

Causes of Political Violence: Ethnic Conflict in Bosnia

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1. Introduction

Bosnia is a country located in Southeastern Europe at the Balkan Peninsula with Sarajevo as its capital. Currently, it is a peaceful country that maintains a high life expectancy rate as well as high literacy levels. It is frequently visited by tourists from different parts of the world which has attributed to its being the third fastest growing tourist attraction region in the period ranging between 1996 and 2011. This is contrary to the national situation the country faced between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The world had not experienced such mass genocide since the end of the Nazi regime in the Second World War. To be precise, the Bosnian Civil War was mainly brought about by ethnic conflict between the Muslims (Bosniaks), Croats and Serbs that shed the blood of over 100,000 people.

Different scholars and writers have made efforts to study and analyze the war and have attached theories in order to define its causes. In this research, two ethnic conflict theories shall be used to explain the cause of the civil war that broke out in April 1992 and ended in 1995. The ethnic conflict theories are the psychological theory and the rational choice theory. They shall be compared and contrasted in order to come up with a theory that ultimately defines the reasons for the conflict.

2. Background

In 1971, Muslims made up the largest component of the population in Bosnia and in the 20 years that followed, Serbs and Croats began emigrating from the country. The census that was held in 1991 showed that the Muslim population was more than 40 percent of the population in Bosnia while the Serbs and Croats made up less than 35 percent and 15 percent respectively. This led to the development of the term 'Bosniak' used to represent Muslims in Bosnia. During this period, the Yugoslav Republic was in the verge of disintegration and by 1992, Croatia and Slovenia had broken off from Yugoslavia¹. The multiparty elections that were held in late 1990 resulted in the formation of a tripartite coalition government that represented the different communities within the country. The Bosniak politician Alija Izetbegovic led the tripartite coalition whereas the increased tension in Bosnia's interior and exterior made it more difficult to cooperate with Radovan Karadzic of the Serbian Democratic Party.

In 1991, local Serbs began setting up barriers to several regions that had large Serbian population (Serb Autonomous Regions) within the country. The Bosnian Serbs received support in terms of ammunition which were delivered to them in secrecy by the Serb controlled Yugoslav People's Army. By August, in the same year, the Serbian Democratic Party began demonstrating against the Bosnian government and took to remove its deputies from the parliament meetings to develop the Serb National Assembly. A referendum vote was held on March 3, 1992 and President Izetbegovic proclaimed Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence from Yugoslavia. This was as a result of the majority Muslims voting for independence while the most of the Serb population dissented from the vote. This was mostly because voting was obstructed in most Serb populated regions in the country.

3. The Bosnian Civil War 1992-1995

On April 7, 1992 the Bosnian Serb Militia groups along with the Bosnian Serb units in the Yugoslav army fired at Sarajevo and most of the towns in eastern Bosnia that were dominated by Bosniaks². Generally, according to Stewart, Holdstock and Jarquin (2002), ethnic cleansing took place where the Bosniaks (primary victims) and Croats (secondary victims) were being expelled from these areas by the Serbs (who were the primary perpetrators). Ethnic cleansing is the eviction of a group of people from a certain geographical region without causing any physical harm to the victim groups. However, the methods used for eviction include rape, torture, murder and force that make it nearly similar to genocide. These were evident in the Bosnian conflict where the Serbs were in pursuit of their envisioned "Greater Serbia."

The Bosnian government's forces made attempts to defend their territory. This proved to be futile since the Bosnian Serbs had occupied 75 percent of the region. Bosnian Croats had left the country and the Bosniaks occupied small towns whereas the Serb Democratic Party developed the Republika Srpska in the eastern part of the country. Peace talks with the Serbian Forces failed and most of the displaced Bosniak refugees were left to receive humanitarian aid from the United Nations (which had chosen to avoid any interference in the conflict)³.

4. Research objectives

This research was carried out fulfill the following objectives:

- To explain the causes of the conflict with respect to each of the ethnic conflict theories.

- To determine which theory best explains the war through comparison to find out what they got right and got wrong concerning the conflict

Once these objectives have been achieved, a conclusion of the theory that best explains the cause of the political violence in the country shall be discussed.

5. Methodology

The methodology of this research involved observation of videos related to the Bosnian Civil War as well as taking notes from articles, journals and books that provided information about the ethnic cleansing that took place in the country. The research data shall be interpreted according to: a) the rational choice theory of the ethnic conflict in Bosnia, b) the psychological theory of the ethnic conflict in Bosnia, c) comparison and contrast of the theories.

5.1. The Rational Choice Theory of the Ethnic Conflict in Bosnia

This theory is defined as a framework that defines the model of both social and economic behavior among people. It holds that the overall behavior of a group of people is based on individualism where individual actors make personal decisions about something. The rational choice theory mainly focuses on the factors that influence collective individual choices. Different people have preferences and they are the reasons behind them making choices among different alternatives. Some of these alternatives include security, economic preferences and the need to maintain a social identity⁴.

To begin with, the security dilemma is evident in the Bosnian Civil War due to anarchy in its political system. The tripartite coalition government represented the communities in random proportions with the largest number of seats being occupied by the Bosniaks. The Bosnian government found it hard to collaborate with the Serb leader, Karadzic, due to the increased tension in Bosnia. Karadzic also prevented the Bosnian-Serbs from placing a vote on the referendum that would win the country independence. Later on, the Serbs began removing its leaders from the Bosnian government to form their own Serb Democratic Party.

