

# Bosnian Genocide

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## WHAT?

The end of the Cold War and the decline of Communism greatly altered the international political scene – the reunification of Germany, the rapid democratization of Russia, and the velvet divorce of Czechoslovakia from Communist influence, among some of the changes. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia -was one of the more liberal communist regimes, led by the enigmatic dictator Josip Broz Tito. Tito kept tight control over the various ethnic, religious, and nationalist groups under the umbrella of a ‘greater Yugoslavia.’ After Tito’s death, politicians began exploiting nationalist rhetoric, pitting the Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks against each other and igniting the flame of nationalist fervor. The multi-ethnic republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina quickly became the site of the deadliest warfare and the target of an ‘ethnic cleansing.’ The genocide in Bosnia claimed the lives of an estimated 100,000 people.

## WHERE?

Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the other six nations that made up the former republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), is located in southeastern Europe (also known as the Balkans) along the coast of the Adriatic Sea between Italy and Romania. The population of Bosnia is about 3.8 million, with 48 percent Bosniaks (also known as Bosnian Muslims), 37 percent Serbs, and 14 percent Croats. Bosnia is slightly smaller than West Virginia, but with more than double the population.



## WHEN?

Historically, the Balkans region was an ethnically and religiously diverse region with alternating periods of peace and conflict. For example, the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by the Serbian nationalist group, the Black Hand, ignited World War I. During World War II, Nazi Germany invaded Yugoslavia, dismantled the government, and murdered over 80 percent of its Jewish population, along with thousands of Serbs and Roma, or gypsies. A communist resistance army, led by Marshal Tito, expelled the Nazis in 1945 and declared Yugoslavia to be a new independent communist state, led by Tito.

For the next 35 years, Tito ruled Yugoslavia as a benevolent dictator. On the one hand, Yugoslavia was one of the most open communist nations for its time and successfully

implemented a multi-ethnic peaceful coexistence. On the other hand, Tito repressed any political activists -who disagreed with his pan-Yugoslav vision. Tito was the lynchpin to a successful peaceful Yugoslav nation, and his death in 1980 left a power vacuum. Ambitious politicians like Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia and Franjo Tudjman of Croatia stepped in to fill that void with nationalist rhetoric and hate.

Milosevic was elected President of the Republic of Serbia in 1989 and remained in office until his election to President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1997. In 1990, Milosevic began encouraging the founding and violent uprisings of several Serb nationalist political parties in neighboring Croatia. Milosevic's vision of an ethnically pure Serb-dominated state understandably scared the other six regions (Slovenia, Macedonia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Vojvodina) of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, causing them to question their future in the Republic. In June 1991, Croatia and Slovenia declared independence from the Republic, resulting in two short-lived military retaliations by the Republic. Slovenia was allowed to leave the Republic relatively peacefully because there was no significant Serbian population. This was not the case for Croatia, with a 12 percent Serbian population. From 1991-1996, Croatia was a hotbed of violence, with citizens of all nationalities caught in the crosshairs of the fighting. In the first seven months of the war, 10,000 people died and another 700,000 were displaced. Croatia would not regain full control of the region until 1998.

People in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia's southern neighbor, watched with horror as violence and chaos flared in the north. Like non-Serbs in Croatia and Slovenia, the non-Serbs in Bosnia were nervous about the repercussions of a Serb-dominated federation. Unlike its neighbors, there were significant minority populations in Bosnia – 43 per cent were Bosniak Muslims, 35 percent were Orthodox Serbs, and 18 were Roman Catholic Croats. Turning to the Western diplomatic world for help, leaders in Bosnia were urged to hold a referendum on the issue of independence from the Republic. In March of 1992, Bosnians, minus Serbs who had been urged to boycott the vote by Milosevic and the Serbian nationalists, overwhelmingly chose secession. Violence broke out almost immediately; Bosnian Serbs began by arresting and executing leaders among the Bosniak and Croat communities. The small Bosnian Serb army added 80,000 armed and well-trained soldiers to its ranks from the departing Yugoslav National Army. However the UN had enacted an arms embargo that left the Bosniaks and Croats without weapons to defend themselves. These acts started a cycle of violence, displacement, and death that lasted for the next three years.

## **HOW?**

Like the Nazis' "cleansing" Europe of its Jews, the Serbs' aim was the "ethnic cleansing" of any Bosniak or Croat presence in Serbian territory. This term meant that various human rights violations occurred that ranged from curfews and forced relocations to rape, castration,

imprisonment in concentration camps, and death. As described by journalist Mark Danner, the Serbs' plan of attack in city after city was as follows:

1. *Concentration* - urge Serb residents of the city to leave, while surrounding the town and bombarding it with artillery fire.
2. *Decapitation* - execute the leaders and intelligentsia of the town.
3. *Separation* - separate the women, children, and old men from the men of "fighting age."
4. *Evacuation* - move women, children, and old men to concentration camps or national borders.
5. *Liquidation* - execute the men of "fighting age."

The most famous example of this plan of attack was the massacre at Srebrenica, a Bosniak-dominated town under weak UN protection. In July of 1995, Serb General Ratko Mladic marched into Srebrenica, separated the women and children from the men, and murdered approximately 7,000 Bosniak men, the single largest massacre in Europe since World War II.

For those who were not killed in the initial massacres, many were sent to one of 381 concentration or detention camps in Bosnia. Inhumane living conditions, beatings, torture, and mass executions were daily occurrences at these camps and eventually claimed the lives of around 10,000 people over the course of the war. Women were often taken to rape camps, where they were raped and tortured for weeks and months until they became pregnant. It is estimated that 20,000 rapes occurred between 1992 and 1995 in Bosnia.

## **RESPONSE?**

Reports of mass killings and rape had slowly seeped out of Bosnia, but once photos and videos of concentration camps like Omarska and Trnopolje were published by Western journalists, the reports captured the world's attention.

According to Samantha Power, author of *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, "No other atrocity campaign in the twentieth century was better monitored and understood by the U.S. government [than the Bosnian genocide]." However, despite the wealth of information and irrefutable evidence of genocide, the U.S. government under both Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton initially chose isolationist policies, citing the lack of U.S. interests at stake in the conflict.

In July of 1992, the first international press reports, photos, and videos of the conflict in Bosnia were published, eerily evoking memories and images of the horror of the Holocaust fifty years earlier. Despite the public outrage created by these reports, the international community

still refused to intervene. A year later, after Serbian forces had taken over several Bosniak-dominated cities, the UN established six safe areas that were to be protected by international peacekeepers. However with very few weapons and orders not to fire unless in self-defense, these peacekeepers were completely ineffective.

After the fall of Srebrenica (one of the UN safe areas), the Croatians and Bosniaks combined their forces to launch Operation Storm, an offensive campaign to push Serbian forces out of the Krajina region in the northwest corner of Bosnia. For two years prior to this campaign, Bosniak and Croat forces had turned on each other and had begun a conflict parallel to the one against the Serbs. Yet by combining their forces, the Croatian-Bosniak offensive was able to push Serb forces, as well as 200,000 civilians, out of Krajina and into other Serb-dominated areas. Although Operation Storm succeeded in bringing the three warring factions to peace negotiations supervised by President Clinton, it also created one of the largest refugee populations in Europe. The Dayton Accords, the name for the peace agreement, were signed on December 14, 1995, ending the conflict in Bosnia and stationing 60,000 NATO troops to keep the peace.