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The History and Collapse of the Illusion of Equality: Bosnia and the Bosniaks in Socialist Yugoslavia”

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Abstract:

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a federal state composed of the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, the Federation entity with a Bosniak majority, and the Brčko District with an undetermined status. This study focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, examining the ethnic policies implemented in Bosnia during the socialist Yugoslav period and the formation and development of Bosniak nationalism. By analyzing Tito‘s “Brotherhood and Unity” policy and its historical narrative strategies, this paper argues that while Yugoslavia sought to suppress nationalism, it simultaneously institutionalized Bosniak ethnic identity through political and cultural means. The policy shift of the 1960s and 1970s first granted Bosniaks official ethnic status while simultaneously weakening supra-ethnic Yugoslav identity. With the collapse of the socialist system and the resurgence of nationalism, Bosnian society once again descended into division and conflict. Today‘s “Yugoslav nostalgia” reflects a collective longing for the ideals of multi-ethnic coexistence and social equality—ideals once embodied by the Yugoslav state system.

Keywords: Nationalism; Bosniaks; Socialist Yugoslavia; Yugonostalgia; Ethnic Policy.

1. Introduction

Today, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a federal state composed of the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska, the Federation entity with a Bosniak majority, and the Brčko District with an undetermined status. However, more than thirty years ago, the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SRBiH) was one of the six republics that made up Yugoslavia, and among all the Yugoslav republics, it had the most complex and diverse ethnic composition [1,2]. This nation was internally divided by three major ethnic groups and their distinct faiths: Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and the numerically dominant Bosniaks—who practiced Islam (at the time they were merely referred to as “Bosnian Muslims” and were not even recognized as a distinct ethnic group). For the fledgling socialist regime, an

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especially thorny issue was the deep-seated hatred and blood feuds accumulated among these three ethnic groups during World War II. If the new Yugoslav government failed to effectively suppress the rising tide of nationalism within its borders, the tragic cycle of bloody ethnic massacres would inevitably repeat itself.

With the failure of the global socialist experiment, Yugoslavia eventually disintegrated. However, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, born from the ruins of the Bosnian War, has become a poor and deeply divided country. On the surface, the Bosnians achieved the independence they had long dreamed of, and both the Serbs and Croats secured their own positions within the Federation. In reality, however, the people of this land have never ceased to yearn for the former socialist federation — according to statistics from 2015, 92% of Bosnians over the age of 45 believed that life was better during the Yugoslav era [3]. In a 2017 Gallup survey, 77% of Bosnians believed that the breakup of Yugoslavia did more harm than good — a proportion second only to that of the Serbs, who had held a dominant position throughout most of Yugoslavia's history [4]. According to Cemre Aydoğan's study of 37 former residents of Yugoslav cities (now citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina) from different age groups, 32 expressed positive attitudes toward the socialist regime. People feel nostalgic for the egalitarian society of former Yugoslavia and for the days before the war when they lived together with compatriots of different ethnicities in the same communities. For many, "Yugoslavia means all of us, without a division, and it was a real unity." [5].

How did this pronounced Yugo-Nostalgia develop? How did socialist Yugoslavia govern Bosnia? How did the Bosnian people, the largest ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina, experience the resurgence of Bosnian nationalism during the Yugoslav era? Ultimately, why did the illusion of this golden age collapse?

This study focuses on examining the ethnic policies implemented by the Yugoslav government toward Bosniaks during the Socialist Yugoslav period, exploring how these policies influenced Bosniak nationalism and the subsequent historical development of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This issue holds significant importance for understanding the widespread phenomenon of "Yugo-nostalgia" that emerged across the entire Balkan region following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The primary analysis covers the history of Bosniak nationalism, the ethnic policies of the former Yugoslavia, the status of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosniaks within the former Yugoslavia, and the role of Yugoslav ethnic policies during the nation's dissolution. Employing a literature review methodology, study collects and examines relevant materials and documents. This approach effectively establishes a theoretical foundation for the argumentation, enhances the credibility of the analysis, and facilitates deeper insights. The objective of this research is to explore and evaluate the successes and failures of the former Yugoslav government's national policies, examining their profound impact on contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2. Background

The origins of the Bosniaks can be traced back to the "Islamization" policy of the Ottoman Empire — as one of only two successful cases of this policy, half of Bosnia's population converted to Islam [6]. Many of them became wealthy through conversion and gained influence in local political and economic affairs. The widening social and religious divisions gradually set the Muslim community apart from other native peoples, forming a distinct group different from the Orthodox Christians (Serbs) and the Catholics (Croats) [7].