Secondly, the Bosnian Serbs were in pursuit for a “Greater Serbia” and they felt inferior in the country where over 40 percent of the population was Bosniak whereas the Serbs were comparatively less⁵. Insecurity among the Serbs led them to resist and place boundaries in Serb

Autonomous Regions and the use of pre-emptive attacks to gain strategic advantage immediately after declaration of independence. Moreover, before the split of the Yugoslavian Republic, in 1980 after President Tito's death, the Serbian Academy of Science drafted a memo in 1985 condemning Tito as well as the state party for implementing anti-Serb policies for three decades. These made the Serbs perceive their rivals to be more malicious than they actually were. This is because President Tito, during his reign, suppressed any ethnic related sentiments in politics.

To add, the Muslims in Bosnia began identifying themselves as Bosniaks, which left the Serbs insecure by losing their social identity in the country. The Bosnian Serbs received nationalist support from the Serb-controlled Yugoslav National Army and their motivation for ethnic cleansing was the knowledge that they would be rewarded with territory. Therefore, they were able to conquer three-quarters of Bosnia by mainly evicting Bosniaks and some Croats who occupied the region. The Serbs' abrupt aggression was successful since the Bosnian Government was not ready to defend itself in any way. Therefore, the Serbs took over the Bosnian economy and the land was rewarded to the Serbs who settled in the region.

5.2. The psychological theory of ethnic conflict in Bosnia

This theory rejects the rational choice theory and holds that the social psychological assumptions are the reasons behind ethnic conflict. These assumptions include symbolic politics, integrative power sharing, consociational power sharing and power dividing⁶. Considering Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country had three ethnic communities with different beliefs. They all had their own leaders too. The elections that were held in December 1990 resulted in the formation of a tripartite coalition government to represent all the communities. This, however, turn out to be ineffective since collaboration between Izetbegovic and Karadzic was challenged by disputes within the country. The consociational power sharing in the Bosnian government failed despite the country being a democracy because of the inability of the Serbian leaders to honor their commitments toward the bargain provided by the coalition government⁷.

In addition, the communities in Bosnia had separate ethnicities. This means that each community had different common histories and shared cultures that distinguished them from each other. In this context, religion was prioritized to languages among the communities in Bosnia and the Serbian ethnicity emphasized hostility towards the Muslims, viewing them as potential adversaries and as enemies. The Serbs dissociated themselves from the Muslims as well

by setting up boundaries and leaving the Bosnian coalition government. Ethnicity also drives an individual into prioritizing their goals according to their emotions and this made the Bosnian Serbs rebel due to fears that their existence in Bosnia was under jeopardy. Thus the ethnic conflict in the country leading to the death of 100,000 people with 80 percent being the Muslims whom the Serbs resented.

5.3. Comparison and contrast of the theories

Whereas the rational choice theory suggests that the Bosnian Civil War was caused due to insecurity, economic reasons and the need for social identity, the latter theory holds that the war was based on social psychological factors. The rational choice theory develops an outward analysis of the causes of the war, which can be arrived at by physical observation. It is evident that the Bosnian Serbs needed to acquire social identity and they were insecure due to strategic occupation within the country as well as the anarchy in the state government but the rational choice theory fails to identify the core reasons for such factors. This is why the psychological theory rejects the rational choice theory; it seeks to define the internal reasons for the war rather than external reasons. In other words, the internal reasons back up the external actions of the conflict⁸.

The psychological theory illustrates that the ethnicity among the communities occupying Bosnia as well as the dissatisfaction among the Serb leaders and their urge to acquire the envisioned “Greater Serbia” led to the ethnic conflict. The theory also explores the problems that the coalition government underwent whereby the Serb leaders manipulated the nationalists’ attitudes against the Muslims, portraying them as extreme enemies hence they engaged in aggressive ethnic cleansing to claim the greater part of Bosnia.

6. Recommendations

From the analysis of Bosnian political history while under the Yugoslavian Republic, it is evident that the civil war was rooted on primordial hatred⁹. This is basing on the primordialist school of thought which supports that ethnicity is ingrained in human history and that we cannot afford to deny its existence. Therefore, the theory that best explains this theory is the psychological theory. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the theory provides in-depth reasons for the causes for the conflict. As much as the rational choice theory has strength for the causal

explanations, the psychological theory backs up all the reasons behind it. Emotion-driven individuals spearheaded the conflict and the only way that they could curb their fear was to employ aggressive tactics.

7. Conclusion

The Bosnian Civil War had numerous victims leaving over 100,000 people dead (despite the initially estimated 200,000 deaths) and the scars of the war still haunt the country to the extent that it would not want to undergo the same situation again. The United Nations provided humanitarian support to the refugees in the region and peace talks proved to be ineffective as the war continued. Later on, NATO, under the request of the UN, took to challenge the Bosnian Serb forces by launching concentrated airstrikes in the country, which resulted in the Serb forces agreement to participate in peace talks¹⁰. This resulted in the end of the war in December 1995.

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