PERSONAL ESSAY

# ARCHITECTURES OF MEMORY IN POST-WAR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

*Evan Daneker shares his reflections charting memory culture in Sarajevo and Republika Srpska*


**Figure 1:** A present-day administrative map of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Republika Srpska—containing Banja Luka, Srebrenica, and Višegrad—is in blue, while the FBiH—containing Sarajevo—is in red.

*by* **Evan Daneker, Yale University '26**

The first night of my month-long stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the beginning of Eid al-Adha, one of the two main Islamic holidays. The city of Sarajevo buzzed as I stumbled jet-lagged down from my apartment in the hills to the urban core. Dusk had set in; brilliant crimson streaks stretched across the sky and above the brutalist apartment blocks in the distance, but I was shielded by the rolling green mountains that encircled the city. Crowds filled the Baščaršija, Sarajevo's Ottoman-era center: tourists gawked at the minarets soaring above them alongside locals haggling at street-side merchant stalls. But these vibrant, chaotic streets also sported scars of violence. There were bullet holes in the facades of Austrian and Ottoman-era buildings in the Baščaršija, artillery holes in the sides of apartment buildings along "Sniper Alley," and unexploded mortar shells left in the sidewalk in the Markale market. Thirty years after the Bosnian War, these scars persisted, etched not only into the built environment but also in the fabric of institutions and the lives of individuals. Throughout my travels in Bosnia, I sought to understand the nature of war memory across present Bosnian society.

The breakup of Yugoslavia hit Bosnia hard. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Yugoslavia fell into a gradual economic downturn accompanied by rising ethnic nationalism. For the multi-ethnic Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, these trends were dangerous; Bosnia was roughly one-half Bosniak (Muslim), one-third Bosnian Serb (Serbian Orthodox), and one-sixth Bosnian Croat (Catholic). When the country voted to secede from Yugoslavia in 1992, violence between the ethnic groups erupted into the nearly four-year-long Bosnian War. The war was characterized by brutal campaigns of ethnic cleansing and violence against civilians. Sarajevo itself suffered frequent civilian-targeted attacks throughout a four-year siege by the separatist Serb nation of Republika Srpska. In the countryside, brutal ethnic cleansing campaigns—waged disproportionately by Republika Srpska against Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats—entailed mass displacements, deportations, and executions. The war ended only after NATO's military intervention in 1995.

Bosnia's present-day political structure—created by the 1995 Dayton Framework Agreement which ended the war—solidified the ethnic divisions of the conflict. Today, the country is split into two highly autonomous entities: the Bosniak- and Croat-dominated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. Ethnicity is built into the constitution; the head of the unitary government features a three-person rotating presidency, with each president representing one of the three dominant ethnic groups. Wartime expulsions and post-war migration left each entity almost entirely ethnically segregated.

Today, Bosnia remains deeply tied to the war which tore the country apart thirty years ago. The war not only shaped the country's political structure but also ravaged cities and villages, littering the countryside with landmines and the cities with bullet holes. What follows is a recounting of my experiences in the Bosniak-dominated capital of Sarajevo and the Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska. This piece is far from an interpretation of events. Its goal is not to debate cause and effect nor to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the Yugoslav disintegration. Rather, it is a personal exploration of remembrance amidst structural ethnic division constructed from my own diary entries, photographs, and interview recordings. It is both a collection of testimonies and a testimony itself. Testimonies are truths, but they are not *the* truth. Instead, they foster an understanding of the varied and nuanced historical narratives that compose an event, allowing the audience to inhabit and empathize with the lived experiences of others. The goal of this piece is to do just that, to place you, the reader, in my own shoes and those of my interviewees, to help you experience my own truth that is but one part of a greater whole.

## Sarajevo

It's a sweltering late afternoon, and I'm walking through the city with Najda Durmo, an expert curator at the Sarajevo Memorial Center. Durmo talks openly about her experiences during the Siege of Sarajevo; she sees her story as just one of the multitudes remembered by the majority of the city's current residents. "When the war started in 1992, I was six years old," Durmo recounts plainly. "I saw my friends getting killed, and

I was wounded during the war. I had to grow up in twenty-four hours." As we walk through the city, she shows me the war's lingering impact on Sarajevo's built environment. Memorialized red resin-filled shell craters, colloquially called the "Roses of Sarajevo," are scattered across the sidewalks. Durmo is careful to avoid the Roses as we walk down the street.

**Testimonies are truths, but they are not *the* truth. Instead, they foster an understanding of the varied and nuanced historical narratives that compose an event, allowing the audience to inhabit and empathize with the lived experiences of others.**

At a café, she tells me that remembering the war is part of her everyday life: "When I leave my apartment, I can see my elementary school where I studied during the war. In that school there are plaques of all the soldiers who were killed there, and one of the plaques has my father's name. When I'm going to the tram station, there is a monument of all of the names of the dead, and my father's name is there again. When I go to the [History] Museum, where I work, there's a wall where I can see my family name and all of the members of my family who were killed in massacres. My name is on a lot of buildings."