The 19th-century "Bosniak national awakening" marked the birth of an independent national consciousness among Bosnian Muslims. The repeated uprisings against the Ottoman Empire and the continuous emergence of literary works with national characteristics reflected the Muslims' sincere pursuit of self-determination. In 1891, writer and politician Mehmed Kapetanović declared that the Bosniaks "shall never deny that we belong to the South Slav family; but we shall remain Bosniaks, like our forefathers, and nothing else." [8]. This can be regarded as a representative proclamation of early Bosniak nationalist thought.

However, Bosniak nationalism encountered obstacles under Austro-Hungarian rule. The empire's constantly shifting ethnic policies, the indifference of Muslim elites and commoners toward "ethnic identity," and the fervor of "Westernizers" for Serbian or Croatian nationalism abruptly halted what seemed like a burgeoning Bosniak nationalist movement [9]. The era of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after World War I, particularly the 1929 administrative reorganization, completely erased the Bosnian entity from existence [10].

During World War II, Bosnia's Muslim population became deeply divided: many chose to collaborate with the Axis powers, while some Muslim elites jointly signed petitions condemning the atrocities committed by the Croatian Ustaše regime [11,12]. Others joined the socialist partisans, fighting for the liberation of Yugoslavia... [11]. Simultaneously, massacres of Serbs by Croats and some Bosnian Muslims, alongside atrocities committed by Serbian Chetnik guerrillas against both Muslims and Croats, further fractured Bosnia. After the victory of Socialist Yugoslavia, the nation faced a reality where nearly every ethnic group within its borders had committed unspeak-

able war crimes against others during the conflict.

3. Analysis

Josip Tito, leader of the Yugoslav Partisans and the socialist government, was determined to bridge the divisions among the various ethnic groups. His policy proved to be highly successful and effective for a time. Tito himself possessed great personal charisma, and both he and his regime enjoyed greater ethnic legitimacy among minority groups (Tito was Croatian, not Serbian). Under the slogan of "Brotherhood and Unity," the Tito regime endeavored to unite the six republics. This slogan and policy were particularly successful in addressing the multi-ethnic challenges of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In consolidating his regime, Tito first employed political manipulation through historiography. In his rhetoric, as well as in that of other Yugoslav leaders, the Second World War was depicted as a heroic, multi-ethnic partisan struggle against Nazi invaders, ultimately culminating in the victory of the just and patriotic camp. As for internal ethnic conflicts — taking the Bosniaks as an example — the brutal acts committed by Bosniak Muslims who joined the Ustaša against the Serbs, or the atrocities perpetrated by the Chetniks in places such as Foča and Goražde, were attributed by the new Yugoslav government to a small minority of ethnic traitors and their fascist allies. As Tea Sindbæk Andersen of the University of Copenhagen pointed out, the complexity of the war was neither deliberately suppressed nor deliberately emphasized, but was gradually marginalized in public discourse [13]. In a speech delivered on July 7, 1945, Tito praised the cause of the Partisans and stated, "…For them it was obvious that the Croatian people were not guilty because the Ustasha criminals committed such crimes, that the Slovenian people were not guilty for what the Domobran criminals did, that the Serbian people were not guilty for the crimes of various criminals belonging to Nedić or Draža."[13]. The implication was that the wartime atrocities committed during the occupation of Yugoslavia should not be attributed to any single nation, but rather to those ethnic traitors who had aligned themselves with the Axis powers. It must be clarified that the Yugoslav regime never deliberately ignored or suppressed the suffering endured by various ethnic groups or the mutual massacres—including those perpetrated against Bosniaks, who were not yet recognized as an ethnic group at the time. Memoirs published by numerous Yugoslav partisans and senior officers openly documented the atrocities of ethnic massacres. Vladimir Dedijer documented the Chetnik massacre of Muslims, writing: "In January 1942: Today I walked beside the Drina [...] Some people stood at the edge of the bank. One cried: 'That is Ibro'. Corpses in the water – one, two, three … on the bank lay one – like a statue of wax in the Museum of Madame Tussaud. It had thrown its head back. These were Muslim families who buried the victims of the Chetniks. The tailor tells me that they slaughtered 86 people in one night!" [14]. The Yugoslav government chose to tolerate such works, hoping to ease domestic ethnic tensions through shared historical memory (a common hatred of fascism).

