.

As presented by Cigar (1995), the jihad that the Serbian intellectuals described, was similar to the on described by the Serbians Orthodox Church in terms of the supposed desired outcome, however, the intellectuals had manipulated different evidence than the Church to substantiate their claim. Instead of using the idea of a cosmic war, much of the literature shows that Serbian scholars used data and census information. Cigar (1995) discusses how Serbian intellectuals claimed that the evidence of the presence of a Muslim jihad was to be found in the high birthrates of Muslims and simply in and of the fact that they were building mosques (p. 28). By strengthening their physical presence, the Bosnian Muslims were supposedly positioning themselves for a political takeover, in which the Serbians would become subservient to, and fall under the rule of these power hungry Bosnian Muslims. This jihad was described as being “economic, diplomatic, and especially demographic” (Cigar 1995:69). Serbian intellectuals worked to present an image of Bosnian Muslims as a threatening people who were quietly gathering their strength in preparation for a total take over.

Leading scholars at the time also aided in portraying Bosnian Muslims as having an illegitimate claim to the land. Cigar (1995) cites historians, such as Mile Nedeljkovic, produced scholarly works arguing that, “Bosnia-Herzegovina had always been Serbian and Orthodox” (p. 69). Arguments such as these, once again reinforced the image of Bosnian Muslims as either; converted Serbians, and thus traitors, or a people with “an inferior, non-European, ‘semi-Arab subculture’ that reflected their ‘desert ancestors’” (Kiernan 2007: 589), and were thus alien to the land. And in reference to these Bosnian Muslims with Ottoman roots, Serbian intellectuals such as Dragos Kalajic argued that Bosnian Muslims had a “propensity to theft, a lack of ethics, [and] laziness” (Cigar 1995:26).

As Cigar notes, because Serbian scholars were so prominent in the media and because, like any scholar found in any country, were considered to be the experts on the matter, they “contributed significantly to making hostility toward the Muslim community intellectually respectable…” (1995:27). Just as can be found in any country, scholars are integral in forming public opinion. They provide commentary in the news and media, and produce the studies and literature that people base opinions around. Thus, the fact that prominent scholars and intellectuals were producing written works and speaking to the need for an ethnic cleansing, the Serbian people had legitimate sources behind which to stand in reference to the belief in the necessity of the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims.

As we can see, the development of a negative stereotype of the Bosnian Muslims was vital to producing a feeling of threat among the Serbian people. While genocide is an extreme measure for any population to take, it is imperative that they feel that their very existence is threatened before any kind of ethnic cleansing or genocide can take place. Additionally, top-down guidance played an important role in not only producing these stereotypes, but also in providing sources of legitimation and justification for the Serbian people. In the case of the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims, top-down guidance for the Serbian people came from Serbian politicians, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and Serbian scholars.

***The Role of the Dichotomous Serbian Self- Image***

After examining how the Serbian came to have a negative view of the Bosnian Muslims, it is now important to examine the ways that Serbians viewed themselves. Scholars, such as Cigar (1995) on the self-image of the Serbian people has shown it to be dichotomous, with Serbs viewing themselves as both a superior people, as well as a persecuted and threatened people (pp. 73-78). Cigar quotes sociologist Ervin Staub as saying, “‘when a sense of superiority combines with an underlying… self-doubt, their contribution to the potential for genocide and mass killing can be especially high’” (Staub as quoted in Cigar1995:79). We will now examine the role these two images had in promoting and shaping the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims.

*Serbian Superiority*

During the 1990’s, and historically, one facet of the image Serbians presented of themselves is that of a proud, superior people. Kiernan (2007) cites a Serbian nationalist leader as claims that, “‘biologically, we [Serbs] are the strongest nation and have the strongest historic roots’” (p. 589). In recalling the discussion of the influence of Serbian scholars in developing negative stereotypes of Bosnian Muslims, these same scholars also worked to produce evidence substantiating the Serbians as a superior people. In addition to citing themselves as some of the most Christian people, as well as claiming to have invented writing, Serbians also claimed that Serbia was where the biblical Garden of Eden had been (Cigar 1995:74). Some additional traits belonging to the supposed typical Serbian included, “bravery, tolerance, long-suffering patience, superior morality, culture, and even intelligence” (Cigar 1995:73). Blum (2007) discusses the role of the use of the term “ethnic cleansing” in genocides and argues that this term lends to the imagery of one race being hygienic and pure, while the other is viewed as being unhygienic or diseased in some way. The use of the term “ethnic cleansing” can be found extensively in literature on the Bosnian Muslim genocide and Blum (2007) argues that Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic was “the first politician to use the term” (p. 204), which lends to the idea that Serbians viewed themselves as a pure, clean race.