**Figure 2:** The Sacred Heart Cathedral in Sarajevo's city center. While much of the building's war damage has been repaired, bullet holes still chip away the cornerstone. Photograph taken by Evan Daneker.

Firsthand experiences play a large role in the culture of memory in Sarajevo. Museums across the city commemorating the war are generally de-institutionalized; Durmo explains that their purpose is "to take all the memories of the community and provide them as an exhibition." The Museum of Crimes against Humanity and Genocide 1992-1995 is one such example, centered on wartime objects that are accompanied by individual stories. I wander through its maze of objects—a shattered doll, a bullet-riddled street sign, a child's diary. Placards cover nearly every inch of the wall with personal stories written in fine print, featuring the occasional typo. "I don't console myself, I just live," one placard declares, telling a story of surviving a grenade attack. Another story, entitled "Taxi," details the Markale massacre from the point of view of a taxi driver: "They were all dead…we loaded them into a truck as fast as we could because we were afraid they

**Figure 3:** Bullet holes pierce the facade of an apartment building in the Mejtas neighborhood of Sarajevo. Photograph taken by Evan Daneker.

could throw another grenade…." In these museums, the feeling of war triumphs over the hard facts.

Although few official, state-supported museums tell a complete narrative of the war, the local Sarajevo government is in no way removed from the war's memory culture. In lieu of a central, state-run war museum, there is an exhibition in the basement of Sarajevo's City Hall, the centerpiece of Baščaršija and political epicenter of the city, rebuilt after the war. Personal stories are written on banners, suspended above a sea of used bullet casings near the exhibit entrance. One banner tells of the suffering of Bosniak prisoners at the Republika Srpska-operated Omarska concentration camp: "After the beatings, people walked around bleeding…fifty percent of the people had dysentery. We were unshaven, hungry. We were like skeletons." An adjacent room boasts of the achievements of the United Nations International Tribunal on the Former Yugoslavia which prosecuted and imprisoned war criminals of the Bosnian War. The exhibit lists "Tribunal Achievements": "Establishing the facts, bringing justice to victims, holding leaders accountable…." Open picture books below the sign catalog Republika Srpska war criminals who have been indicted by the UN.

There is something telling about such an exhibit being held within the foundations of a government building. The memory of the war, much like the modern political situation of the country, is inextricable from the identity of Sarajevo. The war had a lasting impact on Sarajevo's social, political, and economic life, and the city remembers. War memory is preserved in homemade museums and local monuments. It is the foundation upon which the government is built and identified. Above all, it is shared by the thousands of Sarajevans who remember and continue to experience its effects.

## Republika Srpska

Republika Srpska is a stark contrast to Sarajevo. In the mountainous countryside, infrastructure connecting Sarajevo to this Serb-dominated entity is sparse. Banja Luka, the capital of Republika Srpska, lies northeast of Sarajevo and is reachable only by a six-hour drive along a two-lane road. Across the border, signs give the impression of an international border crossing; the Latin alphabet gives way to Cyrillic, and Bosnian Serb flags fly everywhere as a reminder of local allegiances. Project research is difficult in Republika Srpska, and few academics or museum curators respond to my incessant emails. Upon arrival in Banja Luka, I feel an unfamiliar unspokenness regarding the war. The city center of Banja Luka, despite being the site of large-scale wartime ethnic cleansing campaigns, is clean and rebuilt, unlike the scars that dot Sarajevo. In the main square stands a soaring Orthodox Cathedral, rebuilt postwar. Serbian flags, in lieu of Bosnian flags, fly along the streets and are sold proudly at streetside kiosks on the main pedestrian drag.

Banja Luka's Museum of Republika Srpska makes little room for the Bosnian War. The museum is housed in a dank, socialist-era building near the city center. Comprehensive exhibits cover the history of Republika Srpska from prehistory through the modern age, implying Republika Srpska is some natural, persistently existing nation rather than one created by the 1995 peace treaties. The museum particularly emphasizes the Nazi persecution of Serbs during World War II—above the exhibit, a banner hangs from the ceiling depicting an Orthodox Cross alongside the Star of David and the Romani flag, a self-identification with other victims of Nazi violence. The Bosnian War is explained by a single, opaque plaque near the museum's exit: "The breakup of Yugoslavia happened at the same time as

major changes in the world…. Significantly weakened by the negative effects of internal factors, it was definitely broken under the influence of an external force."