An important contribution by the communist government to Bosnian and Bosniak nationalism was the official recognition of the Bosniaks as an independent nation—although this idea had not been present since the beginning of its establishment and despite numerous obstacles, this represented the first time in history that the Bosniaks existed as an officially recognized independent nation.

During World War II, in order to secure the support of Muslims, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia recognized the Bosnians as a distinct nation, separate from the Serbs and Croats.[7] In 1943, Bosnian communist leader Avdo Humo declared, "The peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in community with the other peoples of Yugoslavia, form a new democratic federative Yugoslavia of free and equal peoples, in which the full equality of all of its peoples be secured," and he subsequently particularly emphasized the complete equality of Muslims in policy [15]. However, on March 27, 1945, in a victory-celebration speech in Ljubljana, Tito declared: "Our peoples, all jointly, Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Macedonians – have suffered together and together given enormous sacrifices in this great struggle of the freedom-loving nations."[16]. It is evident that the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) were not included in his list of peoples. The root of this issue lay primarily in the fact that the Bosniaks had never received institutional recognition; moreover, as Muhamed, A. L. I notes, the Yugoslav communists defined themselves as protectors of the common people without ethnic distinction, and nationalism was considered an outdated and reactionary idea. This socialist conception added an additional obstacle to the process of legitimizing Bosniak identity [2]. Therefore, within the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a group comprising 44% of the population—the largest local demographic with distinct cultural and religious characteristics—was not recognized as an ethnic group within Yugoslavia. Bosniaks expressed their dissatisfaction with the ethnic classification through voting: the 1948 Yugoslav census revealed that 89% of Muslims selected an undetermined ethnic identity rather than identifying as Croats or Serbs [2].

Despite lacking formal recognition, the Yugoslav government generally pursued an enlightened ethnic policy—according to Torsti's 2003 research, Serbs, Croats, and

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Muslims enjoyed de facto equality after the nation's establishment [17]. Yet this "equal treatment" itself implied partial discrimination: after all, the lifestyles of Bosnian Muslims and European Christians had diverged fundamentally. The modern, secular socialist state pursued by the Yugoslav regime ran completely counter to the most core aspect of Bosniak national identity—their Islamic faith. In 1946, the Yugoslav government began suppressing Bosnia's courts of Islamic law. By 1950, Yugoslavia had completely banned women from wearing veils in public, criminalized the establishment of maktab schools, prohibited the distribution of Islamic textbooks, and drastically diminished Islam's role in education [2,18]. Particularly controversial was the 1949 death sentence imposed by the Yugoslav government on the four leaders of the Bosnian Young Muslims Organization. Later scholars have sought to rehabilitate this group, arguing that it was essentially a democratic movement grounded in Islamic humanitarianism [2,19]. Other organizations subjected to similar purges included Bosniak fundamentalist groups such as El Hidaye, İhvan, and Merhamet [7].

Although the Yugoslav government also suppressed the domestic Catholic and Orthodox Churches, Islam faced particularly severe challenges due to the weaker political influence of Muslims in central politics and the humiliating historical legacy of Ottoman rule. From gaining power in 1945 until the slowdown of Yugoslavia's economic growth in the 1960s, the Tito regime consistently sought to cultivate public Yugoslav patriotism. This new Yugoslav culture was envisioned as "an overarching supranational culture, which would respect and incorporate parts of the existing national cultures."[20]. In the 1953 census, the vast majority of Bosniaks could only choose the newly created category "Yugoslav, nationality undeclared," which had replaced the previous "Muslim."[21].

