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Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina

—Hannah Waller (Editor: Brigid C. Casellini)

As a student in political science and international affairs at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), I strive to expand my education by immersing myself in unique and challenging experiences. One of these experiences was my internship at Amnesty International U.S.A. in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 2013. My most recent experience, and the focus of this article, was in the summer of 2014, conducting research in Bosnia-Herzegovina with funding from the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP) in the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research.

I developed my IROP proposal by formulating a research strategy based on my primary interests: political science, international affairs, and human rights. This led me to peacebuilding, the goal of which is to prevent a post-conflict society from relapsing into future conflict. I then narrowed the focus of my research to highlight the roles of truth, memory, and justice in rebuilding a post-conflict society in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I lived in a small town in northwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina called Sanski Most, and worked with a local translator, Dijana Merdanović, to conduct semi-structured interviews. My foreign mentor, Vahidin Omanović, is the co-director of a local non-governmental organization called the Center for Peacebuilding (Centar Za Izgradnju Mira). Vahidin helped me prepare for and adjust to life in Bosnia-Herzegovina, set up interviews, and become immersed in the local community. I lived in the Center for Peacebuilding's volunteer housing, a short fifteen minute walk from the center of town, and spent my days researching at the office or conducting interviews at a riverside café called Palazzo. It was at this café that I heard stories of survival, perseverance, and hope, all starting with a cup of *kafa* (coffee).



The author standing next to the town seal of Sanski Most, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Why Bosnia?

During 1992-1995, a series of secessionist wars, together known as the Yugoslav Wars, tore apart the former Yugoslavia. Bosnia-Herzegovina, one of six republics within the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, declared independence from the Republic in 1992. As a result, neighboring Serbia saw an opportunity to invade Bosnia and declare its territory part of a "Greater Serbia." A central component of this invasion was a bloody ethnic cleansing campaign against Muslim Bosniaks within Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). By the end of the war, there were 350,000 casualties and over 100,000 dead, 80% of whom were Muslim Bosniaks. The war continued relentlessly until August 1995, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began a bombing campaign against Serbian forces. The United States-sponsored peace talks finally occurred in November 1995 in Dayton, Ohio, and became known as the Dayton Accords. All in all, the Bosnian War would stand as the worst genocide since the Holocaust. The Yugoslav Wars continued

as a series of ethnic conflicts throughout the region, resulting in the independent countries of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo ("Bosnian Genocide," *History*).



Bosnia-Herzegovina is located in southeastern Europe and is part of a region known as the Balkans.

While the Dayton Accords managed to put an end to the violence of the Bosnian War, the peace agreement froze ethnic divisions in BiH. Today, Christian Orthodox Serbs, Roman Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosniaks struggle to live together in the multi-ethnic country. These ethno-religious groups (defined by a combination of ethnic and religious identities) are increasingly segregated, and unsuccessful peacebuilding efforts only increase the risk of future conflict.

In 2004, Vahidin Omanović and his friend, Mevludin Rahmanović, founded the Center for Peacebuilding, hoping to heal the ethno-religious tension that escalated after the war. The Center organizes annual peace camps, interreligious dialogues, foreign language programs, and trauma therapy, attempting to bring society together. Vahidin and Mevludin insist that the key to reconciliation is a cup of coffee, and that enough dialogue will ease tensions and help society move forward. Even though communication is essential to reconciliation,

it still isn't an everyday occurrence. Typically, residents of BiH prefer to avoid discussing the war, particularly with ethno-religious groups different from their own. The official language of BiH is Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, one language with three dialects, a testament to the barriers caused by the disparity between the three groups.

Recent events underscore the importance of peacebuilding in BiH, as ethnic tensions are still apparent in everyday life. The lack of government involvement is a huge part of why the country is struggling to move forward. A vivid example of this was during the first few weeks of my time in BiH, when over one million Bosnians were forced to evacuate their homes after the most devastating floods in over a century. It was a change in plans, but I did humanitarian aid work with the Center for Peacebuilding for the first few weeks of my time there. On one hand, it was incredible to see how a town with so few resources could come together to rebuild, but on the other hand, it was shocking to see the lack of government involvement in the entire crisis. Most of the aid money coming from neighboring countries was pocketed by politicians, and it was up to nongovernmental organizations to take care of the people. It was painful to see people who had lost everything in the war, returned home and rebuilt, and had now lost everything again in the floods.

After the floods, life in Sanski Most returned to normal. It was a quiet, beautiful little town, but the underlying sadness and tension from the war was never far. One day would be a fun concert for families in the local park, and the next would be a burial procession for two hundred eighty-four bodies found in a nearby mass grave. It was hard to keep up with the shifting emotions, knowing that this is how they have to live, with constant reminders of loss.

