

On Bosnianness

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In the chapter of his book dealing with the South Slavs, Adrian Hastings tackles the apparent failure of Bosnia-Herzegovina to develop a unified national consciousness. Up to the 19th century, he writes, the population felt itself to be primarily Bosnian, but over time imported Croat and Serb national ideas won over its Catholic and Orthodox parts. And whereas, after 1945, the ruling Communist Party rejected Croatian and Serbian claims to Bosnia by re-establishing the latter's statehood, it accepted, nevertheless, the basic message that a Bosnian nation as such did not exist, and completed the process of its internal division by recognising Bosnian Muslims as a separate nation. Three political communities thus appeared in place of the original single one, threatening to reduce Bosnia to an essentially geographical concept.

These pages, written by Hastings in the shadow of the Bosnian tragedy, are marked by the need to explain its origins. While his general approach rightly insists on the primacy of state formation in the construction of European nations, in the case of the 'Yugoslav' Slavs his stress is on cultural as opposed to institutional aspects of national integration, from which the rise of 'ethnic nationalism' among the Serbs and the Croats is deduced and its destructive effects on the 'more territorially based' Bosnian society acknowledged. This approach, however, generates more questions than answers. It will be argued here that state projects not ethnic ideologies played a central role both in shaping Bosnia's national identity and in forging the attitudes to it of its neighbours.

State into Nation

Bosnia's transformation from a state into a nation is typically European. Although the population in the area of inception of the medieval Bosnian state lacked an initial sense of unity based on a myth of common descent, the state's consolidation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries created a common identity which proved successful in replacing existing local affiliations. The initial bearer of this Bosnianness was the nobility; however, by the end of the fourteenth century Bosnianness had taken root in the wider population. For them, the term *Bosnjak* transcended the original meaning of 'being from Bosnia', a mere territorial identification. Recent research has thrown new light on this process, leaving no doubt about the existence of a specifically Bosnian nation on the eve of the Ottoman conquest in the fifteenth century.¹

The destruction of the Bosnian state in 1463 and the resulting flight, dispossession or absorption of the nobility into the Ottoman system, however serious the consequences, were not of themselves fatal for the survival of this national identity. Far more dangerous proved to be the break in state tradition. Bosnia fell victim to Ottoman conquest at the delicate time when the state was starting to separate itself from the community. Its Achilles' heel had always been a poorly organised Catholic Church (this is even more true of the indigenous Bosnian Church) and, consequently, a comparatively low level of literacy, which impeded the rise of a state bureaucracy. We know, indeed, more about medieval Bosnia from its interaction with the outside world than from documents produced for its internal needs. This was a problem that the Franciscans had begun to remedy in the first half of the fifteenth century, but this proved too late. The Bosnian state disappeared before its elite had codified its history in a manner which could be passed on to future generations in suitably adapted versions. The Franciscan order, which survived into the Ottoman age as the only form of organised Catholic presence, did retain a memory of the kingdom, but only as a part of its own history.²

Competing State Traditions

Bosnia survived in a new form, flourished and even expanded under Ottoman rule. Its intellectual production during much of this period rivalled, and at times surpassed, that of its neighbours. Yet, despite its many impressive achievements, Bosnia in the nineteenth century failed to make the transition to modern nationhood. Hastings writes that Bosnia, or, rather, its Muslim elite, was not 'nationally minded'. One consequence of this was that 'a traditional sense of Bosnianness' was undermined by advancing Serb and Croat nationalisms utilizing religion as the main instrument for turning Orthodox and Catholic Bosnians into, respectively, Serbs and Croats.

Yet religion on its own could not have accomplished this. The question remains: Why did Serb and Croat nationalisms prove so potent on Bosnian soil? To answer it one must take into account the nature and *modus operandi* of the intruding national ideas. Their power lay above all in their ability to appeal to real, albeit suitably embellished histories of state individuality. These state-national ideologies enjoyed, moreover, institutional links to the past: in the Croat case the state parliament in Zagreb, the national church in the Serb case.³ In contrast, for much of the nineteenth century, the Bosnian national idea lacked both the support of a living state tradition and forms of institutional autonomy.

The struggle over Bosnia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not, as Hastings suggests, a struggle between ethnic and territorial concepts of nation, or it was only partially so. It was primarily a contest between competing state ideas, which involved, one must not forget, also the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Hungary and the House of Austria. As for Croatia and Serbia,

they claimed Bosnia in the first instance not because Croats or Serbs lived there (each of these, after all, formed only a minority within the Bosnian population), but because possession of Bosnia was perceived to be of strategic importance for their own survival, development and regional pre-eminence. We are dealing here, in other words, not so much with national unification in the ethnic sense, but with appropriation of the Bosnian state tradition. Volumes and volumes were written, especially by the Serbian side, aiming to prove that Bosnia was their ancient patrimony, flooding the academic market and leaving false traces everywhere. In all this hullabaloo over Bosnia the ethnic argument was subsidiary, since the 'original', that is, pre-Ottoman, nationality of the population was habitually derived from the (as a rule fleeting) presence of this or that Christian power on Bosnian soil.