This situation changed in the 1960s—Sevan Pearson describes the history of socialist Yugoslavia as "characterized by a gradual but quite regular decentralization process."[22]. In fact, the centralization policies supported during Yugoslavia's early years were not upheld for their own sake, but because they were "legitimized through the expectation of every Yugoslav that next year he would gain something more than he had this year." [23]. As economic growth slowed, nationalist factions across the country once again began demanding autonomy. Consequently, a new national policy replaced the old one, and the Bosniak people's national status was thereby established.

With regard to this process of affirming national identity, the important role played by the Bosniaks should not be overlooked. In previous decades and after 1960, many Bosniaks entered politics through the Yugoslav government's "national key." For Bosnia and Herzegovina, this "national key" meant that a growing number of Muslims and Croats, originally minorities, gained access to the Executive of the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SKBiH) and its subordinate administrative institutions [22]. In 1970, Branko Mikulić, President of the CKSKBiH, pointed out that the proportion of Communist Party members in the Western Bosnia Party Organization was not ideal and proposed relaxing the admission requirements, since the influence of religious faith in the Bosnian region was very deep and it was not possible to insist that all Communists be atheists [22]. The emergence of a new Bosnian Muslim political elite further changed the situation: government officials of Muslim origin such as Džemal Bijedić entered the political core, and this was also of significant importance for strengthening the national status of the Bosniaks.

Second, the Yugoslav government's decision carried deeper implications—Bosniaks constituted the primary ethnic group within the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SRBiH). Yet nationalists continued to label them as Islamized Serbs or Croats. If Bosniaks were classified as Croats, the Croats would undoubtedly become the absolute majority in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the same would apply if they were classified as Serbs. To prevent the collapse of Bosnia and Herzegovina's political balance, to quell the clamorous nationalist disputes, and to strengthen Bosniak nationalism against other nationalist ideologies (particularly Serbian nationalism), the Yugoslav government made this decisive move [7]. A representative incident was Aleksandar Ranković—one of the founding fathers of Yugoslavia, a supporter of centralization and Serbian nationalism, who explicitly opposed recognizing Bosniak ethnicity—being expelled from the party in 1966 [24].

In 1961, Bosniaks were for the first time able to declare their ethnic identity as "Muslim" in the census. The 1963 Constitution granted them fully equal rights relative to other ethnic groups. In 1969, Dr. Avdo Sućeska, at a conference on the national question of Muslims held in Ohrid, Macedonia, authored a report titled "historic basis of uniqueness of Bosnian-Herzegovina Muslims". [25]. As Yugoslavia's political system gradually shifted towards being "no longer a classical federation … nor … a classic confederation, but … a socialist, self-managing community of nations", in 1971, Muslims finally welcomed the dawn—they were officially recognized as a nation, albeit still under the name Muslim rather than Bosniak [24].

The shift in Yugoslavia's policies can be seen in several examples—Baščaršija, once regarded as a shameful symbol of the Ottoman invasion, was even slated for demolition at one point, but was ultimately preserved following protests by local Muslim elites [18]. By the 1970s,

religious policies were gradually relaxed and liberalized. Subsequent waves of reconstruction of mosques and maktabs restored Sarajevo to its former status as a Balkan center of Islamic culture [2].