A Blessing in Disguise

Although I prepared for my time in BiH, I had to make significant changes in my lifestyle and research goals once I arrived. My initial goal was to interview thirty people: ten Christian Orthodox Serbs, ten Roman Catholic Croats, and ten Muslim Bosniaks. However, this proved difficult, as the first two and a half weeks of my time in BiH were spent doing aid work. Also, I lived in Sanski Most, which one interviewee described as “ethnically clean,” meaning that the vast majority of residents were the same ethnicity, in this case, Muslim Bosniaks. Most towns in BiH have a dominant ethnic majority, but some larger cities (such as the capital, Sarajevo) have become more diverse over time.

Through the tragedy of the floods came an unexpected blessing: people recognized my face from the aid shelters, and were much more open to being interviewed. I ended up conducting seventeen interviews with the help of my friend and translator, Dijana Merdanović, and all of my respondents were Muslim Bosniaks. I interviewed nine women and eight men, ranging from the ages of eighteen to fifty-two. This selection impacted my research because instead of having a balanced sample from all sides of the war, it was heavily based on the victims’ side of the conflict. If I had been able to interview Serbs, who were primarily on the perpetrators’ side, and Croats, who were both perpetrators and victims, the responses would have been much different.

The interview was a series of open-ended questions that let people tell their story or simply say “yes” or “no,” depending on their level of comfort. I organized my questions into three themes: the roles of truth, memory, and justice in rebuilding post-conflict BiH. For truth, I asked respondents about the “whole truth” of the war, as it is a contentious topic which history is taught in local schools (it differs from Bosniak, Serb, or Croat perspectives). For memory, I asked respondents how they felt that the country has dealt with the memories of the war. For justice, I asked their opinion of the BiH judicial system. The full list of interview questions is included in the [appendix](#). Usually, interviews started slowly over coffee by talking about friends we shared. My translator, Dijana, was a master at small talk and building trust, making interviewees laugh and relax. We found that an interview worked best when she conducted it entirely in Bosnian, and then translated it afterwards while I transcribed it. This made the interview much smoother,

because we didn’t have to stop to translate. We did several practice interviews with Vahidin, so Dijana knew what type of follow-up questions to ask, as well as the core of what I was hoping to address in my research.



Hannah with her mentor, Vahidin Omanović, and his wife, Timka, in Sanski Most.



View of the Sana River, the source of the floods, in front of the main mosque in Sanski Most, BiH.

I supplemented my interview research with participant observation, simply living and interacting with people in Sanski Most. I learned enough Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian to get by, but was thankful to be able to speak English with Dijana and Vahidin. On days I didn’t have interviews, I helped out at the Center for Peacebuilding in a variety of ways, such as helping teach English or participating in Harmonija, the interreligious choir. I grew close to my mentor, Vahidin, and his family, and made

many other friends in Sanski Most. I was also fortunate to be able to attend the annual International Society of Political Psychology conference in Rome, Italy, which was a weeklong conference of scholars presenting their research on ideological conflict. I met many fascinating people, even some who specialized in the Balkans, and discovered several new sources to use for research.

Searching for Truth, Memory, or Justice?

I believe that the primary reason why Bosnia-Herzegovina continues to struggle, both economically and socially, is the failure of the Dayton Accords. Even though Dayton stopped the immediate violence with a temporary solution, it actually set BiH up to fail in the future. It put in place a dysfunctional system of three presidents (one from each ethno-religious group), established a corrupt police force and judicial system, and provided no accountability for perpetrators. From my interviews, I learned that the hatred, distrust, and desire for revenge still remain, and are huge indicators of future conflict. If the global community understands the current situation, as well as Bosnia-Herzegovina's tumultuous history, I hope that they will be more likely to help avoid another war.

The most powerful findings I had were quotes from interviewed victims. The quotes can be organized, as the interview was, into three sections: the roles of truth, memory, and justice in rebuilding a post-conflict society. The quotes under each section were responses to questions I asked in my interviews. (See [appendix](#))

TRUTH, according to the majority of interviewees, is the most important part of rebuilding Bosnia-Herzegovina. Without reconciling and establishing one common truth, children will continue to be taught different histories and the three ethno-religious identities will remain divided.

