SO YOU'RE A PROFESSOR THEN?

HOW DID YOU GUESS?
What Does It Take to Stop a War?

*Heather Roberson and the Case of Macedonia*

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

Heather Roberson Gaston (GSAS/Harriman Certificate ’13) was an undergraduate at University of California, Berkeley, majoring in peace and conflict studies and writing her thesis on the role of women in the postconflict reconstruction of Rwanda, when a chance encounter changed her life. One day, as she sat down at a crowded café, an older, bespectacled gentleman asked if he could take the empty chair across from her. She obliged. He turned out to be a political science professor named Ernst Haas. Had Roberson Gaston understood that she was sitting across from the globally renowned theorist who founded neofunctionalism, she might have handled herself differently. But, at the time, the name didn’t mean anything to her. When Haas declared war inevitable and her major “ridiculous,” Roberson Gaston did everything in her power to prove him wrong.

As she pontificated about the complexity of war and the sinister role of military contractors, she remembered the case of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia). It was 2003; the war in Kosovo had recently ended, leaving Macedonia with an influx of Albanian fighters and heightened ethnic tensions. But, contrary to media predictions, the country had avoided armed conflict.

“That war was prevented,” she told the professor, reminding him that NATO had managed to ease tensions by negotiating with the Albanian fighters. Haas conceded, and Roberson Gaston—who knew little about the Balkans at the time—felt vindicated. The conversation ignited her interest in the region. So much so that she switched her thesis topic to the use of law as a conflict resolution tool in Macedonia.

A year later, Roberson Gaston landed in the country for the first time. The trip not only started her ongoing love affair with the Balkans; it also became the basis for a graphic novel that opens with the Haas encounter.

The Republic of Macedonia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, but unlike many of its former Yugoslav neighbors, the country did not descend into interethnic strife. Though tensions simmered between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the sizable ethnic Albanian minority, Macedonia remained peaceful for 10 years after declaring independence. Then, in the wake of the war in neighboring Kosovo, Albanian fighters poured over the border, joining with local Albanian forces. After the Macedonian government passed laws restricting the use of the Albanian language and flag, the newly formed...
Albanian National Liberation Army attacked the republic’s security forces, prompting an armed conflict that lasted from February until August 2001.

Predictions abounded that the nation would descend into civil war, but international organizations, led by the European Union (EU) and the United States, stepped in to mediate. Knowing that Macedonia wanted to join the EU, the EU pressured Macedonia to meet Albanian demands, offering the possibility of accession. The negotiations resulted in the Ohrid Framework Agreement, guaranteeing political and cultural rights to Albanians in exchange for disarmament.

The international community pronounced the agreement a success. But, when Roberson Gaston started researching its impact, she found scant literature on the topic. “I realized I’m not going to understand what’s happening in this country unless I go there,” she says.

Roberson Gaston left for Macedonia in 2003 with no contacts, no place to stay, and no plan. Friends and family worried, and when she first arrived their concerns seemed warranted—she encountered neglected buildings, shuttered windows, and shady characters. But, soon enough, she fell in love with the country and its people, cultivating a network of locals, OSCE officials, and internationals working for the South East European University in the predominantly Albanian city of Tetovo.

Getting to know the place, Roberson Gaston began to see the Ohrid Framework Agreement in a new light. “I went into the region super confident of what I was going to find, excited to tell the story of war prevented,” she recalls. But instead of a rosy, peaceful nation, she discovered a polarized country plagued by...
“Macedonia’s prospects of joining the international community seemed bleak—Greece ... blocked Macedonia’s bid to join NATO.”

mistrust. “There was all of this stuff happening underneath the international community’s very shiny packaging, and I started to develop a lot of doubts about the international role in the Balkans,” she says.

Roberson Gaston stayed in Macedonia for five weeks. When she returned to the U.S., she wrote a 150-page script about her experience and sent it to the graphic novelist Harvey Pekar, whom she’d met through her sister during the movie tour for Pekar’s book *American Splendor*. Pekar liked the script and used it for a graphic novel, *Macedonia: What Does It Take to Stop a War?*, illustrated by Ed Piskor, came out in 2007; Roberson Gaston toured the book in Macedonia the following year.

The book conveys Roberson Gaston’s mixed feelings about Western involvement in the Balkans. “I realized when I got there that we have a lot of power to change the face of these places, but the people might not want these changes,” she says.

At the time, Macedonia’s prospects of joining the international community seemed bleak—Greece, which had objected to the use of the name Macedonia since the republic’s independence, claiming wrongful appropriation of its Hellenic heritage, blocked Macedonia’s bid to join NATO in 2008 and vetoed its accession to the EU in 2009. Meanwhile, a right-wing political party consolidated power, peddling a version of Macedonian nationalism that could only inflame Greece and even further erode Albanian-Macedonian relations.

Roberson Gaston theorized that the Ohrid agreement, and its rapid expansion of minority rights, could

STATUE OF PHILIP OF MACEDON (FATHER OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT) IN SKOPJE, MACEDONIA. PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM JONES. SUCH STATUES, ERECTED BY THE NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT OF PRIME MINISTER NIKOLA GRUEVSKI (2006-16), FURTHER ERODED RELATIONS BETWEEN GREECE AND MACEDONIA.
Heather Roberson Gaston at home in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Gaston wrote her M.A. thesis on the impact of the Ohrid minority rights regime on the rise of nationalism in Macedonia. But, after all her research, she did not feel she had the definitive answer to her question. “I don’t know if I ever will,” she says.

Since graduation, Roberson Gaston has continued to return to Macedonia, where she’s a special adviser for the Civil Center for Freedom, a local human rights organization. She’s also working on a project about Israeli-Palestinian peace movements and recently started a podcast called “Talking Human Rights” (talkinghumanrights.com), where she interviews human rights practitioners about conflict and peace. She plans to return to the Balkans to conduct podcast interviews later this year. Last summer, Roberson Gaston took her three-year-old daughter, Mira, to Macedonia for the first time. During their visit, Macedonia and Greece announced the much-anticipated Prespa Agreement: the Republic of Macedonia would change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia, and Greece would stop blocking its EU aspirations. Roberson Gaston saw the name dispute as a bullying campaign by Greece against “a country that posed no threat.” She worried that nationalists might use the name change as an opportunity to reenter politics. But her colleagues in the local human rights arena had no such fears. “They were much braver, aiming to convince anyone who doubted the agreement that it was the best course of action,” she says. “I found it really inspiring.”

“For anyone predisposed to Macedonian nationalism, this was a really bitter pill to swallow.”

be partially responsible. “All of a sudden, the government was hiring hundreds of Albanian functionaries and Albanian police officers while simultaneously firing Macedonian officers for human rights abuses,” she says. “For anyone predisposed to Macedonian nationalism, this was a really bitter pill to swallow.” At the same time, EU accession, the motivating factor for signing the agreement, had become impossible.

Wanting to explore the extent to which these factors influenced the nationalist resurgence, Roberson Gaston has continued to return to Macedonia, where she’s a special adviser for the Civil Center for Freedom, a local human rights organization. She’s also working on a project about Israeli-Palestinian peace movements and recently started a podcast called “Talking Human Rights” (talkinghumanrights.com), where she interviews human rights practitioners about conflict and peace. She plans to return to the Balkans to conduct podcast interviews later this year.

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Skopje Central Post Office. Photograph by yeowatzup via Wikimedia Commons. Roberson Gaston has been drawn to large concrete structures since childhood—a scarcity in her Missouri hometown. When she arrived in the Balkans, the wealth of such constructions amazed her.