It should be noted that Yugoslavia remained a country opposed to nationalist expansion and, at least ostensibly, averse to nationalism [21]. Overt separatism and Islamism remained prohibited—for example, Alija Izetbegović, the first president of independent Bosnia and Herzegovina, was sentenced in the 1983 Sarajevo trial for explicitly advocating in his work *The Islamic Declaration* the establishment of an "Ummah" adhering to Islamic doctrine, stretching from Morocco to Indonesia [26]. proposals by Salim Ćerić to establish separate ethnic institutions for Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethnic groups, along with ethnically segregated publishing houses, schools, newspapers, and other entities, were also rejected by SKBiH on the grounds that these measures posed a latent danger of ethnic institutionalization [22]. The Yugoslav government was extremely cautious toward Islam and strove to diminish, in its official stance, the influence of religion on the formation of Bosniak national identity. The Bosniaks "had to steer a delicate path between the highly secularised definition of 'Muslims' fostered by the regime and an ability to reflect the undoubted revival of religious commitment and real piety among the faithful." [19]. The religious dimension within this long-suppressed ethnic identity may help explain the academic debate over the foundational roots of Bosniak identity as an independent nation: does the distinctiveness of Bosniaks stem from Bosnjastvo or Muslimanstvo? Intellectuals such as Alija Izetbegović clearly leaned toward Muslimanstvo—that Islam, with its doctrines and customs, shaped contemporary Bosniaks and set them apart. This ideology was profoundly influenced by Pan-Islamism, which gained widespread traction globally beginning in 1979. In *The Islamic Declaration*, Izetbegović articulated a vision of a transnational Islamic community, viewing Pan-Islamism as both an innate Muslim instinct and an inevitable future wave [26]. In contrast, intellectuals like Enver Redžić emphasized the greater importance of Bosniastvo. This debate, which originated during the former Yugoslav era, continues to the present day [7].

Socialist Yugoslavia achieved remarkable economic progress in Bosnia: Tanıl Bora acknowledges that the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the Bosniaks improved. Both the economic situation and living standards significantly increased during the socialist period [20]. Bosnia was regarded as a "microcosm of Yugoslavia" and achieved considerable social progress: [7] Starting from the 1960s, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia paved 3,000 kilometers of asphalt roads and constructed schools, libraries, telecommunications lines, and more [2]. As a result of investments in infrastructure, the literacy rate in SRBiH rose from 67.5% in 1961 to 85.5% in 1981, [27,28] life expectancy increased from 58.5 years in 1960 to 71.8 years in 1990, and the urbanization rate grew from 19.4% in the 1960s to 39.58% by the 1980s [29,30].

However, Yugoslavia ultimately and inevitably moved toward dissolution—an event of great historical significance caused by multiple factors. First was the global decline of communism. Pro-democracy demonstrations and protests erupted across many socialist countries; East and West Germany were reunified; the Warsaw Pact dissolved; Eastern Europe underwent profound transformations; and finally, the Soviet Union, the most powerful socialist state in history, collapsed. The socialist system, once influential across half the world, gradually decayed and lost the trust of the people. Nationalism replaced socialist internationalism and once again became the dominant ideological trend. Although Yugoslavia had long distanced itself from the Warsaw Pact, this historical current still affected the country. Nationalists once more occupied the political center of Yugoslavia. As Ivo Banac notes in his work, after Tito's death in 1980, almost all Yugoslav leaders "had more in common with the prewar Radical Party, the party of Serbian supremacy, than with Slovene or Croat communists."[31].

4. Discussion

Returning to the historiographical perspective introduced at the beginning, the early postwar Yugoslav historical scholarship simplified and generalized the complexities of World War II—assigning full responsibility for war crimes to the fascist governments and their puppet regimes (which indeed bore responsibility for instigating the conflict). This approach proved effective in its context. However, it also entirely precluded the possibility of critically reflecting on the ethnic massacres that occurred during the war. Subsequently, as Yugoslavia entered its period of decline, the phenomena of nationalist revival and socialist decay increasingly manifested in 1980s historiography: critiques and defenses of ethnic atrocities committed during the war—particularly by the Ustasha and Chetnik forces—gradually replaced the earlier anti-fascist narratives centered on the partisan perspective. As nationalism gained importance within historical research, historians holding differing viewpoints increasingly advocated for and reinforced interethnic nationalist sentiments. This issue is not limited to World War II. The origins of the Bosniak nation, as mentioned earlier, derive from the Islamization policies of the Ottoman Empire. Correspondingly, Serbian nationalist elites adhering to Orthodox Christianity

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precisely exploited the historical antagonism between the two ethnic groups. They depicted the Bosniaks as the perpetrators who killed Prince Lazar in the Battle of Kosovo, described the large-scale conversions during Ottoman rule as a betrayal of the nation, and characterized "Bošnjastvo" as a symbol of historical grievances. [1]. Tea Sindbæk Andersen noted that historiography in the late 1980s emerged when the fragile balance among the federal republics was disrupted. Consequently, the writing of history descended into being "acute, painful and highly malleable issues, available for instrumentalization." [13].