"This morning, I thought, 'Send her home knowing nothing. What I know will destroy this girl. I don't want to scare her.'" [Female respondent on her first thoughts about our interview when she woke up that day]

"It is very important that they [perpetrators] admit what they did was wrong. I think in the public opinion it is very important that they admit it was genocide. There are so many Serbs that believe they did nothing wrong. For them, they were fighting for their country, for their nation. But you don't kill women and children, civilians, in a war over land." [Female respondent on the need for perpetrators to be honest about the crimes they committed during the war]

"I know firsthand how hard it is to kill someone and go to bed at night. It all comes back in your nightmares. Their conscience [Serbs'] has to be haunted. They will have to confess eventually." [Male respondent on how perpetrators will have to confess the truth eventually, even if only to clear their own conscience]

"Still, after twenty years, I don't understand how it happened overnight. All the Serbs and all the Croats knew . . . Bosniaks were blind, completely in the dark. We were lambs prepared for slaughter who had no idea." [Female respondent on how Serbs and Croats knew the war was coming, compared to the Bosniaks who were taken by surprise]

MEMORY is crucial to recovery, because by sweeping war and tragedy under the rug, there is nothing to prevent another ethno-religious war from happening.

"It will always be hard to live here [in Bosnia]. We have lost our moral integrity . . . Children are taught to bribe, and that it is better to be rich and criminal than to be an intellectual. Good or bad, something will have to happen soon because we have been in the same place for so many years [since the war]. The future is not stable. There will be another war." [Male respondent on how the issues of memory in BiH need to be addressed in order to create a stable, peaceful future]

"We might have another genocide by tomorrow morning. This is not finished. All it takes is one crazy guy in power, and we have plenty." [Male respondent on the future of politics and stability in BiH, and the potential of a corrupt politician to lead the people into another war]

"What we have right now is not peace. We have a war that is using everything else but weapons." [Male respondent on the current state of BiH, and how even if it looks peaceful from the outside, there is turmoil on deeper levels]

JUSTICE is also paramount, because perpetrators who roam free are a daily reminder to victims of the failure of the government and judicial system to pursue justice and accountability, thus supporting the notion that institutions in BiH are dysfunctional and corrupt.

"The worst part about Sanski Most is that everyone is looking for a way to escape." [Male respondent on how without justice, the young people of BiH will continue to move away in order to find a more equitable society]

"We have all three nationalities in Bosnia: Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks, and we have to live and coexist. Serbs have Serbia, Croats have Croatia, but Bosniaks . . . we don't have our own country." [Male respondent on the international community's failed attempt at justice and reconciliation after the war. The Dayton Accords divided the country by ethno-religious identity, but did not address the root causes that started the conflict.]

"When someone kills one hundred people, you can't kill him one hundred times in punishment." [Male respondent on the difficulty of bringing perpetrators to justice]

"In the European Union [EU], there is the general opinion that every Muslim is some kind of terrorist, always planning their next attack. This is our [Bosnia-Herzegovina's] biggest barrier to joining the EU. They are afraid of Bosnian Muslims . . . although we are very modern, very secular." [Male respondent on how the international community, particularly the EU, will continue to view Muslim Bosniaks negatively unless the justice system proves that Bosniaks were victims.]



Word Cloud #1: This word cloud is a series of responses to the question, "What is the first thing that comes to mind when I mention the war in Bosnia?" I asked respondents this question to determine their strongest memory of the war, and to see if that influenced their opinion on modern-day BiH.



Word Cloud #2: This word cloud is in response to the question, "How do you think society will be able to heal (if ever)?" I asked this question to try and determine the most important theme to respondents—truth, memory, or justice—in rebuilding post-conflict BiH.

What's Next?

I chose to pursue this research because of my passion for human rights, an inevitable benefit of growing up with my father, who is a professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Keene State College. He connected me with my foreign mentor, Vahidin, who adopted me as part of his family and was responsible for making my experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina unforgettable. Vahidin introduced me to friends in Sanski Most, who convinced me to join and travel with Harmonija, the Center for Peacebuilding's interreligious choir. I was also able to take side trips to Mostar, BiH, which is home to a gorgeous bridge originally built during the Ottoman Empire, and Srebrenica, a memorial to the genocide that took the lives of over 8,000 Muslim Bosniaks during the war.

After spending nine weeks in Bosnia-Herzegovina, I learned an incredible amount about the culture, people, and history. I was constantly asking questions, taking notes, and conducting research. I learned more in those nine weeks than I have in years of school. There is truly nothing comparable to living, breathing, and experiencing the daily life of a new and beautiful culture.