The countryside of Republika Srpska exhibits a similar, silent attitude towards the war. A trip to the east of the country brings me to Srebrenica, a town of thirteen thousand. In 1995, the Army of Republika Srpska's invasion of the UN-protected town of Srebrenica ended in the eventual massacre of over eight thousand civilians, a massacre that would later be labeled a genocide by the International Court of Justice. As our van winds through the rolling hills, Adnan, my Bosniak guide, points out the unmemorialized sites where civilians were killed during the war. "On this soccer pitch, the Army of Republika Srpska shelled three children," Adnan states, pointing his finger out the window. Near Potočari, we pass a warehouse, and Adnan explains, "That is where they massacred the Bosniak civilians. They rounded them up there and threw grenades in the windows." As we pass by, I notice that the crumbling, explosion-marked concrete interior has been replaced with a new plaster facade.

**Figure 4:** A war-damaged house in the Džidžikovac neighborhood of Sarajevo. Photograph taken by Evan Daneker.

It is an eerie feeling to go into Srebrenica town today, a place where ethnic cleansing was largely successful—Serb flags fly proudly from the windows and balconies. A tourism sign welcomes visitors to the town and highlights the region's natural beauty, conveniently evading mention of the memorial and graveyard down the road, the reason for most visits. For lunch, Adnan and I go to the apartment of a local woman who survived the massacres and moved back to the area. I ask her what it is like to live in Srebrenica today, and Adnan translates. She responds, "Imagine living in a place where your neighbors killed your friends, where they killed your family. And they are still your neighbors today."

In a neighboring town, Višegrad, the government of Republika Srpska recently built a fabricated "old town" development, Andricgrad, highlighting the culture of Bosnian Serbs with the goal of attracting tourism to the region. The town is empty when I visit. The half-finished five-star hotel and the sparsely decorated Serbian Orthodox Church in the main square mark the end of a spotlessly clean pedestrian promenade, filled with empty café chairs, and the whole scene leaves me with the impression of a Potemkin village. As we drive away from Andricgrad, we pass a Bosniak graveyard; the Višegrad area, once eighty-eight percent Bosniak, now has few Muslim residents left after the war.

## Reflections

Witnessing these vastly different wartime memory cultures, I must remind myself that Sarajevo and Republika Srpska are two parts of the same country. This ethnically divided rift, however, pervades the national political atmosphere to the present day. At the Tito Café in Sarajevo, I sit with Amir Duranović, a professor at the University of Sarajevo's Faculty of Philosophy who specializes in Contemporary Bosnian Politics, and he explains to me the interaction between ethnicity and politics. "The Dayton Framework Agreement has often been used as a veto tool for ethnic constituency blocks, mostly by Serb political elite," Duranović

claims, adding, "they have threatened, 'if our proposal is not accepted, we will leave the institutions.'" To Duranović, one of the biggest obstacles that Bosnia faces is its ethnicity-based voting system, which binds political positions to occupants of specific ethnicities. "This is a country where not all people are equal before the law. Serbs vote for Serbs, and Bosniaks for Bosniaks." With such a system, appealing to populist ethnic narratives remains a powerful political strategy.

Bosnia's memory rift is a symptom of wartime divisions reinforced by a newly created, ethnically-defined political system. But, importantly, it is also deeply rooted in individual experiences, in unhealed individual suffering. Ivan Ivanović is a Bosnian Croat, recently retired from the armed forces after a thirty-year career in various military branches. During the war, he served with the Croatian Defense Council (HDO), the armed forces of the unrecognized Herzeg-Bosnia state. "I grew up in a small town, with friends of all different ethnic backgrounds," Ivanović tells me. "But after four years of war, of sharing your life with only one ethnic group, the truth is you have a problem. You need like four or five years after the war to just remember again that humans are just humans." He adds that he felt jostled by the war's end: "One day, everyone needs you, and then the next day the war is over and you are abandoned; many people stay lost in the war." Durmo echoed similar sentiments about the lingering effects of the war on her quotidian life. "You're just trying to survive day-to-day, and then one day, the war ends. But every day you feel these PTSD moments that come back because the war stays around us every single day."

At the same time, many are optimistic about a future where ethnicity is less important to Bosnians. "You will see how things have changed in the positive direction, for ordinary people have their own issues which are more important than these ethnic lines," Duranović explains. Duranović sees hope in Bosnia's eventual accession to the EU, believing that EU membership could provide the country with a European "supra-identity" under which it can unite. "Hopefully the next generations will not find the 19th-century narratives of nationalism attractive anymore; hopefully they will think about development, change, and the EU. It took Germany a full forty-five years before it reunified after World War II." Durmo too remains hopeful for Bosnia's future. "This is a rich country; it is rich in its diversity. But we need to understand that we have a problem of misinformation and propaganda here, a problem of lacking reconciliation. I see hope in future generations that they can overcome these barriers and move past these divisions that only hurt ourselves. I see hope that we can break the image of a war-torn country and be an example of meaningful peace." For Durmo, the first step to peace is building a common memory. ◆