

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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After Ethnic Cleansing: Lessons from Bosnia for the Caucasus

Using his latest book, *Bosnia Remade: Ethnic Cleansing and its Reversal*, as a starting point Gerard Toal sought to address the following issues: ethnic cleansing as a practice, reversing the practice of ethnic cleansing, and going beyond ethnic cleansing. Dr. Toal, Professor of Government and International Affairs and Director of the Government and International Affairs program at Virginia Tech, discussed these and other issues at a Harriman Institute event on November 1, 2011, moderated by Alexander Cooley, Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College.

The term “ethnic cleansing” was coined during the Bosnian war (1992-95) and was first utilized by Croatian government officials and international aid workers to describe the actions of the Yugoslav army in Croatian towns and villages. The term originates in military euphemisms such as “cleansing the terrain” and notions like “Juden rein.” The term was also used by international journalists, Western diplomats, and UNHCR officials as a “vivid metaphor conveying the commitments of its perpetrators.” Subsequently, the Bosnian war globalized the term.

Ethnic cleansing was given ostensible meaning by a series of socio-biological and politico-geographic propositions endorsed by Radovan Karadzic’s Serb Democratic Party amid the severe economic and constitutional crisis of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The first proposition held that “ethnic identity was the primordial axis of life in Yugoslavia.” In this context, ethnic groups were deemed to be “trans-historic and quasi-biological entities.” The second proposition argued that “each ethnic group had a natural homeland, an ethno-

territorial place that was its own.” The third, socio-Darwinian proposition held that “throughout history, national groups were in perpetual competition over land.” Ethno-territorial logic shaped, in part, the political geography of the two Yugoslavias that were established in the 20th century: an internal republic of structure that implicitly affirmed some ethno-territorial polities under the 1921 constitution, or as different nations committed to brotherhood and unity to realize a common Socialist community, as conceptualized during Tito’s regime. The speaker argued that the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) confounded these principles because it was “home to three different constituent peoples” Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, a view that was not shared by the ruling Communist party at the time.

Democratization among economic and constitutional crises enabled the ethno-nationalist parties representing the three dominant groups in BiH to oust the ruling Communists in the December 1990 elections. Despite agreeing to cooperate, the three parties focused on “consolidating local fiefdoms.” Two of the parties were “under the direct control of governments in neighboring states.” The outbreak of war between Serbia and Croatia in 1991 further radicalized politics in BiH. Amidst the drive for independence by those fearful of a new Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, agents of the Serb government helped direct the Drina valley military assault, an act which, according to the speaker, plunged BiH into war.

In May 1992, with an ethnic cleansing campaign “well under way” across BiH, Radovan Karadzic articulated six strategic goals for the

war, to be implemented by Milosevic loyalist Ratko Mladic. The first of these was a directive permitting ethnic cleansing to “un-mix” Bosnia’s three communities and to partition its space along ethnic lines. The remaining five goals addressed the issue of borders which needed to be created for what would become Republika Srpska. These strategic goals were in keeping with the vision of the Milosevic government, namely, “the creations through force of arms of an ethnically homogenous statelet in Bosnia - Republika Srpska - adjacent to a similar entity in Croatia - Republika Srpska Krajina and the joining of both to a rump Yugoslavia centered on Serbia and Serbian identity.”

Violent ethnic cleansing is a military tactic to realize a larger strategic vision. In fact, the speaker argued, it is a tactic as much about seizing and controlling territory as it is about identity. More than simply the removal of an out group from a location, ethnic cleansing involves the “ethnicization of space” a process through which “a landscape is wiped clean, and available for re-inscription as an ethnically homogenous homeland.” In short, “ethnic cleansing is a form of geopolitics.” The “geo” can signify two interrelated practices: “an attempt to [impose] a new ethno-territorial order [on a given] space” and “an attempt to build an ethnocratic political and economic order upon that space.” The remaking of Bosnia through ethnic cleansing involved both tactics. The Bosnian war lasted over three and a half years, during which time more than half of the country’s population of approximately 3.3 million were displaced.

International refugee law specifies three durable solutions for those forcibly displaced from their homes: local integration, resettlement, and voluntary repatriation. The inflows of Bosnian refugees into European states, notably Austria, following the beginning of the war led many European leaders and institutions to describe ethnic cleansing as “abhorrent” and “unacceptable.” This desire to reverse ethnic cleansing was incorporated into Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Accords which marked the end of the Bosnian war. Specifically, Article 1 of Annex 7 of Dayton provides for restitution,

return, and compensation to individuals displaced by the war. Yet, the speaker continued, despite promises to victims of ethnic cleansing to freely return to their pre-war homes, others sought to consolidate the ethno-territorial and ethnocratic structures that had originally displaced individuals, and misappropriated their homes. The Bosnian conflict forced the international community to confront the relationship between reconciliation, restitution, and return and their relationship to reintegration and reconciliation.

The international decision making was originally driven by military criteria. Despite institutional incoherence and considerable local obstructionism following the war, the international community slowly developed the capacity and the legal mechanisms to effectively implement Annex 7. Eventually, UNHCR together with other local organizations charged with implementing Dayton, determined that the best long term peace reconciliation strategy involved supporting minority returns. Namely, “population returns by those whom war time displacement had rendered minorities in their place of origin.” This decision was “significant [in that] it declared that assistance for housing and local infrastructure should be dependent upon the acceptance of return.” As it evolved, the implementation changed from “the right to return, to the return of rights”, with an emphasis on local choice and on restitution as a distinct right. Through the establishment of a property law implementation process and a return and reconstruction task force at the local level in Bosnia international institutions sought to undo the Bosnia remade by ethnic cleansing and war.

While debate continues in Bosnia regarding the relative success of ethnic cleansing, Toal suggested that “Annex 7 and the implementation of Annex 7 has succeeded in ways that few thought possible in 1996.” There have been genuine achievements in reconstruction, restitution, and return. Furthermore, Toal argued, the official discourse regarding returns currently is vastly different from what it was at the end of the war. The speaker concluded with a suggestion that Bosnia today is characterized by; a loosening of

ethnocracy, apparent reconciliation, and an emphasis on and a commitment to rule of law, and a sense that the homeland must be shared with other ethnic groups.

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