*Serbians as a Threatened People*

In stark contrast to the view Serbians held of themselves as a superior people, they also viewed themselves as a threatened people. In addition to constructing Bosnian Muslims as an external threat, Cigar (1995) discusses how the Serbians believed that other races and nations were jealous of their superiority (p. 75). Serbians saw this jealousy manifested in the “cultural achievements of the Serbian people being officially ‘ignored’” by the policies of the Yugoslav communist nationalities (Kiernan 2007: 591). Serbians also believed that the new boarders that had been drawn in the Tito-ist era had essentially cheated Serbians out of land that was historically theirs (Kiernan 2007: 590). It was believed that these new boarders scattered and alienated the Serbian population, and the formation of new boundaries around Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia would lead to the destruction of these isolated Serbian minorities (Friedman 1996: 220).

As discussed earlier, the Serbians viewed the Bosnian Muslims as a threat both politically and religiously. In taking both of these into account, Burg and Shoup (1999) note that it was widely propagated that if the Serbians did not act first to ethnically cleanse the Bosnian Muslim population, the Bosnian Muslims would act to ethnically cleanse the Serbian population (p. 174). In accordance with this, Serbian General Mladic presented the Serbian side of the Bosnian Muslim genocide as being a defensive act instead of an offensive act. Kiernan (2007) quotes Mladic as having said: “We Serbs always wait until it reaches our throats. Only then do we retaliate” (p. 591).

This dichotomous self-image the Serbians held of themselves was a strong factor in bringing about the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims. The Serbians viewed themselves as being superior to others, which, in its own way, worked to justify the ethnic cleansing of a lesser peoples. In addition to and because of, viewing themselves as being a better, more pure race, the Serbians also viewed themselves as being vulnerable and threatened. Serbians believed that others were jealous of how superior they were and external forces were working to bring about their demise. Thus it can be argued that the dichotomous self-image the Serbians had of themselves worked to facilitate the Bosnian Muslim genocide in that they felt not only superior to the Bosnian Muslims (and others), but their superiority, as well as very existence as a people, was threatened and acting defensively, by way of ethnic cleansing, was the only appropriate and effective action.

***The Role of Land in the Bosnian Muslim Genocide***

In addition to the more abstract ideologies used to explain how the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims came about, theories regarding land factored into the genocide. As argued by Mulaj (2008), the decline of Yugoslavia and the death of Tito opened the door for a rearranging of the boarders in the region (p. 80). Kiernan (2005) argues that territorial expansion is an important factor in bringing about genocide (p. 590), and in the case of the Serbians, his theory on creating utopian societies (2005: influenced the desire for territorial expansion. In a similar vein, Mulaj (2008) takes the position that territory can be defined in ethnic terms (p. 80), and as will be shown, this is exactly what happened in the case of the Bosnian Muslim genocide.

*The Use of Territorial Expansion to Create a Utopian Society*

Before discussing the importance of territorial expansion, it is imperative to discuss the role of the desire among the Serbians to create a utopian society. Mulaj (2008) discusses how in 1986 leading Serbian scholars and intellectuals at the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences penned the *Serbian Memorandum*, a document that claimed Serbians were “the most victimized people in Yugoslavia” (p. 49), and because they were so victimized, they deserved to have boarders redrawn in such a manner that they would include all of the Serbian populations throughout Yugoslavia in Greater Serbia (Mulaj 2008: 49). The most important aspect of this document was that it called for “the complete national and cultural integrity of the Serbian people” (Kiernan 2007: 590). This view of a utopian society was strongly influenced by many of the beliefs previously mentioned, but especially from the belief in the superiority of the Serbians, as well as their belief in being the legitimate and native inhabitants of the area. In creating this purely Serbian utopian society, the Serbians would have a nation where they would be free of the polluting influence and effect of the Bosnian Muslims, whom they viewed as either traitors or tainted. Serbians held that the creation of this utopian Serbian nation had been prevented after World War II since the Serbians “did not get its own state like other peoples” (Cigar 1995: 23). Friedman (1996) points out that the Serbians did not view this utopian Serbian nation as a new phenomenon, but rather as a logical move to take back what was rightfully theirs in the first place.