During the Yugoslav period, religion played an extremely limited role in public life—it was regarded as contrary to "brotherhood and unity" and was therefore suppressed, as previously noted. However, as the authority of the central Yugoslav government gradually weakened, religion, increasingly detached from state-building functions, experienced a revival in Bosnia. Whether it was the vision of Islamic revival and the spread of Pan-Islamism among Bosniaks, the growing influence of the Orthodox Church among Serbs, or the Croats' efforts to rehabilitate the reputation of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, who had been tried for collaborating with the Nazis—these developments all indicated that religion was reclaiming its role as a marker of national identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina [13]. The violence stemming from religion was vividly manifested in the subsequent Bosnian War [1].

To maintain internal stability and peaceful development, beginning in the 1960s, the Yugoslav government abandoned the supranational and inclusive Yugoslavism, turning instead to directly support relatively disadvantaged ethnic groups and encourage their distinct national characteristics—among which the primary beneficiaries were the Bosniaks. Yugoslavism stood in stark opposition to any exclusivist nationalism that emphasized the particularity of one's own nation, and its failure in cultural construction inevitably contributed to the disintegration of the Yugoslav state itself. As Andrew Wachtel noted, without the failure of Yugoslavism and the revival of individual ethnic cultures, the political and economic crisis faced by Yugoslavia in the 1980s might not necessarily have led to the country's dissolution [32].

Laslo Sekelj attributes the dissolution of Yugoslavia to the rising external debt and the resulting economic crisis (for which Tito himself was largely responsible due to erroneous economic policies), as well as the inefficiency of the government following federalization reforms. Although the decentralization of Yugoslavia granted greater autonomy to many ethnic groups, including the Bosniaks, leading to a revival of local cultural traditions and broader, freer prospects, it also, as he noted, resulted in the Communist Party—which was constitutionally tasked with safeguarding "general interests"—being unable to effectively implement policies. In such a loosely structured federation, political conflicts among the party-controlled republics intensified amid the wave of nationalism. He also highlights a critical fact: the decision for Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence was made from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. As in many historical moments, the Bosniak elites once again made decisions on behalf of the broader population [23].

The fuse of the powder keg had been fully lit. By the 1990s, with nearly all nationalist parties winning elections in their respective republics, the collapse of Yugoslav communism became inevitable, and nationalism achieved complete hegemony. Bosniaks celebrated their impending freedom, while the international community hailed it as another triumph of self-determination. Yet for the Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats, already marginalized within Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnia's impending independence signaled nothing but a new tyranny by the majority. As Donald Horowitz stated, "If new secessions are likely to produce lower-level ethnic tyrannies, this is the result of pervasive ambivalence about principle. The international community seems to value simultaneously self-determination, increasingly defined in ethnic terms, and the sanctity of frontiers—principles that are in collision. Some people therefore get to determine the future of others."[33]. In the end, the so-called 'some people' did not bring the prosperity they had promised to the people, but instead brought hatred, massacres, division, the denial of past history, and the greatest humanitarian disaster in modern history.

5. Conclusion

To this day, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the country with the strongest Yugo-nostalgia. In his research in Jajce, Larisa Kurtović noted, "Despite the violence of war, most residents of Jajce remembered this period fondly; many also lamented the destruction of interethnic trust that had helped make possible 'a shared life' (zajednički život)." Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina still deeply feels the severe social divisions, corruption, human rights violations, and inequality caused by the war. A Bosniak from Sarajevo, through his tragic identity shift in 1994, explained the formation of this country and its people: "First, I was a Yugoslav. Then, I was a Bosnian. Now I'm becoming a Muslim. It's not my choice. I don't even believe in God. But after two hundred thousand dead, what do you want me to do? Everybody has to have a country to which he can belong."

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