The nineteenth century was one of great confusion in Bosnia, which was in no position to join the battle with its own state project. Under Austro-Hungarian government, however, it made a first step towards the recovery of its statehood - and with it the tools for forging a modern sense of nationhood. Its progress in this regard was by no means linear, but there is no mistaking its direction. The milestones along this road are clearly marked, and include the acceptance by the Muslims of Bosnia's Christian past as part of their own identity; the refusal in 1918 of the Bosnian Serbs to unite with Serbia in advance of the establishment of Yugoslavia; the dogged defence of Bosnian territorial integrity throughout the inter-war period; the supreme war effort which, at the end of World War II, ensured the establishment of the Bosnian republic⁴; the striking progress the republic made in the second half of the twentieth century. These achievements are all the more impressive given Bosnia's initial weakness and the historical turbulence witnessed in the period from 1878 to 1945, which included major local conflicts, two world wars and two attempted partitions. Contrary to Hastings' view, the recognition of the Bosnian Muslims as a distinct national group was beneficial, in that it broadened the government's social base and induced a positive re-evaluation of the Ottoman past. As a result, in the early 1970s, the Christian and the Ottoman cycles came together to form a linear historical path of the kind that is characteristic of unified nations. The symbolic healing of the rupture in the state tradition was the hoisting of the colours of the medieval Kotromanić dynasty over the entrance to the national parliament in 1992.

History Repeats Itself?

This re-appropriation of state tradition took place at the time of yet another invasion from the East. There exists, indeed, an arresting parallel between the events of the fifteenth century and what was to happen to Bosnia five centuries later. In 1461, two years before his execution by Mehmed II, the young king Stjepan Tomašević asked for and received a crown from the pope, thereby staking a claim to independence from the Croato-Hungarian kingdom with

which Bosnia had been 'associated' since the twelfth century. At this moment the Ottomans were already in possession of a substantial part of the state territory, and sections of the nobility had sided with the invader. The king tried and failed to appease the sultan, who had already decided to crush Bosnia. Left to face alone a vastly superior army, the Bosnians succumbed. Western Europe, which extended either token help (Venice, Dubrovnik) or none at all (Rome, Buda), subsequently blamed internal dissension for the kingdom's fall. Mehmed II proceeded to divide Bosnia with Mathias Corvin, king of Hungary and Croatia, each establishing a military defence system on the territory adjoining the new border. This story was repeated, with variations, at the end of the twentieth century. Bosnia's declaration of independence was treated by Serbia as an act of rebellion, and steps were taken to crush it. The Serbian army (the JNA), already deployed in Bosnia, was joined by important local notables. The Sarajevo government was new to the job, and the Bosnian army proved too weak to eject the enemy. The European Union, which offered no help, blamed Bosnian 'ethnic' divisions for the outcome. Croatia refused to aid Bosnia and proceeded to divide it with Serbia, each side turning 'their' parts of Bosnia into the modern equivalents of the old military border. But the story, as we know, ended differently. Milošević proved to be no Mehmed II, Tudman no Mathias Corvin. John Paul II showed more compassion for Bosnia than had Pius II. Unlike King Stjepan, the Bosnian government did not surrender.

Conclusion

Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian national individualities 'gelled' with the formation of their medieval states. The elements composing the requisite glue varied in each case, but for all three one can say, in agreement with Hastings, that once it had happened it proved hard to alter.⁵ The trend towards 'ethnic' separation in Bosnia, which appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, was an outcome of its political weakness, and was reversed a century later as the state recovered its integrative function: another generation of uninterrupted peace would have made Bosnia appear as 'ethnically homogeneous' as its neighbours. There is, indeed, no better proof in Europe of the primacy of the state-territorial over the ethnic principle in national formation than the endurance of the borders between these three countries, with Croatia and Bosnia being more or less where they were in the Middle Ages, while Serbia remains east of the Drina.

Notes

1 One finds, for example, that at this time the inhabitants of the Bosnian city of Jajce, which had previously been part of Croatia, included both those who called themselves Croats and those who called themselves Bosnians. Mladen Ančić, *Jajce: Portret srednjekovnog grada* [Jajce: Portrait of a Medieval City], Split 1999, p. 56.

2 The Franciscans, it seems, did manage to assemble, on the eve of Bosnia's fall, a history of the Kotromanić dynasty, which was later used by the Dubrovnik historian Mavro Orbini in his *Kingdom of the Slavs* (1601).

3 Or, more concretely, the privileges granted to Serbs as a religious community by the Habsburgs. Serbia's emancipation from Ottoman rule in the first half of the 19th century became an inspiration in its own right, but its impact on Bosnia was crucially mediated by the Croatian and Hungarian Serbs.

4 Bosnia provided the main battlefield between the Partisan resistance and the armies of the Axis powers aided by their local Croat and Serb allies. This explains why Federal Yugoslavia was officially inaugurated at Jajce, Bosnia's former royal seat. In this 'ethnically mixed' society, the Partisan success was intimately linked to the promise of Bosnian state autonomy within Yugoslavia. Marko A. Hoare, *The Chetnik-Partisan Conflict and the Origins of Bosnian Statehood*, University of Yale doctoral thesis (2000).

5 In the case of Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia the linguistic argument could not be used in the same way as in the case of Alsace, where, in the well-known French declaration quoted by Hastings, 'race' is linked to language. Language on its own could not decide the quality of the Dubrovnik 'race', which, as the author notes, was Croat by 'nationality and by its sense of the [Croatian] fatherland' that survived centuries of separation. Just how deeply rooted national identity had become in the Middle Ages is exemplified, in the Croatian case, by the fact that peasants in Istria, i.e. at Croatia's other Adriatic limit, continued to identify themselves as Croats centuries after the Croatian state had retreated from the area.