Kiernan’s (2005) theory of the role of desire for a utopian society (p. 23) in the creation of genocide ties in with his theory on the role of territorial expansion in that the Bosnian Muslims occupied the land that Serbians needed to create a utopian Greater Serbia. In the words of Karadzic, “the Serb state [had] no need to incorporate its enemies into its own state” (Karadzic quoted in Cigar 1995: 65), and as stated by Milosevic, “it is always the powerful who dictate what the boarders will be, never the weak. Thus we must be powerful” (Milosevic quoted in Kiernan 2007: 590). These two quotes from two of the most prominent leaders of the Serbians in the Bosnian Muslim genocide perfectly illustrate the fact that not only did the Serbians fully intend to create a utopian society that excluded all those who were non-Serbians, but they believed that in order to effectively achieve this goal, force would be necessary. It is also important to note the argument presented by Kiernan (2007) that the Serbians believed it was their right to create their utopian Serbian nation on lands that were historically theirs, but which had come into the hands of other in an unjust and illegitimate manner (p. 590).

*The Role of Ethnic Territories in the Bosnian Muslim Genocide*

Mulaj (2008) presents the argument that in the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia came the emergence of politics based on identity, more specifically, ethnicity (p. 80). In addition to the points made above, illustrating the desire for a utopian Serbian nation, Mulaj (2008) brings up the point that as Yugoslavia disintegrated there was “a new distribution of power and a new configuration of power relationships” (p. 83), which included a potential for a shifting of boarders. This shifting of boarders would render groups who had previously occupied a majority status as a minority, in this case, the Serbians. Preventing this became paramount to the Serbians, and in working to prevent this Serbians adopted an “ethno-national identity” (Mulaj 2008: 84). Once again, we see that issues surrounding land and proper placement of boarders to facilitate a Greater Serbia were a top priority of the Serbians.

Aside from historical and ideological reasons for wanting an exclusively Serbian nation, Mulaj (2008) makes an excellent point in arguing that, “the more homogenous a population, the easier [it] is for a government to control and rule it” (p. 89). In following this, simply in and of the fact that the Bosnian Muslims occupied a territory that the Serbians deemed theirs by historic right, Bosnian Muslims posed a threat to the Serbian governments’ control of the future Greater Serbia. The presence of the Bosnian Muslims represented heterogeneity and thus it was conceivable that if the Serbians would not be given the land via a legitimate means, ethnically cleansing the land was a logical way to obtain the land, while at the same time maintaining its Serbian purity.

***In Conclusion***

While the Bosnian Muslim genocide was certainly a horrific atrocity, much can and should be learned from it. In learning to recognize the ideological elements that are conducive to creating a genocidal environment, scholars can provide the framework for mitigating these elements before the genocide occurs.

The events in Bosnia in the 1990’s did not just come about by chance, and in examining the literature on the ideologies that bring about genocide, it is very apparent that a majority can be applied to the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims. As described by Cigar (1995), Top-down guidance (p. 63), was important in the development of a feeling of threat as discussed by Chirot and Edwards (2003: 15), another important agent in the development of a genocidal environment. This top-down guidance came from Serbians political leaders, the Serbian Orthodox Church and leading Serbian scholars. These three agents first constructed the perception of a threat by constructing and propagating negative stereotypes of Bosnian Muslims. Once the Serbian people had internalized the negative stereotypes and perception of a threat, these three agents used their authoritative positions to legitimize and justify the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims for the Serbian people. The role of the dichotomous self-image (Cigar 1995:73) the Serbians had of themselves was also important in the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims. Serbians viewed themselves as being both a superior people, as well as a threatened people, and from either end of this spectrum they found justification for genocide; either in the fact that they felt like they were entitled to take back land that they viewed as historically theirs, or in that they felt threatened and needed to defend themselves. Finally, theories tied to land were strongly represented in the case of the Bosnian Muslim genocide. Desire to create a utopian society, namely a Greater Serbia, was an ideological element found in the formation of genocide, as discussed by Kiernan (2007:23), and this desire to create a utopian society necessitated one of Kiernan’s (2007) other ideological elements- territorial expansion (p. 31). Mulaj takes a more political approach to the ways that land factors into the development of genocidal conditions and argued that with the adoption of ethnic identities after the collapse of Yugoslavia, created ethnic tensions in a political period when borders were being negotiated. The Serbians, as a cohesive ethnic group, believed that they had a right to much of the land that the Bosnian Muslims occupied and because they could not obtain the land legitimately, a genocide ensued.

While this analysis is only the very tip of the complex and deep seeded issues between the Serbians and Bosnian Muslims, it presents a window into how it was possible for people to go from being neighbors to enemies, with one group vehemently trying to wipe out the other. In the larger context, this analysis shows how ideological theories can be used to examine and explain the occurrence of genocides, and as mentioned earlier, can hopefully be used to help prevent genocides in the future.

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