I will graduate from UNH in May 2015, and will then begin graduate school at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. I will be pursuing a two-year master's degree in international affairs with a focus on conflict resolution. After this, I plan on working in either the nonprofit sector or in foreign policy, hopefully within the fields of human rights or post-conflict peacebuilding. All of my future goals were formed by or are based on the remarkable summer I spent in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

It is impossible to put into words how truly thankful I am for all of the wonderful people who prepared me for, supported me during, and listened to me after my incredible summer in BiH. To my donors through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research—Dana Hamel, Frank and Patricia Noonan, Craig and Andrea Abbott—for making students' dreams become a reality; to Mary Malone, for revising endless drafts and being my mentor from beginning to end; to Georgeann Murphy, for being my voice of reason in chaotic times; to Peter Akerman, for his patience throughout the long preparation process; and to my father, James Waller, for instilling in me a passion for human rights, and for convincing Patti Waller to let me embark on this crazy adventure. Hvala to my Bosnian friends and family, without whom I would never have been able to have such an unforgettable experience; to Vahidin Omanović, my second father, and Timka, my loving mother, who brought me into their home and community as if I had always belonged there; to Dijana Merdanović, for being an amazing translator and for being the friend I didn't even know I needed; to Mevludin Rahmanović, my ever-comedic crazy "uncle," and his wife Edina, for always giving me a reason to smile; to Alen, Djeno, and all of Harmonija for accepting me as a friend despite my never-ending questions; and lastly, in the hopes of keeping this a reasonably-sized paragraph, hvala to Centar Za Izgradnju Mira, to all of the staff and volunteers, for connecting me with interviewees and being my home-away-from-home. Vidimo se!

References

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Demographic Information:

Name/Age/Ethnicity (Bosniak, Serb, Croat)

Years of schooling/level of education

Current family situation (married, single, divorced)

Children (Yes or no)/Occupation

Where did you live during the 1991-1995 war? Did you move after the war?

Where is your family from originally?

Truth

- 1) What is your definition of truth (in general)?
- 2) What is your definition of truth about the war in Bosnia?
- 3) Do you think perpetrators have told the complete truth about the war?
- 4) Do you think there are more mass graves that have yet to be discovered? How do you think the rest will be found (if more remain)?
- 5) What else needs to be told in order for you to feel like the whole truth has been uncovered?
- 6) Once the truth gets out, is there any way that perpetrators can compensate victims and victims' families?
- 7) What about bystanders (who knew and were silent for 20 years)?

Memory

- 8) How do you think that the country has dealt with the memories of genocide and war?
- 9) How have you dealt with the memory of war? Do you think about it often?
- 10) What triggers these memories?
- 11) What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I mention the war in Bosnia?
- 12) Did you have friends of other ethno-religious identities before the war? Do you now?

Justice

- 13) How do you feel the international court has done in bringing justice to perpetrators (i.e., the Hague)?

14) How do you feel the national court has done in bringing justice to perpetrators and victims? How about the local court in Sanski Most?

Overall

15) How do you feel about the path to reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

16) Do you think there is healing between victims and perpetrators? How long do you think it will take for society to heal (if ever)?

17) What do you think Bosnia will be like in 5-10 years? Do you see yourself still in Bosnia, or somewhere else?

18) What do you think is most important to healing and post-conflict reconstruction (truth, memory, justice)? What will make society whole again?

19) Youth—Does the memory of the war impact you, even though you weren't alive at the time? If yes, how so? Adults—How do you think the memory of war will impact your children?

20) What role do you believe the European Union and the United States played during the war in Bosnia? What role do they play now?

Author and Mentor Bios

Originally from Spokane, Washington, **Hannah Waller** grew up with an interest in human rights, and credits this inspiration to her father, a professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Keene State College. A senior with a dual major in political science and international affairs and a minor in Spanish, Hannah is a member of the University Honors Program and a Hamel Scholar. She dove into her IROP experience, reflecting that she was embraced by the citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina as one of their own. "I made life-long friendships," she said. "It was fun, albeit exhausting, to learn a new language." Hannah intends to use this research for her senior honors thesis. She discovered *Inquiry* through her IROP coordinator and is excited to publish her research. Following graduation, Hannah will attend George Washington University to pursue a master's degree in international affairs with a focus on conflict resolution.

Vahidin Omanović is the co-founder and executive director of the Center for Peacebuilding (Centar Za Izgradnju Mira) in Sanski Most, Bosnia-Herzegovina. He specializes in conflict resolution and dialogue facilitation. This was his first experience as a foreign mentor for an undergraduate researcher.

Mary Malone is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of New Hampshire. She was featured in Mentor Highlights in *Inquiry* 2014.